

GUE Tech 1 ITC – Croatia 13-19th May 2013

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Sitting at my desk I stared at the email, “GUE is pleased to announce plans to conduct two Tech Instructor courses in 2013!” That was the good news; the hard part would be persuading Mel to let me spend US\$4000 on the course and to leave her behind for a month in the New Zealand winter, while I enjoyed southern Europe in the summer. I continued reading through the prerequisites and the course summary – I had no problems fulfilling GUE’s requirements, but as well as the cost, the course dates meant I would be away for our 10th Wedding anniversary. Damn, whichever way I looked at it, this was going to cost me! So how do you justify travelling half-way around the world, spending lots of money in the process and abandoning your wife for weeks? And yes that word was used, although somewhat tongue in cheek.

After many years together you learn to pick your moments when you have something difficult to ask. Whilst very supportive of my diving, I knew Mel would need significant convincing in this instance, so with the sun shining and a couple of cups of tea in hand I tentatively suggested a trip to Croatia. As expected Mel had already seen the email and pointed out the obvious. I had already done several T1 interns, so why couldn’t I do what everyone else has done over the last few years and simply teach a T1 class whilst being examined? I was ready for this, with my answer centred on two key ideas. My first point was that on a normal T1 class with real students you can’t practice and make mistakes. On a real class you have to be totally on top of things, particularly during erroneous valve failures, where the potential exists for a confused or rushing student to close all of their team-mates valves. In this instance it’s not ok for the intern to say, ‘hang on a sec, can we rewind and do that again?’ Secondly, whilst interning on real classes you can’t guarantee to see and deal with all the possible problems, whereas with ITC examiners pretending to be ‘troublesome’ students I knew I would face the entire circus full of acrobatics, magic tricks and clowns.



Krnica Dive – home away from home

I threw in a few other arguments for good measure – networking opportunities and quality classes. As the sole instructor in a geographically very isolated country it is important to regularly meet other GUE instructors, to exchange ideas, keep up to date and importantly keep motivated. I also reminded Mel of the best argument in favour of GUE classes - their quality. I highlighted the instructors for this class, Rich Walker and Kirill Egorov, both of whom I had worked with before. I reasoned that by working with Rich and Kirill I would get to see some new ways of presenting lectures, get some great tips for dry-runs and learn how to skilfully manage a ‘very awkward’ T1 class underwater.

I felt I was gaining the upper hand in our little domestic discussion, which inevitably meant Mel played her biggest and best card “Do you really think this makes financial sense?” (Now before I continue I should point out that I work full time in the dive industry and Mel is a very successful accountant.) As a Fundies instructor your only real justification for T1 status is that you have students who want to do T1. Whilst it is possible a few people may have taken on GUE Instructor status (temporarily) for vanity reasons, you really cannot justify the time and money commitment to become a T1 instructor on anything other than growing your student base. So my final counter to Mel was that having started in a country virtually devoid of GUE divers, I had waited for 4 years since becoming a Fundies instructor, precisely so I could be sure of enough students to make the

qualification worthwhile. At this point anyone in a long term relationship will recognize that although the argument might have been won, I was still going to pay!

A couple of months later it was time to abandon Mel and head to Croatia. From Auckland I headed to the UK, caught up with family for a few days, borrowed a bunch of dive gear from a friend, got over the worst of my jet-lag and then took the Ryan-Air flight to Pula. From here it is a 20 minute drive through very pretty countryside to Krnica, which was delightfully characterized by my taxi driver as 'but there's nothing there.' On arrival in the town centre (1 pizza bar, 1 shop, a post office and a dozen houses) we had to stop to ask for directions and then proceeded down the hill to the port. Whilst it is an incredibly picturesque little harbour I could see the taxi driver's point, there really wasn't much going on, which meant JP's big white GUE-Netherlands van was easy to spot. Finally I had arrived.

