Diving Etiquette: Diving in a Group

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe... Divers' nerves on fire off the shoulder of Shark Reef... I watched canister light beams glitter in the dark near the Labyrinths of Thistlegorm. All these moments will be lost in time, like cameras off the side of the boat – unless we, umm, talk about it?" – Roy Batty, if he'd been a diver.

Humans don't naturally behave like birds or ants. If you want a group of people to act in a coordinated manner, you need to provide them with some sort of training. Scuba divers are no exception to this rule. However, in many cases, you're diving with a group, and possibly a buddy, whom you met only minutes before deflating your BCD. It'll be alright, you say. Probably.

Divers have a tendency to behave like gas molecules: They saturate all the available space. While submerged, an initially straight line of divers is likely to gradually explode into the shape of a ball. It's almost a scientific law. This can be entertaining to watch on easy dives in open water. In a canyon or inside a shipwreck however, it can be dangerous. So how do we prevent it from happening?

The magical power of a good briefing

Yes I know, most dive briefings are soluble – when exposed to water, they just disintegrate. Nevertheless, a good divemaster will try to deliver briefings that are chemically stable. To prevent a group of divers from forming a ball, it's a good idea to organise the group into buddy teams. The Golden Rule: Put the least experienced divers closest to the dive guide and the most experienced ones at the end of the line. Numbering the buddy teams can also help. Armed with such information, each diver should be able to properly position themselves correctly—together with their buddy, of course—without further intervention by the DM.



Who's watching whom

A widespread misconception is that a group of divers is just a huge, extended buddy team. That's one of

the most scary things I've ever heard. It's wrong. It's dangerous. Don't do it. Rely on your buddy only! It has nothing to do with monogamy, just practicality. Watch your buddy, and be kind to her, him, them, or whatever their preferred pronoun happens to be. For more detailed courtesy advice, please see this previous issue of Diving etiquette: The Buddy.

The amazing benefits of being in a line-shaped group

And here we go, a line is happily formed. Steadily finning by in pairs, the divers begin to explore the reef wall. The divemaster spots a family of clownfish in a fluffy anemone and points them out to Paul and Sandra, the first buddy team. Paul and Sandra get closer to watch the tiny creatures, then move away, but not before pointing out the anemone to Ben and Giulia, the following buddy team. And so on. The instructors at the end of the line go a little deeper, paying careful attention to stay behind the others and avoid blowing bubbles into everybody's faces.

Yes, this is Paradise.

Hell

The whole group rushes in to watch the clownfish. Bubbles and fins are everywhere. Sandra has her regulator knocked out, Giulia's mask is dislodged. The instructor, rising from below stealthy as a shark, hits Ben on the chin with his first stage. The terrified clownfish have long vanished into depths of their anemone, as fragments of coral tumble toward the depths of the ocean.

So here are the rules:

1 – Don't overtake the buddy team in front of you

You wouldn't jump the queue in a supermarket or at a bus stop, would you? There is no reason to do it underwater. We don't have an express lane beneath the waves.

There may be exceptions: When the current is strong, you might find yourself in a fast lane of sorts. Or maybe the buddy team in front of you stops to watch something, taking forever. Most likely it's you though: You're finning too fast without realising it. Not a big deal: Just keep calm, swim back, and resume your position. It's easy, really.



2 – Respect the safety distance

On a crowded dive, fins, silt and bubbles tend to aggregate around the masks of the divers that follow. Good finning technique will help with not stirring the silt, but unless you are diving a rebreather, you'll find it difficult to stop making bubbles. Try to not go deeper than the buddy team behind you. Heavy breathers are usually in front, next to the guide, at a shallower depth. For good reason.

3 – Don't monopolise

Imagine a group of five buddy teams. If each team stops for ten minutes to watch a *chromodoris quadricolor*, it will take the group fifty minutes – an entire dive spent watching just one nudibranch. Photographers, here we are! Picture lovers should position themselves at the end of the line. Even better, and yes I know it hurts to pay extra, but have you considered hiring a private guide? The cost is a tiny fraction of what you paid for your equipment. There are also many dive centres that cater specifically to photographers. Maybe there is one in your next diving destination. That said, if you can't get a private guide… follow the group and the rules.

4 – Be on time

Even a small delay during the water entry can spoil the dive. (But don't get me wrong, you don't want to crash down on someone else's head either.) Also, keep yourself visible to the DM – they often won't move on unless they have a full head count.

5 – Watch your buddy

Divers habitually look down at the bottom, but most of the dangers are at the surface. Imagine you're third in a line of buddy teams. Your buddy suddenly becomes buoyant and starts heading up into raging propellers. The divemaster won't be close enough to help – you're the one who needs to intervene. Both on the surface and underwater, "Where is your buddy?" is one of the top three questions asked by divemasters. The most common response is a wide-eyed facial expression, followed by a searching look from side to side. We've gone on and on about this issue: The buddy team is fundamental to dive safety. Please behave accordingly.



6 – Thou shalt not harass

I've seen many a poor moray hiding from an onslaught of bubbling divers, and sharks bolting away in fear. Turtles… don't get me started. Overly aggressive approaches by divers are bad for marine creatures, and they're no good for divers either. Most marine life, including sharks, will try to escape when harassed. Think of the divers who kindly agreed to stay behind you in the queue. Were they the ones that scared off the whale shark? I rest my case.

7 – Shakers, horns, and other noisemakers

They've fallen out of fashion, I know. Let me explain why: It's not because divers' ears have become more sensitive to underwater noises, it's because divers have realised that noisemakers scare marine life off. Unfortunately, not everybody got the memo. If you own one of these hellish devices, please use it responsibly. Only a diver who's in trouble, or maybe a nuclear submarine approaching at fifty knots, can justify the noise. Instead, just talk. Did you know that you can talk (and even scream!) through your regulator, and that other divers will be able to hear you?

8 – Surface where and when you are supposed to surface

No one will ever blame a diver surfacing far from the exit point, or not at the planned time, if he/she ran low on air or got caught by a strong current. Nevertheless, popping up at the surface away from the exit point and/or at the wrong time is a first step toward a missing diver situation.



9 – Waiting for the deco guy

Facing a long, unplanned deco stop? Don't blame your computer's conservative algorithm: Unless you're diving in a wreck or cave where everybody's profile is more or less the same, chances are that the problem wasn't caused by your computer. Five minutes extra might be acceptable, half an hour is not. And when the sea is rough, the crew may treat you even rougher.

10 – Be kind

As a customer on a dive boat, you have more opportunities to be kind than a divemaster. Dive leaders have this nagging concern in their head, which is called safety. They're in charge, and sometimes they're liable. They have to be strict, and sometimes explicit. You, however, can always be kind.

About the author

DAN Member since 1997, Claudio Di Manao is a PADI and IANTD diving instructor. He's the author of a series of books and novels about diving, including Shamandura Generation, an exhilarating portrait of Sharm el Sheikh's diving community. He collaborates with magazines, radios and newspapers, talking and

writing about diving safety, marine life and travels.