

Wet Tour

Our intrepid columnist goes underwater to find out what is strapped to the neoprene of recreational divers

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY STEVEN J. LUNDIN

What do divers wear when taking the giant stride into the blue or green? Dive watches comprise one of the most robust and mature luxury goods markets, supported by an enormous variety of products touted in dive watch websites and men's magazines. A diver can literally spend less than \$100 to hundreds of thousands of dollars for a true dive watch.

I traveled partway around the world to see and try out what actually gets wet, beginning in the balmy waters of Puerto Rico, through the chilly Great Lakes and finally to Hawaii.

Puerto Rico

My wife Candace and I touched down in San Juan on a Friday, leaving a grey and rainy Chicago morning for a warm and drizzly San Juan afternoon. We had

planned our first dive for the next day. It was an open water check for her and a tag-along for me. Another couple had signed up for the festivities, insuring I'd get at least one paragraph out of this leg of the trip.

At sunrise we left our room at the Holiday Inn Isla Verde and hit the morning commute on Highway 26 onto San Juan's waterfront. Our dive guide, Karen Vega, runs Caribe Aquatic Adventures Dives, one of a handful of Lonely Planet and PADI recommended dive operations on the island.

The island bug had bitten Vega, a New Jersey expat, when she was vacationing thirty-five years ago. She was a diver from the Clive Cussler era and would merrily plunge into the sea with nothing more than a Mae West, weight belt and old "waterproof" watch.

Unlike most gear junkies, she

keeps things simple. She actually knows what the unidirectional bezel on a dive watch is for, and she relies on it. Such understanding is not standard issue. My old dive buddy Aldo Busot in Miami told me a story about a gotta-get-every-gadget diver who didn't get it.

"He was a trust fund baby who had to have the newest of everything. One day he flagged me down about a 'problem' he was having with a new **TAG Heuer Aquagraph**: the 'big hand in the middle keeps spinning fast!' When I pressed the side pusher to stop the stopwatch he was convinced that I had broken it."

Easily read

On this day Vega dove with a simple **Kobold Soarway** diver, which she admired for its easy-to-read face and wide expanding nylon band. "This could easily fit over



Gandace, wearing a NauticFish, and Karen, with a Kebold, play Pass the Squid in Puerto Rico.

my 7-mil suit,” she explained, although we found it hard to imagine needing one in 82-degree water. It was, however, too cold for many locals to dive unless they had properly insulated themselves with a pint or two of home brewed rum.

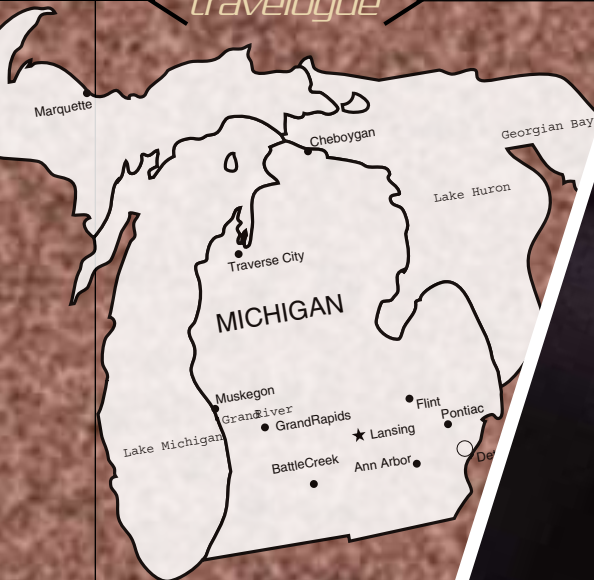
I couldn’t get my wife to wear the **Suunto D3** that I had brought, in a choice of colors no less, but she did agree to dive with a German-made **NauticFish**, which she liked because it had a “pretty blue face.” Whatever dives your sub. Her daily wear is a blue-dialed **Omega Seamaster Diver 300M**, which she tasks every time she

washes the dishes. Vega’s dive master, a solid old fellow who looked like a Russian heavy from a 1960s James Bond movie, helped the other couple don their rented gear. Another no-nonsense diver, he sported a well-used two-tone **Invicta Automatic Pro Diver Men’s watch**.

