TECHNICAL DIVING INDIA

NOT TO BECOME A FOSSIL IN A CAVE

Lying in the silt, the fossil of a turtle is greeting me with a foolish grin and empty orbits. When asked what they would like to become whey they grow up, little kids usually answer something along the lines of fireman, doctor, teacher or cosmonaut. In the depth of this Mexican cenote, an underwater cave halfway across the globe from home, I found a new calling: when I grow-up, I want to become a better cave diver - and, if possible, not a dead fossil in a cave. Even a turtle one with a funny smile.

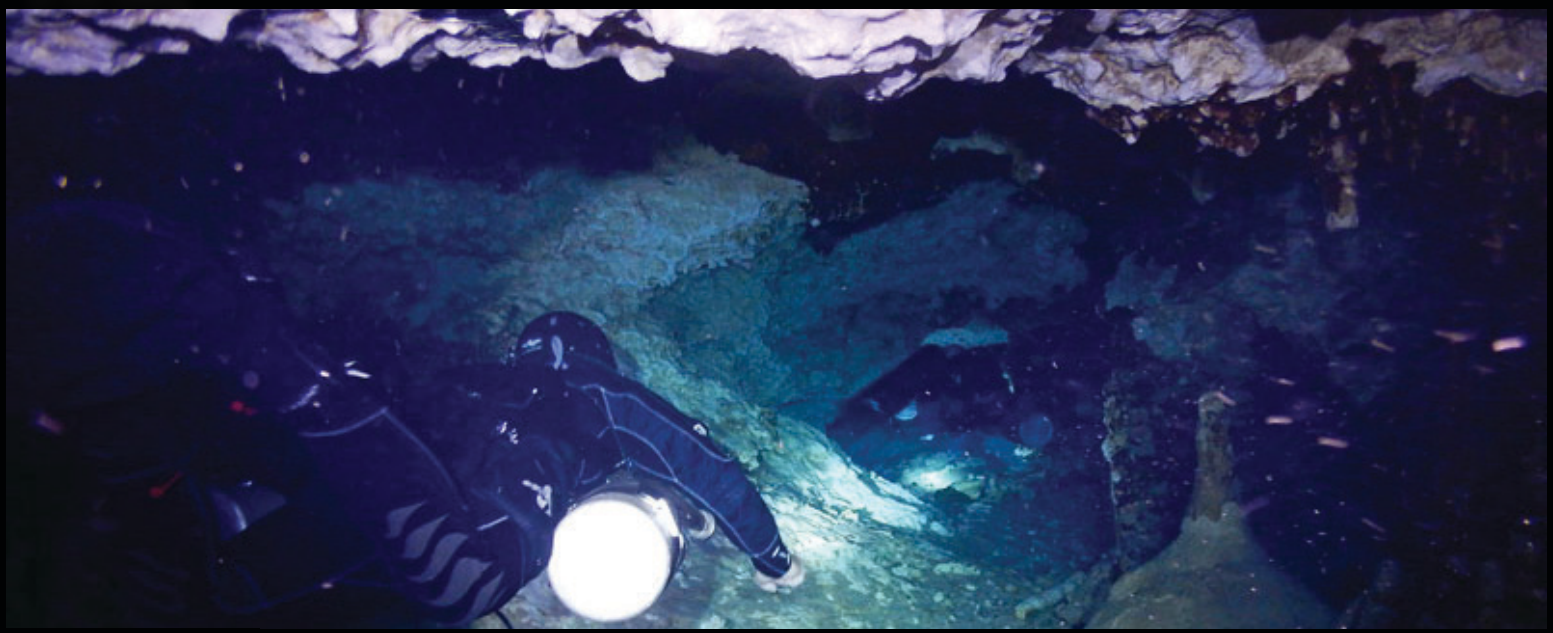
Inspire. Expire. Apart from my tanks, the bubbles flowing out of my regulator are the only gas pockets within an hour of swimming distance. If not for the smooth functioning of my equipment, there is absolutely no chance my life could be sustained so far away from an opening. I don't know about the thickness of granite above my head, but it does not matter: whether 10 centimeters, 10 meters or a 100 meters of solid rock, I'm trapped. The only way out is to follow proper navigational procedures out of this maze: there is no shortcut.

