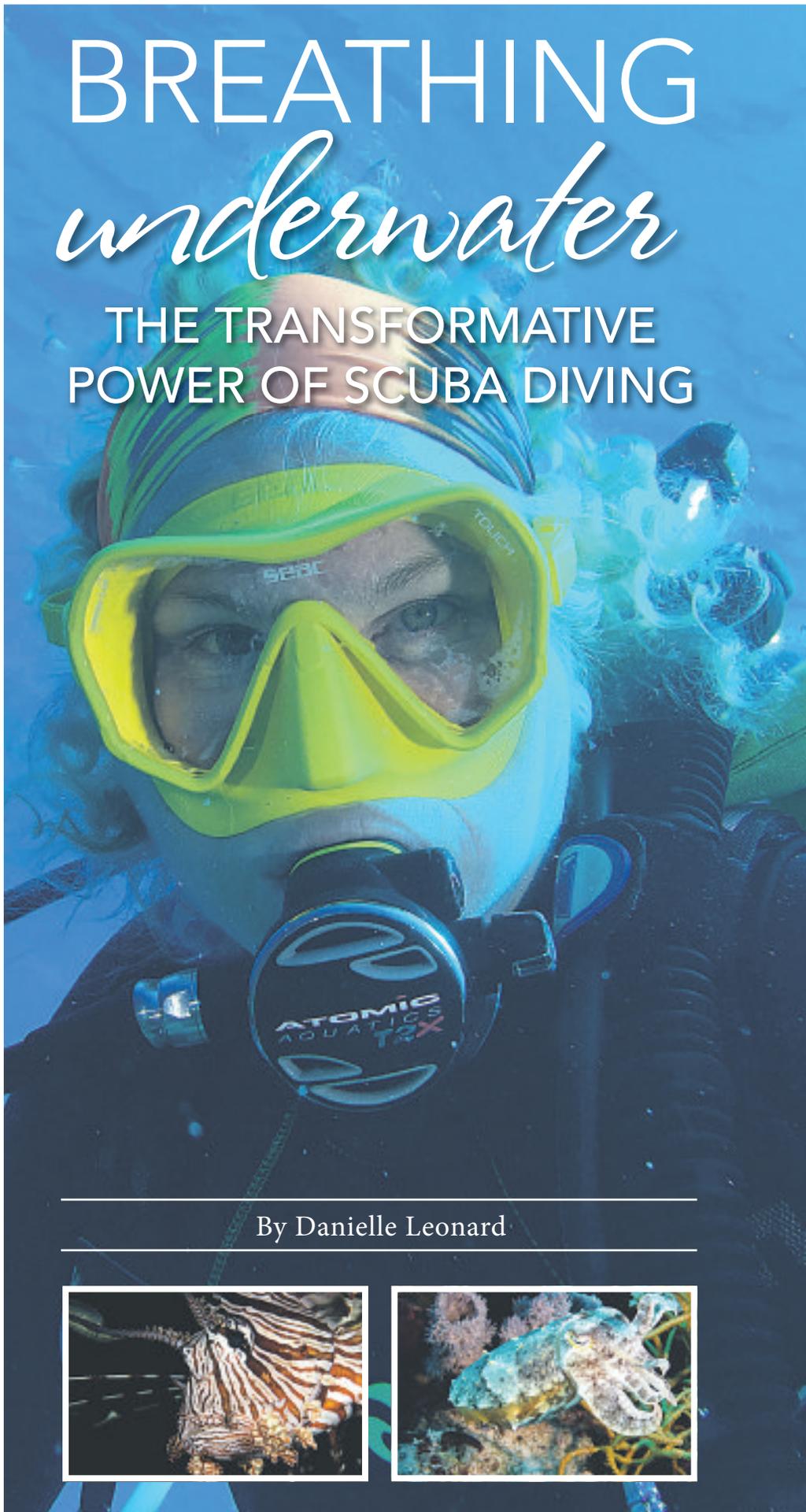


BREATHING *underwater* THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF SCUBA DIVING



By Danielle Leonard



Scuba diving was never on Janine Reed's bucket list. Although the 47-year-old Burlington resident is an avid traveller, her phobia of water kept her adventures comfortably confined to land. That is, until she travelled to Iceland and had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to snorkel in the Silfra Fissure, considered one of the world's most breathtaking underwater sites. She forced herself into the water, never veering far from the guide, and was mesmerized by the beauty that surrounded her. Reed decided at that moment – come hell or high water – she would learn to scuba dive.

“I could see a scuba diver down below,” explains Reed. “I thought, I want to be that guy and see the world from that angle. When I came back home, I signed up right away for diving class.” She found the support and instruction she needed at Float N' Flag – a PADI 5 Star dive shop and instructor development centre in Burlington.

The Open Water Diver certification, developed by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), is the world's most recognized scuba credential. Once completed, divers meet recreational standards that allow them to dive as deep as 60 feet. At Float N' Flag, the bulk of PADI training is completed during a weekend course comprised of classroom learning and practical skill-building in an indoor pool.

