



JO CAIRD has a beef. Too few drysuits are made to suit smaller women, and those that are produced can be difficult to buy or hire. Why, she asks on behalf of all petite female divers, should they have to pay more for a product that never quite seems to fit the brief?

Time to give 'cold shaming' the cold shoulder

FEEL THE COLD WHEN DIVING.

I used to be embarrassed about this fact. These days, however, I refuse to be shamed for something that is outside my control, and bears no relation to my skill or conscientiousness in the water.

When point-scoring dive professionals scoff at my decision to wear gear that they regard as excessive for the conditions – it happens on almost every trip – I simply shrug off their snide remarks.

So what if I choose to wear an undersuit in 23°C water? As long as I have the necessary experience and skill to dive with that particular kit – easily checked with a quick flick through my logbook – what is it to anyone else what I wear?

I wouldn't berate a divemaster for opting for fins that cost more than I earn in a month. Why should he – and it does tend to be men that are the worst culprits here – feel that it's appropriate to comment on my gear choices?

I wrote about the misogyny lurking at the heart of macho dive culture for these pages back in 2012, citing various incidents – sleazy glances or sexist language, for example – that made me feel unwelcome in this world.

The belittling I have experienced in relation to what I choose to wear while diving can feel like a further expression of that macho culture.

It's not only female divers who feel the cold, of course. And there are plenty of women for whom low temperatures aren't a problem at all.

But you're more likely to feel the cold as a woman, because body size is a major factor in how we experience temperature, and women tend to be smaller than men.

I'VE BEEN DIVING for long enough now that this "cold shaming" is nothing more than a minor irritation.

But those newer to diving – women and men both – could easily be intimidated into making equipment choices that will negatively impact their dive experience, and that of their buddy. It also risks putting them off altogether.

Leisure-diving is about enjoyment, and it's hard to enjoy yourself when cold. I've ended coldwater dives early several times because I simply wasn't having enough fun to make it worth continuing.

I'm comfortable doing that, as I know that my buddy will be understanding, but not everyone is in that position.

If you're buddying up with strangers you might be more inclined to dive outside your comfort zone to avoid disappointing them by finishing a dive earlier than planned.

And that way danger lies – hypothermia, where the body's core temperature drops below 35°C, is a potentially life-threatening condition if not treated quickly.

Let's imagine this particular problem



STEVE PRETTY

solved – that we live in a world where no one judges anyone else on their dive-gear. A major issue remains: which dive-gear is available to whom.

A quick tally of the drysuits available at a leading diving e-store reveals seven for men, five for women, three that don't specify, and six that are made to measure.

Not too bad, you might think – a fairly even gender split. Except that the unisex suits are always going to be a much better fit for men, because the male body is the default when it comes to design.

A bespoke drysuit is clearly the most desirable option but convenience comes at a price: up to double that of an off-the-peg suit.

So if, like me, you're a woman in the market for a new drysuit, with a budget of under £1000, you have only three options to choose between, while a man with the same amount to spend has six options.

I understand that dive-stores and drysuit manufacturers are only responding

to the market. Women made up just 38% of total PADI Open Water Diver certifications in 2018.

Even if all those women all took up drysuit diving – and that's a big "if" – the drysuit market is still going to be dominated by men.

But it's hard to see how demand for women's drysuits can be expected to grow when this lack of options functions as a disincentive to embracing diving at lower temperatures.

THE SITUATION IS compounded by the fact that it's rare to find drysuits available for hire. Very few dive-centres stock them, understandably opting for semi-dry wetsuits instead for cost reasons.

Plenty of divers will be fine in a semi-dry. But for those of us who feel the cold, a semi-dry just isn't going to cut it.

Essentially, if you want to dive in coldwater destinations, you need to bring your own kit.

As already discussed, that's a bigger hurdle for women than it is for men. Not surprising therefore, that coldwater diving remains largely the preserve of male divers.

Since buying my first drysuit five years ago I've dived in it in Egypt, Spain,

Gozo, the Canaries, Canada, the Faroes and here in the UK.

Had I been travelling at high season, when water temperatures were highest, I would have been fine in a wetsuit in most of those destinations.

By diving at low season, however – possible only in a drysuit – I was able to take advantage of cheaper deals.

Furthermore, on a lot of those trips my buddy and I were pretty much the only divers in the water.

Put simply, I've had better dive experiences through owning a drysuit.

EQUALITY OF ACCESS to coldwater dive gear obviously matters most to those of us who feel the cold, but it should matter to everyone else too.

Widespread availability of equipment opens up more diving in more destinations to more divers. That's something we can all agree is a good thing. ▣