

An Essential Guide to Buying Dive Gear

Buying your own scuba diving gear, especially when you are just starting out, can be overwhelming if you don't have the right information to help you make informed choices. You want to get the best value and the best fit for your diving needs and you want to be comfortable with your selection for years to come. Our scuba experts can help, with a few pointers and suggestions for things to consider when making the important investment in dive gear.

Dive gear is an investment

First, let's start off by emphasising that last point. Dive gear is an investment. Yes, it can be expensive. But it also lasts virtually forever. Consider this: many dive professionals, who have logged thousands of dives, have done so on the same equipment year after year. With the right servicing and care, dive gear will last you years. In fact, unless your diving needs change, such as diving in new conditions, you may actually use the gear you start with for 10 or 20 years, if not more. When considering the cost of your scuba equipment, plan to amortize it over the span of your diving career. And where possible, try to spend as much as you can afford on key pieces like regulators and BCDs, as you will truly feel the difference on your dives.

Dive gear is individual

Second, your dive gear will be yours and yours alone. It will be there with you on every single dive you make, and it will become an extension of you. It will be your life support system and it will be what makes or breaks each and every dive. In short, in scuba diving, your equipment is important and extremely personal, and it is critical you get exactly the right fit for your body and your diving needs.

This means that you should try on everything you buy, and try on many makes and models to see what works for you. We strongly suggest that all core components (exposure suit, fins, mask, boots, BCDs, regulators, etc) be purchased in person after careful consideration.

Plus, picking out dive gear in person is lots of fun. And the experience of asking questions and discussing gear often leads to discussions on technique and style, and can in fact be a great learning experience.

Not all dive gear was created equal

There are lots and lots of great scuba diving brands on the market, and chances are you've seen most of them around. Mares, Bare, Henderson, Scubapro, Zeagle, Aqualung, Hollis, OMS, Halcyon, DUI and Oceanic are some of the leading dive companies that come to mind, and they all make a lot of great gear. But, and this is a big BUT, most of them are better at some aspects of dive gear than others. Each of them has some specialities at which they excel. That might be a

wetsuit, a fin, a regulator, a dive computer or a mask. Or they might excel at making gear for a specific type of diving, such as technical or cave diving, or for a specific body type.

But it doesn't mean that everything they make will be the best fit for you. Which is why if you look at some of the more experienced divers around, you'll rarely see them buying all of their dive gear from one company.

So beware of "complete packages" from one dive manufacturer as they typically only benefit the company themselves. Instead, expect to assess each critical piece of equipment individually, on its own merits. Don't be afraid of buying a different brand for each component of your core diving kit. A good dive centre should be independent of any particular equipment manufacturers, should offer a variety of leading brands to choose from and should even be willing to special order something for you if that's what you need.

Selective renting is a good thing

Still not sure what your needs are or what you like? You could try renting different kinds of equipment to see what works best for you. For example, at Action Scuba we rent both weight integrated and non-weight integrated BCDs, and if customers are not sure which they prefer, we encourage them to try both to see how they suit their diving style. If you are interested in a piece of equipment but aren't convinced, why not ask your dive expert if you can test it out?

In addition, consider the different pieces of equipment you are renting, and determine which you would prefer to personalise the most, and make that your first purchase. For example, you may find that you can never get a rental wetsuit to fit you well, so you want to invest there first, while tanks are so standard that you might want to put those at the bottom of your wishlist. Or you may care most about owning your own dive computer in order to track your dives, while you might want to rent a different wetsuit for every environment you dive in. The choice is really yours.

By selectively replacing rental gear with your own personalised choices, you can spend a little more to get the perfect fit on each piece, while taking the time to select each one, while still diving on more standard items until you have a better idea of what you want to fine tune there as well.

Buyer beware: used equipment

You may be tempted when starting out to seek out used gear and buy someone's hand me downs off the internet. If you do, keep in mind the lessons learned above. Their gear was selected especially for them. Will it suit your needs? Don't let a low price win out over fit and your own diving requirements. And can you be sure it will work? Don't forget that your life depends quite literally on your dive equipment.

If you do decide to buy used gear, we suggest buying from a reputable dive centre. You can often get great deals on used rental gear, which despite potentially high use, is typically well

maintained and in good working condition. Plus if you buy from a dive shop you can always go back to them if you have any issues, unlike a private sale over the web.

Warranties are essential

An often overlooked aspect of purchasing dive gear is that of the warranty, even though it is essential. We've said it before, and we'll say it again; your dive equipment is your life support system. Therefore, it is important to keep it well maintained and in excellent working order. The best way to do this is by ensuring that whatever equipment you buy come with a warranty from the manufacturer themselves, and that the warranty covers the country in which you live and where you will be taking your gear for service.

Ever wondered how some online retailers can charge much less for the same regulator or BCD than your local dive shop? It usually has to do with the manufacturer warranty – there normally isn't one. Or if there is, it's for another continent, such as Asia, and won't apply to your servicing. This is also usually the case with purchases made on vacation at foreign shops. In the long run, this will end up costing you much more than your initial savings, because with each annual service, you will be required to pay for expensive parts that would otherwise have been covered by a local manufacturer warranty. Plus if something goes really wrong, you'll have no recourse and will end up having to buy a brand new regulator or other pricy item.

Beware the commissioned salesman VS the expert consultant

When shopping for dive gear, you'll know you've found a good dive centre if they ask you lots of questions. If someone proposes a dive equipment package without knowing your needs, chances are they selling what they want to sell, not necessarily what you need.

Some questions to prepare for:

- *Where do I plan on doing most of my scuba diving?* Cold water requirements are very different from warm water needs and you need to carefully select gear for the most demanding environment you will dive in.
- *Do I plan on travelling with my dive gear?* Weight, size, material and compactness will be important.
- *How often will I be diving?* Get durable, high quality equipment that will stand the test of time.
- *What kind of diving will I be doing? Am I planning on continuing my diving education?* Determine what experience you might want to gain over the next few years and select gear that will support you as you get there.
- *What kind of diver am I?* Are you a gear junkie, or do you like things streamlined? Do you want the latest and greatest or are you content with the basics? Does appearance matter or do you care only about function? Be honest with yourself so you can be happy with your investment.
- Your local dive expert will have many more questions to discuss with you.

Turn to the experts

There are lots of sources of information on selecting your dive gear. Dive magazines usually have equipment reviews, which can be really useful but you should bear in mind that in some cases they have paid to be there. You can also look at the diving experts around you, or those whose style you like, and see what they use. This may give you some ideas, particularly if they dive under the same conditions as you intend to. Plus, a good dive centre should be staffed by experienced divers who can help guide you to the right selection of equipment for you. You can even ask your instructor what they suggest.

Happy diving

As you can see, there is a lot to consider when buying your own scuba diving gear. Always remember that ultimately you are the one who will be diving with it, and that this will be your life support system. Take the time you need to make the right choice. And then once you have found the perfect gear, enjoy it!



About the expert

Gary Davis, is a PADI Master Instructor, as well as a DSAT TecRec and SDI/TDI instructor, with over 10 years experience and over 2500 logged dives around the world. He is also the owner and operator of Action Scuba, a Montreal based PADI 5 Star Instructor Development Centre, and the owner and captain of Brockville Dive Charters, which operates in Ontario's 1000 Islands. Gary is recognised in the local diving community as a leading expert on scuba diving, including technical diving, and has personally helped hundreds of new divers select the perfect dive equipment for their needs. He and his team of experts at Action Scuba are on a mission to make scuba diving safer and more enjoyable one diver at a time.