


# Below the Surface

## Scuba Diving in Europe

By Genevieve Northup



Y our first breaths under water feel strange. Remain focused on breathing and equalizing while the world you know – oxygen, sunshine, security – slips away. Soon, the initial anxiety turns to wonder as you reach an incredible ecosystem of silent and graceful creatures, ready to be discovered.



## I'm a newbie.

Never been scuba diving? Don't worry; I was in the same boat until a year ago. Already certified? Skip straight to the good stuff later in this article.

**What is PADI?** There are many certification programs, but the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) is the largest internationally recognized program. Affiliated PADI dive shops have the equipment and instructors to help you take the plunge. Find out more about PADI at [www.padi.com](http://www.padi.com).

**How do I get started?** To ease into the sport, my husband and I completed a pool dive as part of a Discover Scuba Diving course with a local PADI shop. I highly recommend doing this before spending money on a scuba vacation. During Discover Scuba Diving, you'll learn the gear, hand signals and, most importantly, how to breathe and maneuver in a marine environment.

## I loved it! What's next?

After a successful Discover Scuba class, you have two ways to get back in the water.

**Get certified now:** Continue with a local dive shop to earn the PADI Open Water Diver (OWD) certification before your trip, which involves classroom training and several dives (quarries and lakes are used in landlocked areas).

**Train on vacation:** A hectic schedule prior to our trip prevented us from continuing our certification. If you're in the same situation, research dive shops at your destination for those that offer Discover Scuba Diving, PADI Scuba Diver, or PADI OWD programs. To spend less time in the classroom, start the theory portion of the OWD program online prior to your vacation and complete the required dives upon arrival.

## Where should I dive?

With some time underwater logged, now is the fun part – planning your vacation! Should you watch colorful fish and find unusual fauna along a coral reef? Or navigate submerged labyrinths and ghostly wreckage? To inspire you and me, I've researched some of Europe's top dive spots.

### Croatia —

On **Korčula Island**, newbies can sign up for a 20-minute trial dive with PADI five-star Croatia Divers. Those with more skills can dive the Zaklopatica Blue Hole and Wreck Graveyard, where the sun still shines, or journey into the darkness of Rt Ključ and Trstenik caves. Learn more at [www.croatiadivers.com](http://www.croatiadivers.com).

In **Rogoznica**, cliffs, canyons, WWII shipwrecks and a plane downed during the Croatian War of Independence await seasoned OWD and technical divers. Diving Center Pongo ([www.dcpongo.com](http://www.dcpongo.com)) offers PADI Discover Scuba, OWD, advanced and specialty courses, as well as snorkeling.

### U.K. —

At **Lundy Island**, you can try to keep up with exuberant seals in their native habitat. A more daunting destination is **Scapa Flow**, the gravesite for more than a dozen vessels, including several WWI era German warships, British battleships from each World War, and European fishing boats.

Scoping out shipwrecks is exciting, but encountering a 30-foot-long shark will make your heart race. The basking shark is the second-largest fish in the world but prefers plankton to people. Sightings are usually between May and August from **Cornwall, England to Scotland**.

For trips, check [www.scapafloowrecks.com/dive-boats](http://www.scapafloowrecks.com/dive-boats), [baskingsharkscotland.co.uk](http://baskingsharkscotland.co.uk) and [www.blueoceandiving.co.uk](http://www.blueoceandiving.co.uk).

### Iceland —

Glide through spring water to cross the gap between North America and Europe, along the **Silfra fissure**. The sandy ocean floor mirrors the rippling surface when the sun is shining, creating a stunning landscape with seemingly infinite visibility. PADI OWD or equivalent certification is required to dive the fissure. Visit [www.dive.is](http://www.dive.is) for details.

### Malta —

**Gozo, Comino and Malta** have wartime reminders, caves and reefs. The Blue Hole, Dragonara Cave and Dwejra Point should be on your list. Technical divers can journey 130 feet under to the Blenheim Bomber, a WWII British aircraft, and novices can take a breather in the air pocket of the Blue Dome. [Visitmalta.com](http://Visitmalta.com) has a dive directory.

### Norway —

Don a dry suit for perhaps the most memorable diving in Europe. Eat the spoils of a hunt for scallops in **Nærøy** or king crabs in **Finnmark**. And the ultimate thrill? Entering the void with killer whales in **Lofoten**. Schedule an expedition via [www.visitnorway.com](http://www.visitnorway.com).

Wherever you end up, ensure you have the proper training, equipment and a certified guide. And if you don't have an underwater camera, now is the time to get one; you'll want proof of your fisherman's tale. ■