Learning a super power is how course instructor Michael Matthie jokingly describes the certification process. Humans are not built to breathe underwater, so it's no wonder that so many people are uncomfortable with scuba diving. Understanding this, Matthie encourages each student to progress at a pace that honours his or her comfort level with water. After completing the weekend course, there's one final step to certification. Participants must perform open water dives. Float N' Flag offers this at Gulliver's Lake in Hamilton, or provides a referral to complete the dives at a southern destination.

“Our goal is to grow independent divers,” explains co-owner Brad Snyder, who runs Float N' Flag with his wife, Tammy. “Our instructors walk you through every step of the training to ensure you're fully prepared before going into open water. I will literally hold your hand through the dive, if necessary, until you're ready to let go.”

For Reed, this patient and supportive environment was essential. She struggled to enter the pool during the weekend training; and once in, the fear of putting her face underwater was almost impossible to overcome. By the end of the weekend, and with one-on-one help of an instructor, she finally immersed her head. Although she had to repeat the course, she was one step closer to fulfilling the vow she'd made in Silfra.

"I spent almost 40 years being afraid of water but I got so determined to learn to scuba dive so that I could see a part of the world I've never seen," says Reed. She admits her first open dives at Gulliver's Lake were not easy. Terror took over as she descended below the water's surface and, initially, refused to perform the required tasks. She attributes her eventual success to the unrelenting support of her instructor and classmates.

Life changing moments such as Reed's experience are not uncommon at Float N' Flag. In fact, one of the most common fears preventing would-be divers from chasing the scuba diving dream is claustrophobia.

"Ironically, once these people experience diving, they realize it's the exact opposite of claustrophobia," explains Tammy. "You feel more space in open water."

A quick Google search on riskiest sports will most certainly list scuba diving among the results. Tammy and Brad insist, however, that all risks are minimized when divers are trained properly. Float N' Flag puts safety at a premium, with a typical student to teacher ratio of 2:1 in its courses.

While obtaining certification is a feat to be celebrated, the greatest reward comes after the training. The community of like-minded adventurers creates a social network that is not easily found in today's society where so much of our personal time is spent online (read: alone). Float n' Flag hosts regular events for divers of all levels to hone skills and meet for socializing – both indoors and out, depending on the season.

"We're in the transformation business," says Brad. "Our students often describe scuba diving as life changing and wonder why they waited so long to finally go for it." He adds that divers spend more time together out of water than underwater, so creating a supportive, fun community where everyone feels welcome is essential.

Diving in exotic destinations around the world is one of the biggest motivating factors for acquiring certification. Once PADI certified, graduates can scuba dive almost anywhere in the world. In fact, as a travel agent, Float n' Flag leads groups to some of the world's best dive sites.

Of course, a PADI certification is not necessarily required to scuba dive

at a resort. Many tourists sign up for a diving excursion run by a resort that includes a few hours of in-pool instruction followed by open water diving. Regardless of how many resort-led diving excursions a tourist has completed, the in-pool instruction component is mandatory before every excursion. Not only does a PADI open water certification provide thorough training and knowledge development that far exceeds a resort's class, it nullifies any need for resort-specific training before taking the dive.

Reed can attest to the transformative power of scuba diving. She travelled to Belize for her first official dive with Float N' Flag where she dove five times per day over the course of nine days, swam with sharks and completed her first night dive.

"I came to realize that anything is possible," says Reed of her experience. "People tell me they're too afraid to do something, whether it's scuba diving or anything else. I say I was too afraid to put my face in the water. Now I'm diving 60 feet below the ocean's surface."

The rush for adrenaline

HEALTH NOTES



Everyone is familiar with the term adrenaline rush. It's the holy grail of thrill seekers who strive for that heightened sense of awareness that comes with high risk sports and adventure. Whether it's riding a 10-storey roller coaster or parachuting from a plane, the adrenaline surge is the same; and, is an integral part of the experience. Your body is telling you that this is terrifying!

Adrenaline is your body's fight or flight response when faced with an acute stressful situation. It can be instigated by an extreme sport, a life-endangering situation or an intensely stressful moment. When released, the body immediately experiences a racing heart, sweaty palms and a heightened state of physical and mental alertness.

Where does this rush come from? Adrenaline is produced in the medulla in the adrenal glands as well as some of the central nervous system's neurons. During stress, the hormone is released into the blood, sending impulses to organs to respond in a specific way. Air passages dilate to provide muscles with the oxygen needed to fight danger or run. Blood vessels contract to redirect blood toward major muscle groups, including the heart and lungs. The body's ability to feel pain also diminishes causing a noticeable increase in strength and performance as well as heightened awareness. In addition, the muscles of the iris contract to allow the pupils to expand so you can see more clearly.

It's no great surprise, then, that the term adrenaline junkie exists. Let's face it. The rush almost creates a temporary super human experience. Stronger, smarter, faster... sign me up! Alas, it's not meant to last for long. When the intense stressful situation ends, the nerve impulses to the adrenal glands are lowered and the adrenal glands stop producing adrenaline. And, you're back where you started.

