

The HangLine

Issue #01-08

Posted August 2001



Getting Ahead in Overhead

By Bill Nadeau

The thick granite walls of the cave produced a sound chamber preventing any outside or overhead sounds from penetrating into the cave and amplified the beating of our hearts. Our rising bubbles trickled along the cave roof and sounded like finely shattered crystal glass being scattered across a xylophone. This particular system was not actually a natural cave but a fifty year old flooded mineshaft.

Once mined for it's quartz and mica, the remaining minerals now cover the walls of the passages and reflect light back to a diver with a web of sharp and colorful rays. It was like diving in the middle of a giant kaleidoscope and Mother Nature was turning the neck providing us with a spectacular laser show. We approached the final restriction where the cave bottomed out and ran our line around the tricky corner to discover the remainder of the cave had limited visibility. Diving in Canadian Caves and other forms of overhead environments can be an exhilarating



experience but requires a specialized form of training, planning and equipment.

Caves and wrecks create an arena for divers offering fantasy and time travel.

Their environment introduces an unknown element that perpetuates challenge and human endeavor, an intrinsic reaction in human behavior (to explore). For many, the bowels of wrecks and caves is a foreboding environment that conjures feelings of claustrophobia, darkness and pernicious fates. Yet, with training and experience, diving in 'overhead' environments can be rewarding and very safe.

"When a human being enters an alien environment such as underwater/underground, he must rely first on his intelligence and his knowledge, and second on his equipment for survival"

- Sheck Exley, Cave Diving Pioneer

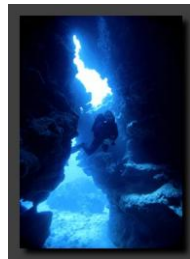




Cave diving pioneer Tom Mount once wrote “...caves are passages into a world of intrigue, a dreamland where fantasies often abound”.

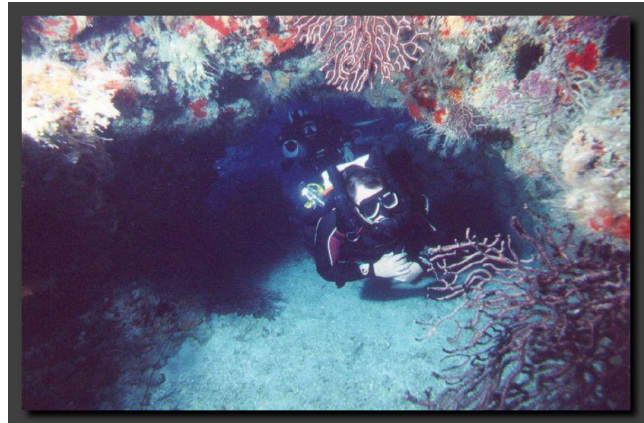
Over the last year (2000) I have had chance to witness the some of the incredible exploration occurring in Canadian Overhead Environments.

This small group of Cave and Wreck Diving specialists has ventured into some of the most challenging sites in the world establishing the Canadian Technical Diving Community as a respectable assembly of explorers. Their accomplishments are now finally being recognized, and in turn have helped accredit the technical training industry with a legitimate cause; to train divers to dive beyond the recreational limit safely. This is a very important accomplishment because for many years technical diving has been heavily scrutinized and as more divers persist in pushing the limits a need to prepare them becomes a necessity.



Canadian caves are unlike any other in the world and pose some very challenging environments. At this time there is no official training course that qualifies a diver to dive in many of the Canadian caves. Our systems are plagued with extremely tight restrictions, strong currents, limited visibility (many times none), difficult accesses (some require repelling 200 foot cliff faces) and of course our trade mark cold water (sometimes near freezing). This is what defines the difference between a technical sport diver and an explorer.

An interesting parallel may be drawn here. For a long time a large number of divers,

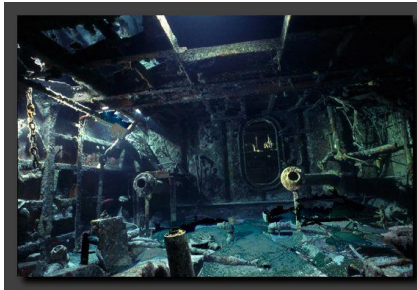


who through experience and self-learning, graduated to the level of technical diving. Many of them are sound and strong divers who continue to train and practice because they understand that there are always new risks, new technology and new techniques to learn about. And then there are a good number of divers who have made inaccurate assessments about their experience and equipment and call themselves technical divers yet still do not understand the fundamental philosophies or diving principles that seasoned technical divers maintain. Along the same line many divers have now ventured into that exploratory realm without fully understanding all the risks involved. I





believe there are very few legitimate and qualified explorers in Canada. These people are fully aware of the all the risks and hazards of exploration diving and have gone to great efforts to deal with it. So where do we start? How do we prepare to progress to the next step? At Underwater Canada this year I spoke with hundreds of people about 'how to become a technical diver'. My position is that they, as open water divers, have already incorporated a degree of technical training but need to understand there are a good number of very important steps that cannot be skipped. Individuals interested in Cave, Technical Wreck or Trimix diving, ask me how long is the course and how much will it cost. The time and money spent at these higher level courses are considerations, which are minimal, compared to what needs to be invested just to qualify for them. Understand that there are no short cuts to technical and exploration diving. Present at Underwater Canada were representatives from the leading technical training agencies - Sandra and Chester Morrison, Victor Williams, Dale McKnight, and cave diving Legends Lamar Hires and Wes Skiles, Canadian Cave explorers like David Sawatzky, John Reekie, Ralph Hoskins, Terry German and Kim Martin and many seasoned Cavers and



"We have learned that caves mirror the reflection of timelessness, penetrating beyond our presence into the realm of eternity."

~Tom Mount

Wreckers. I was fortunate to have had a chance to speak with nearly all of them and one thing came to mind; what a long way we have come. There is great wealth of knowledge and experience out there available to any diver interested in taking advantage of it. It is so apparent now that advanced sport diving, and specifically diving in overhead environments, are mainstream activities. These are exciting times and the forecast seems to only show it getting better. For Cave diving and those interested in exploring its opportunities one could probably not pick a better time than the present.

~Safe Diving