As we chatted up the other couple, who each wore tee shirts to our Henderson titanium 1.5-mil wetsuits, I stole a look at their wrists. The male half of the re-

lationship wore a stainless **Citizen Aqualand**, a professional dive watch which meant that he knew something about the sport—or at least knew what catalogue to order accessories from.

His gal pal wore a **St. Moritz M1** in orange. Again, a legitimate choice for an entry-level watch



that straddles form and function on a budget. Maybe they had a little game, but I couldn't get past the tee-shirt approach to the ocean.

"It's my first dive," she offered my wife. The watch must have been an inaugural dive present, like a bottle of Korbel christening the bow of the S.S. Minnow.

We all entered the shore by the Hotel Normandie for a pleasant hour-long dive. Vega knew every fish in every nook and cranny of our journey and introduced us along the way. She was friendly with lobsters, starfish, a large eel and many shy little crustaceans that simply refused to come out of their shells until she gently coaxed them for our entertainment.

Lake Michigan

"You boys ever dove the Great Lakes before?" asked Captain Mike Tapper of N'pursuit located in Hobart, Indiana. Yet another sunrise tour found me a far cry from Puerto Rico in a small dive boat moored off the East Chica-

go Marina. I had been told to wear at least a 7-mil suit, which is where I draw the line. If it's that cold, I'm getting on a plane. I compromised with a 5-mil Farmer John and only wore the uppers and a hood. I was with four other divers and a divemaster and we were out to explore wrecks.

Dive boats are like bars without the alcohol, a bunch of happy people sitting around waiting for something fun to happen. So we kibitzed. Larry and Chris were a pair of affable yuppies who had dived around the world, from the Great Barrier Reef in Australia to the Andaman Sea in Thailand. Larry was in town to party with his recently married bud for the weekend and they had started last night and were still going strong. Sid was a local commercial diver who had the glamorous job of clearing zebra mussels from filtration screens outside the BP plant

in Whiting, and his buddy Jake, a former ScubaPro salesman, was visiting from San Diego and had lost a bet, landing him in our boat on Lake Michigan.

When I commented that I was writing for *International Watch*, a display of watches came out faster than a bottle of Jack Daniels at the opening gun of the Brickyard 500. And these guys weren't sheepish about it: "What do you think about those Panerai's? My buddy has a Jaeger, is that a good watch?" And on it went.

Our worldly divers, Larry and Chris, each wore **Rolex SubMariners**, and actually kept them on underwater, which was a sign that they probably knew what the outer ring was for. Sid from



Tim Heppner wishes for a blanket in Lake Superior. He wears a Suunto D7.



Avoiding zebra mussels in Lake Michigan

the South Side of Chicago wore a respectable yellow **Suunto Mosquito** while his buddy from San Diego donned a very cool **Citizen 20th Anniversary Aqualand Eco-Drive**.

After about forty minutes we arrived at the dive site: the venerable Tacoma, a seventy-three-foot-long wooden wreck that sank in October 1929 in thirty-two feet of water.

Here are a few things that everyone should know about Lake Michigan diving: 1) You can see farther than your wrist, about thirty-five feet farther on a good day, and today was one of those days. 2) It is NOT either 7-mil or hypothermia. On this particular day we were hitting seventy-three-degree water with thermoclines of maybe sixty-five degrees. 3) Zebra mussels rule the lake. These unnatural mollusks entered the wa-

terways and have helped clean up the Lakes at a cost: they coat everything.

The half-buried remnants of the Tacoma came slowly into view as we descended down the line. Built in 1894, the poor little tug had become too old to handle the wild lake. Now it was covered in the dull patina of the small striped zebra mussel shells that claimed literally every square inch of this doomed ship.

Lake Superior

You haven't really dived the Great Lakes until you've hit Lake Superior, rumored to be the coldest and clearest of the HOMES group. While I haven't Googled the stats, I can tell you that at forty-six degrees in August, my Lake Superior dive was chillier than any cold shower I can remember. My dive buddy, Tim Heppner, formerly of the Navy and now developing

green houses in Chicago, wore a **Suunto D9** on his wrist: a rough and ready dive computer that we've covered several times.

