

Koh Tao:

THE GETTING OF WISDOM

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My father, a fanatical diver, taught me to dive when I was seven years old. I was instantly hooked; marine life fascinated me and my appetite for *National Geographic* and other underwater documentaries became insatiable. By age 10 I could identify shark, ray and even nudibranch species. I could tell the difference between a yellow tang and a yellowtail tang and knew Nemo before his animators did. I wanted to be the next Cousteau.

Despite my obsession, I've led a fairly normal life. School, uni, then a nine-to-five Monday-to-Friday. Bored with the grind, I launched my own business. It went well and I loved being my own boss, but through it all my mind was often out at sea. In December '07 with the sale of my business, I hit a fork in the road. Did I take a lucrative corporate offer or launch a new business venture? No. My girlfriend Giulia put her teaching career on hold, we put our stuff into storage, rented the house, farewelled loved ones and left.

First stop – Koh Samui and Koh Phangan in the Gulf of Thailand. We unwound in the sun and salt water and got stuck into some spicy food. But by the pool, pen in the left hand, highlighter in the right, I studied physics and physiology. No partying for me, I was preparing for Koh Tao. This place is a travel brochure cliché - soft white sands, crystal blue water and gently swaying coconut trees. The temperature averages around 30 degrees and the water is around 28. The locals are friendly and their food is out of this world. Your Pad-Thai, fresh barracuda and a Singha beer won't break the bank.

Koh Tao has a well earned reputation as one of the world's best places to learn to dive. More new divers originate from Koh Tao than any other single destination in the world! The beaches are covered with suntanned Swedes, Italians, Canadians, some Pom's and just enough Aussies. Most arrive having never dived before and leave addicted! It makes sense that Koh Tao is also one of the world's best places to learn how to teach diving, or as Padi says, 'Go Pro'.

I chose to learn from Bans Diving Resort - the diving and social hub of the island. Bans' Fishbowl restaurant and bar is crammed with students, who study Padi manuals by day and trade them for cold beers at night. Bans is more like a diving



MY FIRST ARTICLE FOR SPORTDIVING MAGAZINE WAS PUBLISHED IN 1989 – I WROTE ABOUT MY EXPERIENCE DOING AN OPEN WATER COURSE AT THE AGE OF 12. SINCE THEN I'VE TACKLED HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY, LOST MY VIRGINITY, BROKEN A FEW HEARTS AND HAD MINE BROKEN TOO.



Main: Bans Diving University, Open Water Training.
Top left: Songkran was very, very wet - buckets, hoses, bins and the biggest water pistols that Baht can buy!
Bottom left: Whale shark - my first five to six metre giant.



THIS PAGE
 Left top: Rescuing an unresponsive diver.
 Left middle: Taking Open Water Training.
 Left bottom: A whale shark cruises by.
 Right: Academic presentation.

OPPOSITE PAGE
 Left: Morning meetings.
 Right: Emergency first response instructor training.
 Inset: IE completion certificate.



university. Last year they certified over 8,400 divers, making it one of the largest dive school's on the planet. Courses are taught in over a dozen languages. They have four classrooms, two purpose-built training pools, several speedboats and two enormous dive boats carrying up to 90 divers each.

Eager to get wet again and see what lay below, I arrived a week early. Koh Tao's very warm water boils with life and you never know what you'll see next. On my first dive I saw four *tao* (Thai for turtle). The reefs are home to abundant fish. You'll see swirling schools of barracuda, fit and healthy reef sharks, the occasional manta and from March to May, plenty of whale sharks! Having never seen one on over a thousand dives, my fingers (and toes) were crossed.

Day one of the course and I was pumped! The Bans Instructor Development Course (IDC) is run by two of Padi's finest Course Directors and all-round great guys Jonas Samuelsson and Tim Hunt. They're icons on the island and hold astounding resumes covering every aspect of the dive industry. The orientation session had my blood bubbling! I was raring to go. I could hear the theme to *Rocky* running through my head, then silence. Tim turned the volume down with the mention of 14 practice exams, 13 lectures, heaps of homework and countless pool sessions. He looked directly at me and said "You can say goodbye to Giulia for the next two weeks". 'Ciao!'

The transformation from Dive Master to Instructor takes 17 days. The IDC includes the Assistant Instructor course, Emergency First Response and Open Water Scuba Instructor courses. The final three days bring the 'main event' – the Instructor Examination

(IE). That's correct, a three day exam conducted by a team of examiners sent from Sydney. The IE consists of a 90 minute Standards exam, followed by five theory exams; Equipment, Skills & Environment, the Recreational Dive Planner, Physics and Physiology. You're also assessed while conducting an academic presentation and a series of confined water and open water skills sessions.

The pass rate for all elements is 75%. If successful, you are qualified to instruct all Padi courses from Discover Scuba Diving to Open Water and up to Dive Master. If not... well, lets not think about that. We hit the ground running with a full set of practice exams. The five theory topics were assumed to be prior knowledge. That's OK if you've just finished your dive master course, but I did mine nine years ago! Somehow I managed to pass on my first attempt – being a nerd by the pool paid off.

