

Diving for Fun, Food or Photos

Scuba enthusiasts abound here

by Rick Beasley

Restaurant designer Colin Ryan's portfolio includes a couple of seafood places, but the 32-year-old Eugene scuba diver admits that none of his creations come close to the smorgasboard affair at the bottom of the Newport Jetty.

Ryan, the picture of trim professionalism when he's hunkered over a drafting board at his Emerald City office, looks more like a creature from a red snapper's worst nightmare as he hangs nearly motionless in the dark shadows at 30 feet.

On this foggy Saturday beneath a calm steel-gray surface, Ryan is the predator.

Belted, finned, masked and tanked with 80 cubes of air, the black-suited Ryan is a deadly hunter in the bay. Armed with an eight-foot barbed spear that can be hand-launched with a piece of surgical tubing and a black slab of razor-sharp steel for a diving knife, Ryan waits on the ebb and flow of a slight current. He breathes slowly, and few bubbles escape the regulator's exhaust valve.

A dark figure the size of a small dog betrays its camouflage with a sudden movement along the rocks of the jetty wall, the spear flashes and Colin Ryan's dinner writhes in his grasp.

By his own figures, Springfield

divemaster John Cheesman, at 24 the manager of Seasports, Inc., thinks there are 10-15,000 certified scuba divers in Lane County, though only a couple of thousand are really active in the sport.

Like Ryan, some dive for dinner while others dive for fun. Some are drawn to the stunningly-clear high-mountain lakes of the McKenzie Pass and their submerged lava formations and skeletal petrified forests. Others dive with spear and camera along coastal reefs rich in marine life, or in places like Boiler Bay or Wohink Lake where boat wrecks and train wrecks beckon with ghostly attraction.

Seemingly land-locked except for a ribbon of river which provides a treasure of expensive steelhead lures to a couple of members of one of the local diving clubs, Eugene/Springfield is a hotbed of diving activity. Two local dive shops are producing certified divers at the rate of about 800 per year, including about 100 students from the U of O.

Lane County is surprisingly central to many underwater destinations. Driving west to the fabled dive spots of the Oregon coast, local divers can explore offshore reefs near Coos Bay, swim with gray whales at Port Orford

Although Oregon coastal waters are chilly to the touch at about 50 degrees, Eugene's Ed Rogers stays warm and comfortable in a wet suit.

or gather crab and scallop for a post-dive party at Florence. Driving east, they can dive the cold high lakes of the Cascades or dredge for gold in a twisting mountain river. To the north are the world class dives of the San Juans and Hood Canal, and to the south is unexplored Crater Lake and a once-a-year tropical warm-water dive in Guaymas or Teacapan, Mexico.

Both Seasports and its Eugene counterpart, Eugene Skin Divers Supply, are reflecting a strong growth in the sport. Last year, 400,000 Americans made their first dive. Their numbers have been spurred in

large part by a growing cadre of women divers, say experts who have watched their ranks grow to about 35-40% of the total. With certification training beginning at age 12 and no upper age limits except for health, scuba diving is a diverse and challenging sport that is open to almost anybody.

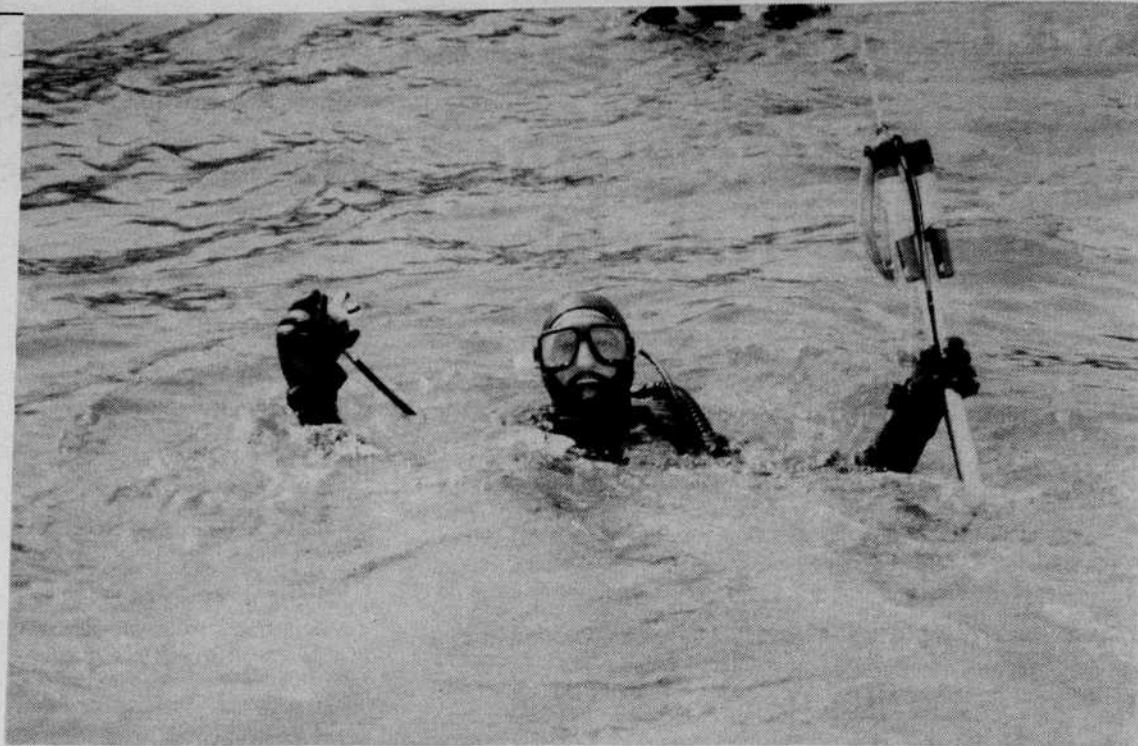
For the 10 or 20 percent who stick with the sport, there's a commitment to the leisure-dollar budget that is roughly equivalent to other active sports like downhill skiing or skydiving: about \$700 for used gear, \$1500 for new, and all the gas and food you can buy during a weekend. Short of an outright purchase, however, divers can rent full tanks, wet suits, regulators and all of the paraphernalia needed for a dive for about \$35 per day or \$45 for a weekend.

Considering the "depth" of the intensive, month-long certification

training programs conducted by Lane County's two dive shops, both affiliated with the respected Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), the initial \$145 cost is a dirt-cheap ticket to adventure. With 12 hours of classroom instruction and 12 hours of pool diving conducted during twice-a-week sessions, the course concludes in an open-water dive off the Oregon coast. The cost of instruction includes the rental of all gear, from fins and wetsuits to the hardware of deepwater diving: regulators, weight belts, tanks and buoyancy vests.

With perhaps 80 million sport dives made in the continental U.S. last year, only 60 fatalities were reported.

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