I was met by Maurizio, my host and supposedly the person who was meeting me at the airport. He looked worried, 'but I thought you were arriving in two days' time?' So much for my accommodation I thought. But really there was nothing to worry about. Maurizio is one of the world's great hosts and the only reason he looked worried was because this was my very first visit to Croatia and he always wants everything to be perfect

for his guests. He gave me a quick tour of the dive centre, got me a cold drink and within moments had arranged alternative accommodation. If you ask anyone who has been to Krnica Dive I guarantee they will cite Maurizio as a major part of their trip – he is truly and wonderfully unique, happily providing you with lots of great food and inviting you into his home.



Marc Hall relaxing between dives

So did the class live up to my expectations?

For 5 days Rich and Kirill drilled Marc Hall and me. Depending on the weather the days were split between each of the three teachings areas – lectures, dry-runs and in-water sessions, plus Rich and Kirill gave various presentations. Using a new version of the slides which Kirill has been developing both Marc and I presented every lecture. We also presented every dry-run and spent over 12 hours in the water. As you do on a Fundies Instructor class we took turns being the instructor running the class and a student in the class. Rich and Kirill swapped between being the assessor and the 'difficult' student, the one who asks all the questions you don't want, always seems to turn and position themselves with their back to you or makes all the usual and not so usual mistakes common to a T1 class.

If I have to pick one area of this ITC which was the most useful it would definitely be the in-water stuff. As I



Krnica Harbour

mentioned previously it is this area which is really hard to perfect whilst interning. How do you judge the right position to be in when you need to both assess fundamental skills such as trim and buoyancy, yet also be right besides students to initiate failures? How do you learn to create a deco bottle failure when you are coming at the student from slightly below and to the left and then move seamlessly to the right in order to maintain control of an OOG scenario? How do you keep the students by the ascent line, watch every little step of the gas switch and keep exact track of the time so you can debrief appropriately at the surface? As with all GUE classes the answer is practice and you can only do this in the water.

With so much material and so many skills to work through the course obviously generates some stress, but the important thing for me was that all the way through the criticisms I received were useful, the praise for good performance was motivating and the problems and scenarios created were always fair, reasonable and realistic. At no point did I feel I was being pushed to ridiculous extremes simply to see where I would crack and after each session the feedback was immediate and balanced. It was also good to realize that our opinions mattered and the feedback Marc and I gave was listened to and appreciated.

Conclusions

You can always be sure when you sign up to a GUE class that the instructors know their stuff, that the class will be educational and your skills will be challenged. I'm tempted to add that the classes are always fun – but usually it isn't until after the class you relax enough to realize you did actually enjoy it. As I highlighted at the start of this article this class was expensive, but I believe it was well worth it. Yes I probably could have learned all the skills and improved my teaching during the course of multiple interns, but my time is also precious. To pack so much into such little time whilst also knowing that any mistakes I made were not going to ruin a real student's class meant that I was able to relax (a little) and really focus on improving my teaching. Additionally the open and discursive approach taken by Rich and Kirill throughout the class definitely contributed to my performance. I walked away with my first T1 signature – which definitely helps the Mel situation.

So if I had to debrief in just three points (see Rich I'm getting better) I would say the following. Firstly if you want to become a T1 instructor then this is definitely the route to take. Secondly as with all GUE classes the more prep you do beforehand the more you will get out of it. I became a Rec 3 instructor first and it definitely helped. And thirdly do the class in Croatia, meet Maurizio if you haven't already and stay on after the class to enjoy the many world class wreck dives the Adriatic has to offer. OK fourthly (sorry Rich), if you have any questions feel free to email me. There is so much more I could add, but a debrief should be brief!

Post script

Having 'agreed' to abandon Mel for one month I found myself on the defensive again when asked by Panos to stay on in Europe for a second class in Croatia. When I finally return to NZ after two months away I am expecting to be cleaning windows or cooking for a very long time – but at least I remembered to send flowers for the 10th wedding anniversary.