

Opening a new world

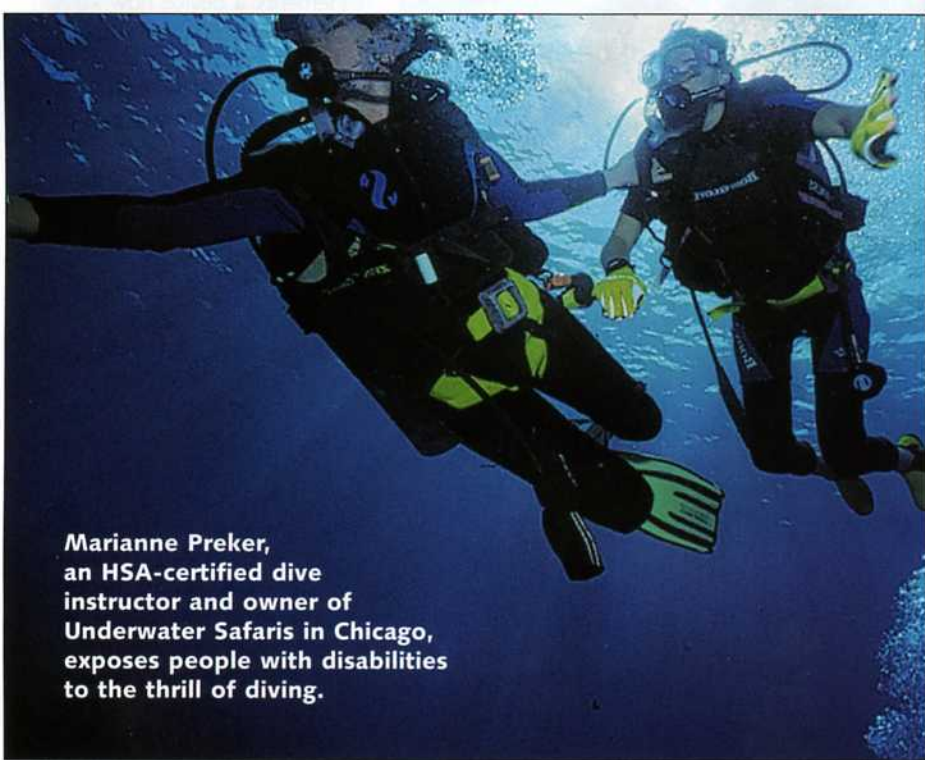
Unlike snorkelers—who float on the water's surface with their heads in the water and breathe through a short tube that juts out into the air—scuba divers descend deep into the water, becoming active members of the marine world, while breathing through a mouthpiece attached to an air tank that is worn on the back. Just how practical is scuba for a person with a disability? "Absolutely practical, just as much as any other sport," says Jim Gatacre, director of the Handicapped Scuba Association International (HSA).

In collaboration with PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) and NAUI (National Association of Underwater Instructors), two of the largest diver-certifying agencies in the world, HSA has become a leading authority on recreational diving for people with disabilities. HSA offers an internationally recognized diver-training program for people with disabilities and an instructor-training course for professional dive instructors who want to train people with disabilities in their area. "Almost anyone can become a certified diver," confirms Gatacre. "We have certified people with all kinds of physical disabilities—even with paralysis from the neck down—and with forms of mild retardation. If you can be trained to work a job, you can be certified. We've never turned anyone down who has come to us wanting to dive."

True, the decision to learn to scuba dive is a big one, whether or not the person has a disability. According to Victoria Jorge, co-owner of Fat Cat Diving and Excursions in the Dominican Republic, dive training must be approached with seriousness and attentiveness. "It takes some study to comprehend how the body is affected under water," explains Jorge. "Diver safety depends on that understanding." Knowing how to properly operate the equipment is of equal importance as well. "A person is not ready to dive until he or she knows what each piece of equipment they're wearing is and how it is used," she says.

Diver training: getting comfortable

Before diver trainees are permitted to dive, they are given extensive opportunities to get



Marianne Preker, an HSA-certified dive instructor and owner of Underwater Safaris in Chicago, exposes people with disabilities to the thrill of diving.



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