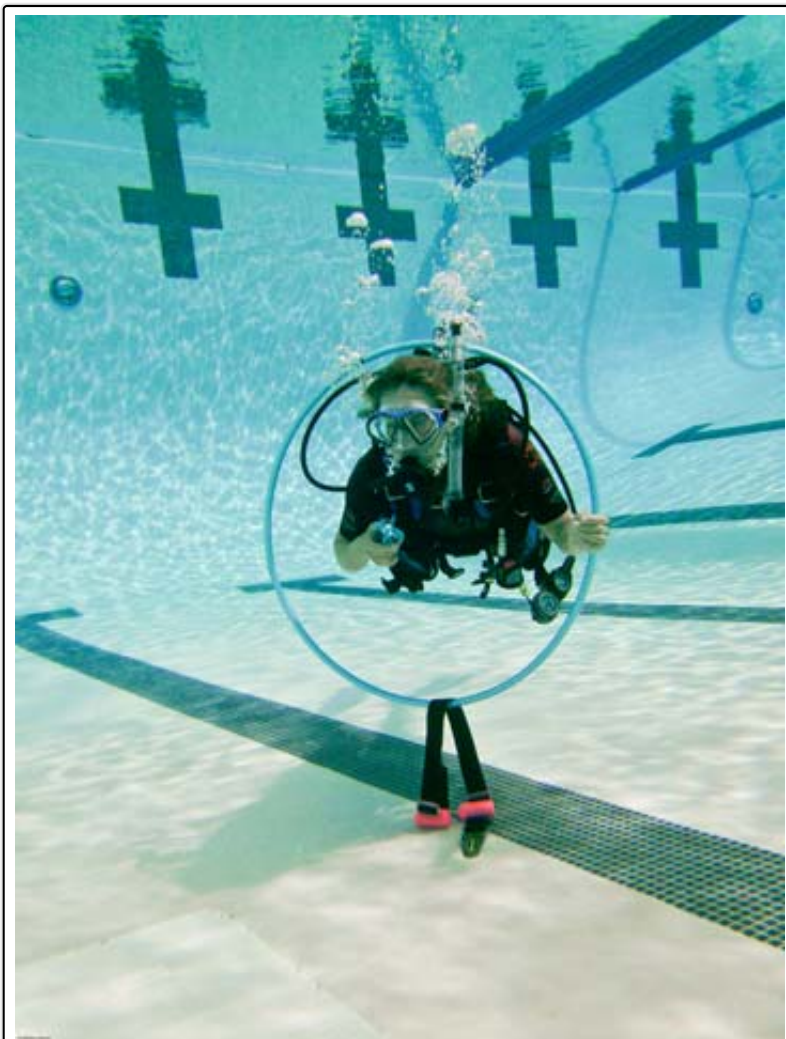


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Scuba Provides Sense of Calm

April 11, 2013 | By **Sue Pascoe**, *Staff Writer*



Sue Pascoe swims through a hoop at 13 ft. in the Maggie Gilbert Aquatic Center pool. *Photo: Barbara Gentile-Crary*

There is a certain stillness under the water, which is one of the first things one notices in scuba. The sounds of birds or even traffic are eerily gone and even conversation, which one takes for granted above the water, is done in sign language. Scuba is like visiting a hidden foreign country. An early morning dive in the Great Barrier Reef off Australia was like watching a small city wake up. The sky was just losing its darkness, when we went over the side of the boat.

With the exception of one or two lazily swimming fish, the ocean, filled with coral of differing shapes, seemed absent of movement. As the sun rose, more and more fish of varying colors and sizes appeared from nooks and behind plants and started a “morning rush” hour, moving with a purpose and direction, much as traffic might

on the 405.

Perfectly weighted, a diver, rather like a large unattractive fish, is able to observe this environment breathing “canned” air through a regulator.

Although I had received my open water PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors)

certification more than 23 years ago, I hadn't been under the water until Sunday, when Malibu Divers director of education, Barbara Gentile-Crary convinced me that I should recertify to dive off the coast of California.

I listed the reasons why I shouldn't: dark, sharks and cold. "Those are the reasons most people give. Additionally, they think they have to be Olympic-style swimmers," said Gentile-Crary, who is a volunteer in the L.A. Sheriff's dive team and one of the top one percent of all dive instructors worldwide, teaching advanced divers to become instructors.

"It's not dark," she said, noting that on a great day, visibility off the coast can be 40 to 90 ft. "I never saw a great white on a scuba dive. If you wear the appropriate clothing you won't be cold. And people don't have to be Olympic swimmers. We teach people who are quadriplegic and paraplegic to dive."

Malibu Divers teach out of the Maggie Gilbert Aquatic Center pools, and students range in ability from those who have never put on a mask or flippers, to those who are training to be dive teachers.

"I'm a hard-core free diver and spend more time in the ocean than in class," said Ryan Gangi, 19, who attends Cal State Channel Islands and took the class with friend Ally Peskay, 18. "I wanted to see what my friends are talking about."

They were being taught by John Carlo, 19, who is majoring in business at Cal State Channel Islands and started as a 14-year-old at Camp Emerald in Catalina. "I dive two to three times a week, and during lobster season I dive more," he said.

Also in the pool were four Pacific Palisades eight-year-old boys, who were participating in the "Seal Team," a scuba discovery program. (You cannot become certified until age 10.)

"I like the ocean and I wanted to look at it from under," said Brennan Clark, who for his eighth birthday party invited five friends for a scuba party at the pool.

"It was an out-of-the-box party and the price was reasonable," said Clark's mom Kelsey, who said her son has asked for scuba lessons, but isn't old enough.

Working with the boys were several dive masters, including Laurel Bartels, who explained that she started diving in Texas in quarries and then the Gulf of Mexico after she had been in an airplane crash. Her injuries prevented her from working out. "I was athletic before the crash, running, hiking and biking," she said, and sought an activity that would not put stress on her body.

She initially had problems with scuba. "I couldn't breathe through a regulator," she said, but a patient instructor kept working with her until she mastered it. She feels that experience makes her more patient with her students. "If they want to learn to dive, I will take time and work through their issues."

Also with the boys was Bartel's husband, dive master Eric Rippon and dive master Tom Figueroa, who works full-time as a landscaping architect.

"I started with open water classes for physical education in 1982 and 1983 at Southern Methodist University," said dive master Ralph Litton, an accountant. "It's a lot of fun. People get addicted to scuba; it's kind of like golf."

After spending the afternoon in the water, my only regret was that I had not revived the sport sooner—everything was just as effortless and lovely as I remembered.

Malibu Divers is located at 21231 Pacific Coast Hwy. For lessons and equipment, visit: malibudivers.com or call (310) 456-2396.