

LONDON DIVE SHOW SPECIAL EDITION

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DIVER

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Do dive pros overdo the machismo?



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Hey **dive pros**, who are you trying to **impress**?

Could it be that some would-be or new divers, particularly women, are put off the sport when they encounter rude or patronising attitudes towards them?

JO CAIRD thinks it could

THE DIVE CENTRE DIRECTOR who made me feel so stupid for not knowing the names of all the local fauna in advance that I considered cancelling.

The divemaster who shouted at my buddy for five full minutes for having only a photocopy of his stolen certification card – despite being told that PADI was in the process of sending a replacement.

The numerous guides who have talked down to me because I don't own all my own gear.

These are just a few examples of individuals I have encountered whose behaviour has risked putting me off diving over the six years since I qualified.

I've come across a lot of wonderful divemasters and instructors in my time – women and men who have taught me a huge amount, inspired me to improve my skills and generally been a joy to spend time with, both under water and topside.

Most dive professionals you meet are fantastic ambassadors for their sport. Yet it takes only one negative experience to put someone off for life.

THIS IS PARTICULARLY

THE CASE for those new to diving. Getting qualified is not much fun in itself, even if there is a thrill attached to that first experience of exploring under water.

For most, training is a means to an end, and the hours spent studying dry dive science, doing confined-water dives and endlessly practising tricky new skills are more about endurance than enjoyment.

Don't get me wrong – this is vital stuff that all divers need to know. Training needs to be rigorous to ensure the safety of everyone involved in the sport, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

But given that this isn't exactly the most diverting way of spending your hard-earned leisure time, it's important to make the process as pleasant as possible if we want to encourage beginner-divers to stick with it.

Instead, some of the instructors I have come across seem more concerned about showing off their own skills and experience than effectively initiating their students into the sport.

Though relatively harmless in most cases, at its worst such behaviour can turn into outright bullying. Confidence-building is an important element of dive training, and it's crucial that students don't feel belittled or intimidated.

Power-play on the part of instructors is perhaps born of job dissatisfaction.

I can see that teaching open-water courses may not be the most glamorous aspect of a career in diving, but that's no excuse for behaviour that ultimately does a disservice to the whole community.

It's not only dive virgins who are vulnerable to unwelcoming attitudes, either.

Sometimes it's inadvertent – a matter of someone just being a little bit

dismissive. I've logged

only about 50 dives but have been fortunate enough to have dived in some unusual locations. It's often only at the point when staff at dive centres get a look at my logbook that they start taking me seriously.

Surely hiring some gear and booking a seat on a dive-boat shouldn't make you feel as if you're trying to join some kind of exclusive club?

SOMETIMES, HOWEVER, the put-downs feel more deliberate. I don't know why the dive-centre director I mentioned in my opening paragraph took against me, but that's clearly what happened.

Every question I asked – from "where can I get changed?" to "what's the vis like?" – was met with a roll of the eyes, a snide remark, a snort of derision.

It was genuinely perplexing, not to mention

upsetting enough that I very nearly called the whole thing off.

If I hadn't been halfway around the world at the time, at the only dive centre in the area, I would have done just that.

I have no problem with bowing to greater experience and expertise. It's interactions and conversations with more experienced and skilled members of the community – including the people running dive centres and the instructors who work there – that inspire me to push myself, keep learning, improve.

But having a healthy respect for experience doesn't make it acceptable or helpful to denigrate lack of experience.

PARTLY TO BLAME is the macho culture that diving can't seem to shake off. The sport isn't without risk, of course, and there are moments when I envy my buddy his upper body strength, but very little recreational diving these days requires peak physical fitness, or a propensity for

acts of derring-do.

The delightful truth – something we should be shouting from the rooftops – is that diving is an activity accessible to almost everyone, whether they're old or young; sporty or sedentary; male or female.

Alas, this is a message that isn't always getting through, at least as far as the

statistics on gender in scuba can tell us.

In 2012, women made up only 34% of PADI-certified divers worldwide.

There may be various factors behind this disparity, but I don't think it's a wild leap to lay at least some of the blame at the door of macho dive culture and the misogynistic attitudes and behaviour in which it sometimes manifests itself.

I can't be the only female diver who has ever been made uncomfortable by sexist language, sleazy glances or unwanted advances.

And I'm sure my buddy, who is also my boyfriend, isn't the only male diver to have been deliberately belittled by an instructor seeking to demonstrate his masculinity.

If we're to broaden access to this sport and retain keen newbies, by ensuring that diving is inclusive and welcoming, we need to acknowledge damage caused by macho dive culture, examine our interactions and call people out on bad behaviour. It's about treating each other with a bit of common decency.

