

GUE Tech 1 classes in Sydney: 1-16th September 2012

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Two weeks in the Sydney sunshine and it is all work related. But is it still work if you enjoy it? Is it still work if you don't get paid for it? I like to think it is, although my lovely accountant wife begs to differ. Maybe it's because of the location, Bondi Beach, during an unseasonably hot spring, with the temperature peaking at 29 degrees and bronzed and bikini clad young ladies everywhere you look – not that I was looking of course. But don't the dive agencies all promise we can live the dream once we're instructors? So really I'm just proving them right. Right?



The schedule for my trip to Sydney was pretty hectic. Arrive at 8pm Friday night, with the first GUE Tech 1 class starting at 8am the next morning. The plan was to do Saturday, Sunday and Monday on T1, finishing the class later in the week – Friday, Saturday, Sunday. In between I would do my GUE Instructors reevaluation. Then on the Monday the second T1 class starts, running for six days straight, with my flight out the following day. So really 15 full days in Sydney with classes booked for 14 of them. Come on, if that's not work then what is? If I worked in an office I would have got at least 4 days off during that time, plus wasted numerous hours playing solitaire and stalking people on Facebook when the boss wasn't looking. Be honest, does that ring any bells with anyone?



The reason I'm in Sydney doing classes is to continue working towards my GUE Tech 1 Instructor rating. Part of the process to become an instructor involves interning on classes with current T1 instructors, that way you get to learn the structure of the class and how to flex the syllabus depending on the needs and problems of individual students. For my two weeks in Sydney I am working with Liam Allen from Dive Centre Bondi, who I've known since 2007 when I first worked with him to become a GUE Fundamentals Instructor. As with all GUE ratings the agency doesn't make it easy to get certified. All the criteria for passing are very clear, but the standard is high, understandably so given the nature of the class. Student safety is always paramount, but in a class where the instructors are constantly simulating problems it requires great ability and awareness to maintain control, particularly during ascents.

Until the introduction of the Rec 3 class a couple of years ago Tech 1 was the GUE class where trimix diving was first introduced. The class certifies divers to use three different trimix gases (30/30, 21/35, 18/45 – oxygen

content, followed by helium content) to a maximum depth of 51m. Additionally divers may carry one decompression bottle, either EANx50 or 100% oxygen. The class is conducted over a very intense 6 day period, with lots of in-water time and plenty of what the notes delicately describe as 'aggressive' scenarios. Basically as the instructor you create lots of problems, valve failures, lost masks, out-of-gas etc. You start slowly of course, but the aim is for your students to develop the capacity to cope with the important skills such as gas switching whilst 'under considerable duress'. Remembering back to my T1 class if the instructor could have heard me during some of the dives all he would have caught was F#\$!, S%&# and A@#*.

As the point of the class is to expand each students comfort zone, it means you are continually pushing them to the edge of their capabilities. To put it another way, it means as the instructor you are intentionally making students uncomfortable during the dives. It is therefore very important that after each water session you give a very clear and relaxed debrief of the dive, explaining what happened, where things went wrong and what needs to be done to fix the problems. There is no benefit in smashing people's confidence or in pushing them over the edge, although occasionally it might feel that way to individual students in the heat of the moment. However, Liam is always very clear at the start of each class, explaining how important it is to retain your sense of humour throughout and try not to start arguing, blaming your team mates or simply throwing your hands in the air and saying 'F**k it!' Remember, GUE is not the army and we are not trying to break students in preparation for remodelling into perfect GUE form, we are simply trying to make them better divers.

Each T1 class follows a broadly similar format, although there are obviously variations depending on the location and the skill level of the students. There are lectures and dry-runs of the skills throughout and



Bondi Beach – a tough place to teach.....

generally there are between 2 and 4 dives each day. Day 1 starts with a review of fundies skills, beginning hovering just off the bottom and then moving into mid-water as quickly as possible. Valve failures and line laying techniques are also introduced at this point, with the team working together to fix a series of simple failures during the bottom section of the dive. Assuming everything goes well the next step is to introduce gas switching procedures, again starting close to the bottom with visual references and then moving into mid-water for more realistic and challenging conditions. We also continue with multiple failures and polishing of the fundies skills – valve drills, s-drills, smb deployment and out-of-gas ascents.