Funny how the human mind works. Assuming I was at the beginning of a dive on our good old 18 meters deep Temple Reef in Pondy, I would also be looking at an hour before breaking the surface, yet would never consider it to be a challenging situation, despite some of the main characteristics of the dive remaining the same: same medium - submerged in water, same dependence - relying on my scuba equipment, same duration - an hour away from the surface. The absence of possibility of an emergency exit makes a world of a difference.

I'm not afraid of the cave, and somewhat surprised not to be - but I'm certainly feeling a deep sense of respect for this environment. How could I not, after reading Sheck Exley, Jared Jablonsky, Dan Lenihan, and their gripping tales of caves exploration? Even the name of Exley's main book, the "Blueprint for survival", reminds the diver that what he is doing is just that: surviving in an environment where he's not supposed to be. And yet, it's almost never the cave that kills the divers: it's the divers themselves, by not following appropriate procedures, or by being carried away by their ego. And tec divers are often found at the top of the list when it comes to ego, right between coke-fueled rock stars and lifelong-elected dictators of Banana Republics - which are, incidently, two types of persons you probably do not want to be cave-diving with.

Hence the intense preparation, servicing every single part and streamlining the entire kit to reduce entanglement and failure hazards, as well as rehearsing every exercise, building up muscle memory until they become second nature: grabbing and following a line in zero-visibility while sharing air with a buddy and communicating by touch, scrupulously following navigational procedures to maximize the chances of finding the exit even in a silted-out cave by laying lines and markers with every possible outcome in mind, performing valves shut-down drills in every position and situation... Interesting fact: in a cave, some exercises can not be simulated. In order to practice a loss of line in a no-visibility situation, you have to lose the line and silt out a portion of the cave - thus creating the very situation you hope to never encounter. And you even pay for it. Human beings are strange animals.

Some well-known skills suddenly seem much trickier to handle. I thought my buoyancy control was decent - and rediscover the pleasure of being a rookie all over again. Going thirty centimeters up and down in open water is barely felt, but in a a fifty centimeters tunnel, a foot of difference is like a rollercoaster ride thrusting a diver from silting-up the place to banging their head on the ceiling.



PADI TecRec

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I check my gauges - I'm almost at the agreed-upon turning pressure. I signal my buddy to turn the dive, point at the exit direction, and take my wetnotes out of my bum bag to write down pressure, time and depth, in order to assess our dive plan during the debriefing and adjust our future procedures accordingly. The ScubaPro logo on the wetnotes can barely be seen anymore, after hundreds of dives of heavy usage and abuse: going through the pages, seeing old decompression plans and maps of my usual Indian diving grounds, is like peering through a window into another world, connected only by this wetnotes, and the liquid element. Remember the question about the hydrological cycle in the PADI Divemaster manual? All waters of the world are connected through cycles of evaporation and condensation - and yet, in the Mexican Cenotes, the water has managed to stay more or less away from this great exchange for maybe hundreds of thousands of years.

This incredible amount of time somehow percolates through the rocks surrounding me, and diving through those galleries is a kind of time travel, passing stalactites formed a million years ago when those grounds were above sea level, floating over the fossil or skeleton of an animal that got lost here long before human beings were inhabiting the Earth, or trying to not disturb layers of sediments building the graveyard of marine creatures who died several ice ages ago. Most of the Mexican caves are solution formations, and were built through the dissolution of soft materials through traveling acidic waters - a process older than some continents. And through this sensation of eternity, the stunning beauty of the simultaneously underwater and under-earth landscape: Madonna's passage, the Room of Tears, thousands of stone spears buidling cathedrals inaccessible to most pilgrims, and stone figures whose devotional shape remind me of the Italian Black Virgin, la Santa Madonna del Canetto. Without the shop of cheap, holy trinkets - but definitely with a sense of awe that, as an heathen diver, I've only felt in a few old temples. Going through haloclines separating layers of salt and fresh water, my vision troubled by the swirls of conflicting liquid densities, I'm absolutely tripping, and yet have to stay resolutely focused. It feels like having to solve equations while sucking on a ball of Kashmiri opium.

