

THAILAND - Learn to Dive: Taking the first plunge...

There are many places to learn how to dive across S.E Asia but many people choose South Thailand; the tropical islands are popular favourites among backpackers from all over the world who want to try diving for the first time. The water is clear, warm and calm with very little current and home to many crazy critters and funky fish, making it perfect for beginners!

By Ayesha Cantrell





THAILAND - LEARN TO DIVE

Whether it's your first time or your fiftieth time, there's something limitless and exciting about hitching on your backpack. Seeing new things, tasting new food and doing some cool stuff is all part of heading outside of your front door. For many travellers learning how to SCUBA dive is high on their list of things to do and as a SCUBA Instructor I know this can be a little scary.

Centre Of Attention

Wherever you are, your first task when learning to dive is choosing your dive centre, this can seem like a whale of a job as there are lots to choose from. In Koh Tao alone, there are over 25 dive sites ranging from shallow and colourful to the deep blue. From my experience, being clear on what you want from your course will make your choice easier. For example, what language do you want to take your course in? South Thailand is one of the few places in the world where you can virtually guarantee to be able to find an instructor who can teach in the language you prefer.

Consider the size of the dive centre too, as a general guide, at a larger dive centre you will be in a larger group. The maximum number of students in a group is 8, so if you would prefer a smaller group with more personal attention, ask about the group size. If you are travelling on your own, a larger dive centre with larger groups will give you more opportunity to meet new people. A few dive centres offer private tuition, if it's something you are interested in, ask, there will usually be a premium to pay though.

Ask what the dive centres refund policy is so you know where you stand if you don't like it or get sick and are unable to complete the course. Find out what happens if you want to repeat a day or can't complete an exercise and need to practice again the next day, can you join another course and is there an extra cost?

A lot of dive centres offer discounted accommodation whilst you are taking your course, so have a look and think about what you want and where you want to be. Dive centres are located in many different areas offering different atmosphere and lifestyle for students. Think about what you want from your environment. Do you want to be on a quiet beach or do you want to have a big choice of restaurants or night life? Some dive centres have their own restaurants and bars attached, some are lively and some more chilled. Do you want a dive centre with a pumping after dive social scene or do you want a quiet spot to chill and relax?

It's important to take your time and have a look around, find yourself a room or somewhere to drop your bags, have a rest, grab a cold drink and then have a wander around. Talk to the instructors, ask them about the course and check out the dive centre itself too but keep in mind what it is you are looking for. It's possible that the person you talk to will be your instructor, but find out and if not see if you can talk to the person who would be teaching you. Find out about their experience and see if they are passionate about diving. There are so many great centres in Thailand; you are bound to find a dive centre that suits you!



To Book or Not to Book?

You can book in advance; at busy times this will secure your accommodation and save you the hassle of touts and taxi drivers upon arrival. Making your choice before you arrive can be harder though as you haven't had the opportunity to meet the team. A good dive centre will answer all your questions via email promptly, so you can still be assured that they will meet your requirements in terms of accommodation and group size etc. Talking to fellow travellers and checking out the many travel forums online for feedback and recommendations will give you some pointers too. Remember though that the bigger dive centres have more students so you are more likely to hear about those than the smaller ones.

Show Me The Money

If I could give one piece of advice to all would-be divers it's not to choose your course based on price alone. Budget is always a factor when buying anything but I would strongly recommend making sure the dive centre is the one you want rather than it being the cheapest. You will only learn to dive once so make sure you're comfortable with a dive centre that matches your needs.

Blow Some Bubbles

Most people choose to take their Open Water Course, which is your first certification level, however if you are short on time but still want to have a go you can complete a Discover Scuba Diver. This takes a little over half a day and includes at least one dive and you will usually have an option for another too. You will learn some basic theory, be given an orientation to the equipment and then go into very shallow water to practice a few exercises that will make your subsequent dive more comfortable. This is an enjoyable way to test the water and see if you like it, it's a wicked experience but it's not a certification.



Carded / Licensed To Thrill

To get your licence you need to take your Open Water Course and this certification lasts for life. The course comprises of theory, taught from videos and a manual, ending with a final exam that tests your knowledge prior to certification. In the water you will learn techniques, first in very shallow water, then you'll plunge into four dives where you will put all you have learnt into practice. Allow four days for your course and don't plan any big nights out. A usual day will start around 8am, finishing around 5pm with a break for lunch and will comprise of some theory and some water work each day. You will be asked to swim for 200m or snorkel for 300m and float for 10 minutes to demonstrate your comfort in water. This isn't timed and you don't have to be an Olympian but you do need to be able to swim or snorkel. Diving is open to everyone in reasonable health and you will be asked to complete a medical questionnaire. If you have a condition that's listed you will be required to visit a doctor in order to determine if this will exclude you from diving. This doesn't take long and will only cost a few hundred Baht in most places.

In the Deep End

Breathing underwater can feel a bit weird at first and your brain needs a while to adjust to this unfamiliar sensation. It can seem a bit scary and daunting and this is why your first water sessions will be in water shallow enough so that you can easily stand up. This gives you a safe environment to get comfortable in the water and equipment. These sessions can take place in a pool or in the ocean. Once comfortable, these sessions progress to teach you things you will need on every dive, for example, how to clear water from your mask without having to come to the surface. Your instructor will take you through emergency drills too; this will enable you to correctly respond should you find yourself with a problem underwater. During these sessions you will gradually move a little deeper into maybe a few metres of water. Once you have mastered these techniques it's time to go play with the fishes and see some of the amazing scenes underwater! During your four open water dives you will repeat some of the skills you have mastered. On your first two dives the maximum depth is 12m and your final two dives extend to 18m. This doesn't mean you have to attain these depths; your instructor should take the course at your pace and match your level to the choice of dive site and environmental conditions.





Finding Nemo

The underwater world is mind blowing; watching a turtle glide beside you as it descends from taking a gulp of air from the surface, seeing how hard the little shrimp works to keep the burrow he and the goby live in clear, finding Nemo, seeing fish getting spruced up at cleaning stations, accidentally disturbing idle grouper, swimming through schools of fusilier, stalking barracuda, peering in crevices at shrimp and crabs, finding sting rays slumbering under overhangs, puttering alongside puffer fish, being dazzled by the colours that the angel and butterfly fish bring to the reef. All this and more can be seen on any dive and the more you dive the more you will see and the different things you will notice.



South Thailand has some amazing seasonal visitors too, graceful, harmless whale sharks frequent many dive sites between March and May and then again in Sept and October. These gentle giants can grow to 12m, they are filter feeders and still very little is known about them. There are only a few places in the world that they visit habitually and we are very lucky to have them grace our waters.

Advancing

Many new divers get truly bitten by the diving bug; I know I did, if this is you then stay a bit longer and take your Advanced Course. It's designed so that you can continue straight on and it's perfect for building confidence and gaining more experience. Dive at night, dive deeper, learn to find your own way around the dive site, use an underwater scooter like James Bond, identify fish or take some photographs. You get to choose three of the five dives to suit what interests you and the other two must be a deep dive (30m max) and a navigation dive. This course is usually completed in 2 days and is mostly about the diving with only a tiny bit of theory compared to your Open Water Course. If this still hasn't quieted your appetite then there are any number of courses you can take based on your further interests. If you've got a few months and a few pennies in the piggy bank you could soon find yourself qualified to lead fun divers and get paid to go diving. I have many friends who came to Thailand to do their Open Water Course and have never left!

Learning to dive should be a fun, safe and enjoyable experience that you remember for the rest of your life. It could change your life; it changed mine, now diving is my life!