A full day was spent underwater in a skill demonstration workshop. Mask clearing, regulator recovery and buoyancy control are second nature to all good divers, but demonstrating these to Padi standards is a different story. They need to be simplified, fragmented and over-exaggerated. We practised demonstrating everything from blowing bubbles to buddy breathing. We worked on over 30 skills including one that all IE

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candidates must perfect - rescuing an unresponsive diver. Establish buoyancy, check for breathing, clear airways, administer rescue breaths and tow while removing equipment. Sound's easy doesn't it? Rescue and first aid skills are vital. As an instructor I may be responsible for my students in the event of an emergency. The EFR Instructor course refreshed our skills and taught us techniques for demonstrating treatment of everything from cuts and stings, to near drowning and decompression illness.

To quote Jonas (probably quoting someone else), "If you give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. If you teach him how to fish, he will eat for a lifetime." Dive instructors are teachers and Jonas taught us 'how' to teach using techniques that can be applied to any topic at any level of education. We learned how to plan and deliver academic presentations, confined and open water training sessions. Throughout the IDC, Tim and Jonas gave a series of relevant and interesting lectures. Topics included: Adaptive Teaching, Legal Responsibility and Risk Management and Dive Industry Business Principles. Funny how focused you become when learning about something you love. After two weeks of intensive training, we





Bans Resort beachfront & dive training pool.



were fit, primed and ready for the main event.

We enjoyed a well-deserved day off for Songkran, the Thai New Year, and to celebrate the dawn of the year 2552. I spent the morning underwater with a group of Open Water students at White

Rock and assisted their instructor. Twenty minutes in, while watching students practice mask clearing, the lights flicked off and everything went dark. I looked up – the sun rays were blocked by a five to six metre giant. She gracefully cruised by, ignoring us totally. I still can't believe I saw my first whale shark with a group of Swedes who were on their first ever dive!

I spent the afternoon on land, but it was very, very wet. Traditionally, Thais 'wash away' any bad luck from the past year by pouring a little water on each other. These days, men, women and children line the streets and beaches in gangs, armed with buckets, hoses, bins and the biggest water pistols that Baht can buy! Its all-out war and no one stays dry.

Then it was match day, the main event, the grand final... I was bloody nervous! Jonas drove us to the exam and waited outside like an anxious parent. The room was tense; 24 candidates frantically flicked through books trying to cram in that little bit more. The bell rang and we were off! Ten minutes into the 'standards' exam, my nerves settled and then, in a flash, it was over. We had a few minutes to breathe, then plunged into the five theory exams. There were a few curveballs, but not much that we hadn't seen before – Tim and Jonas had prepared us well.

KOH TAO TRAVEL FACTS

Koh Tao (Turtle Island) was named because of its shape and due to the many turtles inhabiting its waters. It was first visited by backpackers in the early 80s and only became popular with divers from the early 90s. The island is now home to over 50 dive schools, hundreds of resorts and restaurants serving everything from exquisite Thai, to Italian Indian, Mexican and Japanese cuisine. Koh Tao has maintained its original charm and isn't overdeveloped like its neighbours Koh Samui and Phuket. It doesn't have an airport which should help keep it that way.

Getting there - From Bangkok, Thai Airways and Bangkok Air operate over 20 services daily to and from Koh Samui. The flight is only 45mins. From Koh Samui, take a 1.5 hour Lomphraya catamaran to Koh Tao (including pickup from your hotel or the airport).

Non-diver Activities – Stunning beaches, hiking, walking, watersports (snorkelling, sailing, kayaking), mini-golf, bowling, Thai cooking schools, great shopping and cheap massages.

When to go - Monsoons occur July to October. Best time to visit is November to May when the weather, beaches and dive sites are at their finest. Annual water temperature averages 29.5°C.

Visas – Australians automatically receive a 30 day holiday visa on arrival to Thailand. Steep fines apply if you overstay. Three month holiday visas must be applied for in Australia.

Currency – Thailand is cheap! Check exchange rates.

Electricity – 220V, European 2 pin plug.

Bans Diving Resort is nestled in beautiful tropical surroundings right in the heart of Koh Tao's Sairee Beach. Bans has spectacular ocean sunsets and is within close walking distance to great restaurants, shops and night-life.

Facilities - Two purpose built swimming pools, two large dive boats, speed boats, four fully equipped classrooms, a mini-mart, two internet café's, beautiful beachfront restaurant and Fish Bowl bar.

Accommodation – A wide range of excellent options from basic airconditioned rooms to fully-equipped deluxe executive suites with ocean views.

On day two I was first off the rank. I gave a lecture on the Recreational Dive Planner including the use of tables, the wheel and the pro's and cons of dive computers. It seemed to go down well. 23 lectures later, amid sighs of relief, we geared up and headed for the pier. At Mango Bay, we revealed our open water teaching skills with mock classes where mock students were given mock problems. Soon-to-be dive instructors were sinking, floating, bicycle kicking, cramping, and masks were being put on upside down.

I woke up bright and early for the final round. In the pool, I taught my students to fin-pivot, share air, and perform a Controlled Emergency Swimming Ascent. When I surfaced and wiped the chlorine from my eyes, it was all over. I was an instructor! At the closing ceremony 18 of us were congratulated and presented with certificates. The beer at Dirty Nelly's tasted particularly sweet that afternoon and it flowed well into the next morning.

My time on Koh Tao was extraordinary. It was a special experience for so many reasons. Becoming a dive instructor is a great personal achievement that I highly recommend. I've finally realised my dream. Now let me see... which pristine beach will I head for next?

>LINKS www.bansdivingresortkoptao.com