

Reporter Paul Thompson goes underwater - not undercover - for his latest story

STALYBRIDGE CLUB TAKES ADVANTAGE OF POPULARITY OF DIVING

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BUTTERFLIES flutter in my belly as I arrive for my scuba diving taster session. I've got comedian Jerry Seinfeld's rant ringing in my ears: "A great activity, where your main goal is to not die."

Fears are soothed in the foyer where I chat with members of the Chaumont diving club. They allow themselves a chuckle when I tell them I'm worried about getting the decompression sickness divers call the 'bends'.

Fitness

Mark, an instructor of 12 years, says: "I think that's unlikely in a swimming pool."

Chairman David Redeyof is in his second year of diving, and already he has experience of three big open-water dives and the job of raising the profile of the club.

He said: "There's a great social side. We do everything from paintballing to pub quizzes."

For those with undersea aspirations, diving officer Andy has good news: "Committed learners can be ready in six months. That means doing open water practice in your own time."

After a labyrinthine tour of the Copley centre's refurbishments, I'm in the changing rooms cutting a dash in trunks and T-shirt. Strap some compressed air to my back, I think, because I'm ready as I'll ever be.

Not so fast. First I swim four lengths to prove minimum fitness. Then there's a snorkelling session to get used to breathing underwater and using flippers. I discover, with wonder, how far

jammed water will travel when correctly displaced by a pea-shooting blow.

Next, kitting up. Your jacket fits like a waistcoat and, with the cylinder's weight, it's like giving a toddler a piggy back. This isn't enough to drop you to the bottom so a belt of lead weights is fitted round the gut.

Buoyancy

Lesson one: buoyancy. This means moving up, down and staying constant. It's the most important - and possibly most difficult - skill to master. You have one button to put air into your jacket, and another to take it out. You control your vertical movement like you would that of a video-game character.

Also, a deep breath in makes you go up, out makes you go down.

Underwater, Mark takes me through my buoyancy paces with a medley of do-as-I-do, flash-card commands, and simple sign language. To say 'okay', you make an 'O' with your forefinger and thumb, like the American 'A-okay, buddy'.

Before long I'm mooching a length, enjoying the new perspective and incredible vision of clarity. The peace is like a head massage. The woozy slow-motion of others is breathtaking.

And this is just a swimming pool. Imagine how this would be heightened exploring a wreck, or creatures of the Red Sea (divers' Mecca that the club visits every year).

Over far too quickly, it's an essential experience. I didn't expect to like it. But I left making an 'O' with my forefinger and thumb.

Find out more at www.chaumontdivelclub.co.uk



ABOVE: Paul makes the okay sign and left, receives diving instructions from Mark Lucas ASN301464a/d08