

# Hey! Where'd my buddy go?

By Bob Bailey

I watched it happen ... standing on the beach at one of my favorite dive sites and looking out I saw a lone diver surface. Watching to see what he's up to I watch him look around for a couple of minutes, then submerge. A few seconds later, another lone diver surfaces 100 feet away. He does the same thing. A few seconds later the first diver pops back to the surface again. I holler out and tell him to wait on the surface ... his dive buddy will be right back. He waits, and in a few minutes, the two are reunited.

We've all heard horror stories about the buddy of circumstance ... aka the "buddy from hell" ... the guy who gets in the water without a clue or a care, doesn't follow the dive plan, or quickly gets separated from his dive buddy. Such divers are the bane of a dive vacation, in particular, because they frequently end up causing you to cut your dive short, or spend some stressful minutes underwater at a time when you're paying big bucks trying to have a good time and maximize your bottom time.

And sometimes, perhaps, we are that buddy ... even though we may not want to be.

So why does it happen? What can we do to make sure we're NOT that buddy? And what can we do to help assure that the person we get paired up with on the dive boat isn't either?

I like to think that most divers WANT to be good dive buddies. But perhaps they never got the skills to know how to be one. Perhaps they covered the skills, but aren't in the water often enough to be comfortable using them. The reasons are as diverse as the knowledge, skills, and motivation of the individual divers themselves.

Let's start by looking at what I believe to be the biggest single contributor to poor buddy skills ... awareness. Diving isn't "natural" to us as human beings. Besides the fact that it puts us in a physical orientation we're not used to (horizontal vs the vertical position we spend most of our waking time in), it also removes one of our most important feedback loops ... our vision. We're used to being able to perceive things that are going on around us by using our peripheral vision ... essentially a 180-degree field of view in which we can see and respond to things going on around us. Putting a dive mask on our face reduces our field of view to less than a third of what we're used to. By narrowing our visual range, we inhibit our awareness and therefore our ability to respond to what's going on around us. We have to learn a new behavior ... that of turning our head from side to side to see what's in our peripheral view, rather than simply moving our eyes. At first it takes conscious effort. Eventually it becomes more natural, and our ability to extend our awareness improves. So our skills, as a diver, must include teaching ourselves to look around more often than we're used to doing.

Now that we're looking around, what are we looking FOR? Well, our buddy, obviously. Are they in a position where we can see them easily? Are we in a position where they can see us easily? In Open Water class most of us learned the "lead-follow" style of diving ... where one buddy swims behind the other. This is great for the person in the back ... they can keep constant vigilance on their dive buddy quite easily. But it's not so good for the person in front ... as they haven't yet invented a dive mask with a rear-view mirror. The diver in the front constantly has to turn

around to check on their dive buddy ... and that's a pain. Because it's a pain, the diver in the front is unlikely to be doing it very often. We develop a "trust" that our dive buddy will be there when we turn around to look ... and that's not always a good assumption to make. Suppose the dive buddy stops to look at something. Will you know to stop also? Or will you keep swimming, assuming that your buddy is still behind you? For this reason, in most open water situations, it's better for two divers to swim shoulder-to-shoulder ... or as we like to say, swim to be seen. When swimming side-by-side, two divers can easily and continuously keep track of each other simply by turning their head to look at each other. Even wearing a dive mask you will have a wide enough field of view to be able to see your buddy ... and if they are suddenly not in your field of view when you turn your head you will know to stop and look around before swimming very far. Because of this, your chances of losing each other are reduced dramatically.

Now we're in a position to be seen ... what else can we do? Or what if we're diving a wall or a wreck ... where side-by-side isn't really practical? Well, in many situations, that's where a good dive light comes in handy. A dive light can be an "extension" of the diver. Shining it where it's easily seen by your dive buddy tells him you're there ... if your buddy can see your light shining on the bottom or on a surface nearby, then they know you are not very far away. We call that "passive communication" ... giving your dive buddy a visual cue as to your whereabouts. Dive lights can also be used for active communication, using signals analogous to those you normally provide with your hands.

Other things we can do to be good dive buddies? Slow down! Many divers ... especially newer ones ... tend to swim pretty fast. Sometimes it's because swimming fast makes buoyancy control (seemingly) easier. Sometimes it's just what we were taught to do. One of the selling points for many of the more expensive models of fins on the market is the "speed test". But what's the hurry? You may not even see that octopus or sea horse that's sitting right there in plain sight ... because you just blew right past it. Going slow has a lot of benefits ... from improved air consumption, to seeing more, to giving your buddy a lot more of an opportunity to share your dive with you. Consider this ... the faster you go, the quicker it's possible to lose your dive buddy. I've seen it happen time and again ... one buddy sees something, stops to take a look, looks up to show their buddy, and the buddy is nowhere in sight ... he kept going and didn't even realize that his dive buddy had stopped.

So these are some simple things that every diver can use, practice, and make an every-dive part of their routine ... look around ... swim to be seen ... make use of a dive light when possible ... and slow down.

There are other aspects of diving that can also be used to avoid buddy separations ... making, discussing, and sticking to a dive plan ... descending and ascending while facing each other ... communicating with each other during the dive ... and myriad others. I leave it for some of you to discuss them.

By knowing, and using, these techniques ... most diver separations that occur would never happen. You and your dive buddy will have a more relaxed dive, probably see more, and have lots more enjoyable things to talk about after the dive is over.