FOCUS: SIDEMOUNT DIVING

Sidemount diving is particularly well suited for penetrations in overhead environments, like caves and wrecks:

Modularity: the tanks can be put in front of the diver for particularly tricky restrictions, or even be staged if needed.

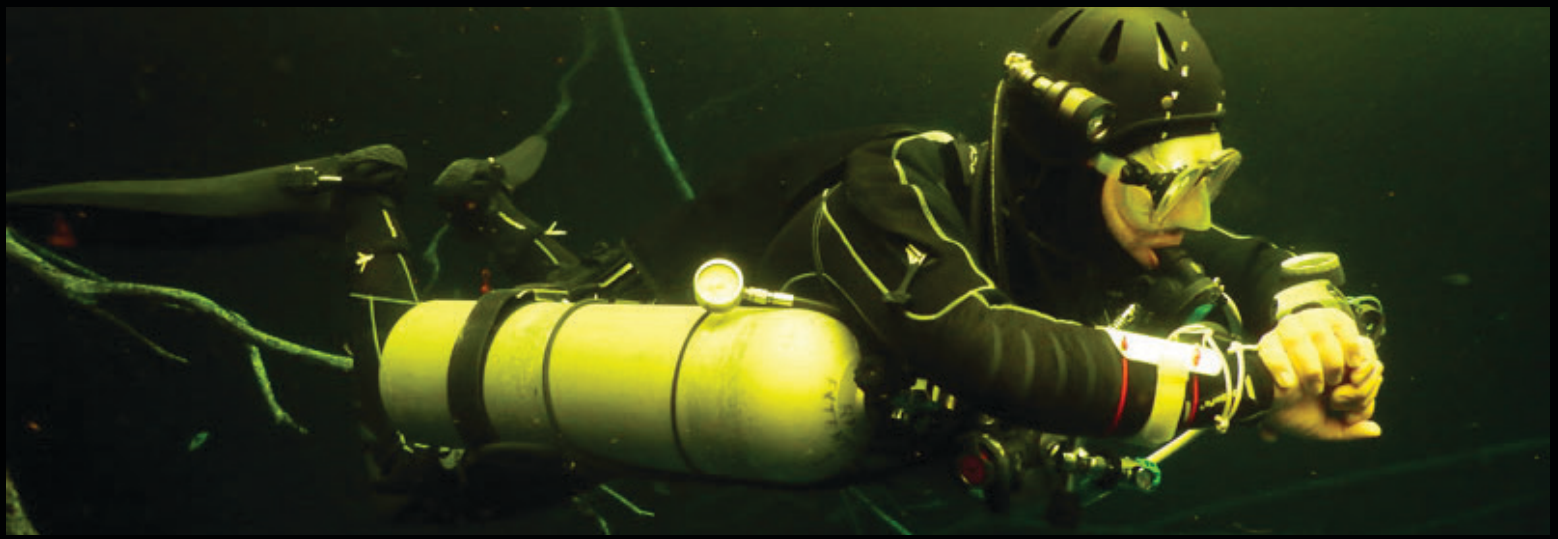
Nothing on the back: having not tanks on the back can allow penetration in some restrictions that would be impossible in backmount, since it reduces the diver's vertical profile.

Redundancy: sidemount offers the diver at least 2 completely independant breathing systems.

In these rooms, more decorated than the most insane creation of any architect on acids, water flows in absolute transparency, and one does not swim: one flies, finding deep under the earth the same zero-gravity than in outer space. A song from a Mexican metal band, Agora, goes through my head, following the rhythm of my bubbles: "siluetas en el aire", silhouettes in the air, divers as floating shadows in a lightless world.

One kick at a time, gliding through the darkness, I finally see the faint gleam of the exit behind a last curve. I've never really grasped the deep meaning of the expression "light at the end of the tunnel" until today.

I'm hooked. I can't help but feel like a cosmonaut just coming back from another planet. I've barely seen a fish during the dive, and I don't care: the surreal beauty of the caves, the sensation of riding time and elements, on the very edge of survival and the world, pushing my skills further with every kick, is like discovering a new dimension of diving, forcing me to rethink even my open water diving - becoming a silhoueta en el aire. And not a dead turtle in the silt.



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