

Dive Conferences – awesome or awful?

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Blah-blah-blah, gas-gas-gas, chat-chat-chat. We all know the routine: meetings are inevitably very dull, half-day seminars can be appalling and all-day-long work conferences are the pits. No one really wants to go, the lunch is often a let-down and the only possible source of amusement might be if one of the senior managers says something wildly inappropriate. So for an outdoor-orientated and highly adventurous group, such as us divers, can a weekend dive conference really be that much fun?



Part of the problem is today's jaded society. We are constantly bombarded with the 'next best thing', 'the ultimate', 'the greatest'. Everything today is 'AWESOME!', only we all know everything isn't awesome. Some things are great, some are only average and some are downright terrible, but the prevailing marketing wisdom requires everything to be hyped to the max. And the problem with this is that the consumers, which are effectively all of us, become desensitised and cynical. I mean really, does anyone believe that some fries, a few nuggets of mechanically reconstituted meat and a wrap are 'The Ultimate Line

Up'? Or that a popular fizzy cola is 'Lip-smacking-thirst-quenching-ace-tasting-motivating-yawn-yawn-yawn.....'?

But getting off my soapbox, the question is how do you combat the continual stream of over-blown drivel and hyperbole and get people to focus on stuff which is really quite good? Alas I don't think anyone knows for sure – so I'm just hoping you are still reading at this point and you know me well enough appreciate I might have something interesting to say when I stop moaning and get on with it.

My point is this – DIVE CONFERENCES ARE AWESOME! And this is why.....

Firstly there are the talks, the majority of which are about the actual diving experiences of the speakers themselves. These are not discussions of hair-brained theories concocted by some management guru to sell more books, these are real-world dives, usually going way beyond the normal. Some of the talks I've listened to have covered topics as diverse as exploring thousand-year-old mines in China, diving inside icebergs, discovering 500-year-old shipwrecks, designing homemade rebreathers out of vacuum cleaners and saucepans and getting inside huge fishing trawler nets to take videos of the carnage. In some cases this really is life and death stuff – not the pretend 'OMG-this-is-like-so-major' rubbish shown on TV. A distressingly regular feature of many conferences are discussions on the events surrounding high profile diver deaths – never happy topics, but always well attended because everyone wants to know how to make sure it doesn't happen to them!

And the speakers are genuine. They love what they do, they are passionate and informed and they can answer your questions with practical advice garnered during years of cutting edge diving experience. Admittedly not all the talks are slick and professional – some can be very rough and unvarnished – but you can accept this because you know the presenter is a true down-and-dirty-get-in-there-and-do-it type of person, far more interested in actually doing the activity than talking about it.

Secondly there are the toys, with big conferences such as OzTEK providing a paradise for equipment-nerds. A good show is like a giant Toys-R-Us for divers and as well as seeing all the latest gadgets and gizmos you can also ask questions from the manufacturers. This is not the fools-gold type of info you get on dive-forums, this is pure gold. Ever had a question about rebreathers? At OzTEK you can compare everything side-by-side – and ask the same question to each of the manufacturers in turn. The same goes for everything from booster pumps to batteries, dry-suits to dive computers.

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10th Annual Conference in Gainesville and High Springs, Florida
December 6-7, 2014

<p>Wednesday-Thursday, December 3-4</p> <p>Guided ocean diving in South Florida</p> 	<p>Friday, December 5</p> <p>Project Baseline workshop</p> <p>Evening social in Gainesville</p> <p>Guided diving in North Florida Springs</p> 	<p>Saturday, December 6</p> <p>Join us in Gainesville for a full day of conference speakers followed by an evening social.</p> 	<p>Sunday, December 7</p> <p>Travel the short distance to the home of GUE in High Springs and join us for small group workshops, guided diving, and an evening social.</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div>	<p>Monday, December 8</p> <p>Local field trip with Dr. Todd Kincaid</p> <p>Guided diving in North Florida springs</p> 	<p>Tuesday, December 9</p> <p>Guided diving in North Florida springs</p> 	<p>Wednesday-Sunday, December 10-14</p> <p>MCEP Science Project in Ox Bel Ha, Mexico (limited spaces; must be GUE Cave 2)</p> 
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*We will continue to update you with additional details as they become available. The optional activities itinerary is still subject to change and dive trips to South Florida will be contingent upon weather conditions.

And the stands don't just have toys, they also have all the major training agencies and all the best dive destinations represented. Got some questions about diving in PNG, or Tahiti, or Chuuk; want to know about gas blending classes, or cave diving classes – just ask the experts.

And thirdly – at risk of alienating everyone – there are the 'networking opportunities'. Ok I'm being facetious, what I mean is you have a chance to meet and talk to a wide range of people, including many of the leading lights within our chosen sport. Where else can you meet and question real-life explorers? These are not reality-tv-explorers, who have their producers scout ahead to make sure their 'wilderness campsite' is cleaned and sanitised just before they arrive. These are people who have really headed out into the wilds, often without proper funding and backing, and have made things up as they went along. In fact hearing about the failures is often just as interesting as the successes.

Of course if you really want to get the inside line on the latest expeditions, or who has stitched up who, or what pieces of equipment you really need to get and which to avoid, then you either need to hang around the bar, or go to the usual end-of-conference dinner. If you are sick of the totally-PC never offend anyone culture which seems to be all pervasive nowadays then there is nothing like the inappropriateness and openness of 200+ very tipsy divers. This is older people recreating the 'my-parents-are-away-lets-have-a-party-and-go-mad' mayhem they enjoyed as teenagers. I wouldn't miss the gala-dinner at OzTEK for anything, as it is a wonderfully bonkers and entertaining evening and worth every penny.



So what conferences do I have in my calendar currently?

In December I will be attending the Global Diving conference in Florida. This is being held in the middle of some of the most exciting cave diving country in the United States, which means as well as all the cool things I highlighted above, there will also be lots of very exciting diving to be done. This conference will bring together divers from all around the world and has very strong environmental and research themes running throughout many of the presentations. The last time I went to this conference was in 2008 and I loved it and this year promises to be bigger and better than ever.

And in March next year I will be attending OzTEK '15 in Sydney. This conference runs every other year and this will be my 4th conference in a row. The main themes of this conference are exploration and extreme diving, with lots of 'nerding' out opportunities with the latest tech diving equipment and decompression research. When I did my first OzTEK in 2009 I missed out on the gala dinner, but I haven't made that mistake again!

An extra bonus for me at both of these conferences will be the chance to meet up with friends from around the world – other divers I have met during various expeditions, projects, dive trips and of course previous conferences. But this isn't something unique to me, once you start going to events like this and joining projects, you too will start to meet friends at these events. And this is really the key point for me. Dive conferences are awesome because they are inspiring and generate a massive surge of enthusiasm to go diving. Every time I return from a conference I am brimming with new ideas for places to visit, projects to join and new equipment to try out. So whilst I'm on the go for the entire weekend, all day and all evening, I still always come back to NZ feeling refreshed.

So if you've made it to the end of this article - well done. Now try to make it to one of the conferences. I guarantee you won't be disappointed!