Three other divers joined us on a boat from Captain Joe Lindquist of Shipwreck Dive Tours. John and Dave, a pair of beginner open-water divers from Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, and Arthur, another newbie diver, from Milwaukee.

We rode across the foggy lake bay towards Trout Point, where the Selvick lay. The Selvick is a 1915 city class tug that our captain's father had hauled up from Sturgeon Bay to become the first intentionally scuttled boat in the Great Lakes and part of an underwater wreck preserve.

Attempting to ignore the drizzly cold, I took account my fellow diver's watches. John, the better-heeled of the pair, sported a **TAG Heuer Aquaracer** which he confessed he had "no idea how



Lundin stays wet in Lanai with a J-LC Master Compressor



Wei Koh tans in Lanai with his J-LC Master Compressor and Bell & Ross BRO1

to program, but I thought it was the right watch to wear." His buddy Dave sported an **Oceanic Geo**. Arthur had probably read every dive article that he could get his hands on and was the most uber-prepared diver I had encountered in a long time. Amidst a spiderweb of snaps, buckles and webbing, Arthur strapped the following to his BCD: flashlight, whistle, emergency beacon, small knife, cyalume light stick, compass and a pair of scissors. He wore a **Cressi-sub EDY** dive computer watch.

The tug was nicely tucked between the rocks in about sixty feet of water. It had been cut in several places to allow entry, but we were the only visitors slipping through its cold metal shell. We collectively saw one fish, and it was probably passing through to warmer waters.

The Selvick is free of zebra mussels and the water is bracingly

clear. This dive, in a 5-mil wetsuit, has to go down as the shortest of my career. By the time my hands went numb and I began my ascent I had logged a whopping twenty minutes of bottom time on my **Ulysses-Nardin Marine Diver**.

Lanai, Hawaii

It was more than fitting that I concluded this real dive watch roundup on a boat off the island of Lanai, Hawaii, with a group of watch journalists. We had been flown in by Jaeger-LeCoultre to review their Master Compressor dive watches (see full review in *International Watch*, August 2007, pp. 88-92). Our particular boat carried writers who dove and could actually comment on dive watches in action. But my work for this article was topside.

I made my way through the boat while all the other divers were

suiting up and checking their photo gear. Daryl Carson, the gear editor for *Sports Diver* magazine, wore a no-nonsense **Seiko Automatic 200 M** stainless steel dive watch. Wei Koh of *Revolution* magazine was an avowed watch junkie and wore two watches: he had the **Master Compressor** strapped on one wrist and a **Bell & Ross orange-dial BR01** on the other.

Then there was the Russian journalist who had flown thirty-six hours for this trip and wore a **Vulcain Cricket Nautical**, not the kind of watch you find counterfeited on Canal Street. He was fast friends with the Greta Garbo of the group, a journalist/model from somewhere in Eastern Europe. Her short bleached blond hair hung out from under a pork pie hat; an ever-present Cuban cigarillo, floss bikini and a **Luminor Panerai** completed the ensemble.



The Girard-Perregaux Sea Hawk II



It's a Sinn UX.



In Lanai with a Vulcain Cricket Nautical

Finally there was a pair of German writers who kept to themselves and took their beer as seriously as their diving. I asked them why they had traveled halfway around the world to drink Miller Lite at the resort bar. They didn't respond, but they redeemed themselves with their taste in watches. One wore a **Girard-Perregaux Sea Hawk II** and the other a **Sinn UX**, both connoisseur dive watches that set benchmarks for durability, precision and style.

So, what do divers wear? Since all the information any diver needs is found on the instrument dive gauge cluster, the watch is a purely personal statement, usually more of vanity than

utility. I dive with a **Suunto D9** because I'm too lazy to manually record my dives and it keeps track of everything short of underwater bathroom breaks.

Like most protective watch snobs, I shudder at the thought of exposing my minty two-tone **Rolex Submariner** to anything wetter than the condensation around the glass of a cold dry martini.