Days 3 and 4 are where we really start the ascent training, with multiple ascents each day, during which time the students learn how to change ascent speeds from the initial fast ascent off the bottom to the gradually slower and slower ascent closer to the surface. Gas switches are continually worked on and as capacity develops more and more problems are introduced. At this stage we also introduce lost deco gas procedures and valve failures on the deco bottle. Finally once this is complete we move into the last part of the class where we do 3 experience dives on trimix, which give the students a chance to get comfortable with dive planning, ratio deco and for most people their first taste of 50m dives.

So how did my two Sydney classes go?



Firstly they were quite different. One of the groups had clearly done a huge amount of preparation work, diving together and drilling all the fundies skills over and over – and over and over – and over and over again. Additionally all of these students are fully qualified cave divers, used to valve failures and stage bottle handling. Consequently Liam and I were able to push this group much harder in the beginning and introduce more complex failures earlier on. On the other class, whilst the students were all solid fundies tech passes, they had not done as much diving and definitely not as much specific prep work for the course – consequently things went slower and new skills took longer to learn. Unfortunately this meant we ran out of time before

completing all of the skills, so they will be rescheduling dives with Liam in October.

However, in other areas the classes were exactly the same. By carefully tailoring the failures Liam managed to push both groups to the edge of their capabilities, showing everyone where errors start to creep in and how control starts to be lost. And even with significant prep work it was still very clear to all the students how much harder it is to do drills in mid water than it is close to the bottom. Then add in managing different ascent speeds as well as current, surge and swell and suddenly the difficulties of tech diving in the open ocean become apparent.

Finally after watching, discussing and in some cases instigating numerous failures underwater I have been reminded of how quickly things can change from comfort to chaos on a dive. I have done many 50m+ dives and after a while this depth feels easy, but things can go wrong. With a little bit of current it is easy to lose the shot line and have to do a drifting mid-water deco. This means popping and then managing the smb. Then imagine as you turn on your deco bottle you find it has been knocked loose during the dive and the o-ring has been shredded – suddenly you have to share deco gas with your team for 20 minutes in mid-water. If the thought of such a problem makes you feel uncomfortable and yet you are still deco diving perhaps you should think about upping your skill level!



Conclusions?

Tech 1 is very definitely a hard class and the step from a fundies 'tec' pass to a T1 pass is huge. There are many new skills to master and all have to be done in mid-water with no visual references other than your team mates. You need great buoyancy skills, great awareness and the ability to remain calm under pressure. You need to do lots of prep work prior to the class and unless you are extremely strong underwater you should

expect to be doing additional dives after the initial 6 days in order to complete everything. The majority of divers do not pass this class immediately.

Watching these two classes have also changed my mind about another GUE class, Rec 3. I have taught several of these classes, but have previously always explained to my students how they could instead go straight onto Tech 1 and bypass Rec 3 if they wanted. This may be true, but I shall no longer be giving this advice. Now I will advise everyone to do Rec 3 before Tech 1, unless they have done lots of deep ocean diving, with deco bottles and gas switches and learned how to manage multiple failures. I now view the Rec 3 class as the perfect stepping stone between fundies and T1, allowing students to learn about and practise many of the T1 skills, but at a slower pace and without the 'aggressive' scenarios.

So what are my next steps?

Well firstly I did re-qualify as a fundies instructor, just in case you were wondering, so I can continue working towards my T1 rating. I have another intern to do in November in New Zealand and then I am hoping to bring a T1 examiner over to NZ in February/March time so I can teach a class and get the first of the two signatures I need to start teaching. In the mean time I have a lot of notes to write up about how to teach the class and plenty of reading to do to make sure I'm ready for all the lectures. The important thing is I'm excited and looking forward to teaching this class. Of course it helps that I've had almost perpetual sunshine for 15 days and that on our last dive a huge sunfish came up to say hello. And as a final bonus a humpback whale even accompanied us for some of the boat trip back – how can you not love diving when you have such encounters?

