



Most scuba divers say the experience is amazing and like being in a whole new world.

“Every time I go diving, I always see something that I’ve never seen before. Some things I’ve seen on TV and then I’ll see it in the water, but they are so many things I see that I’ve never laid eyes on. I’ve been diving for 20 years, and I can’t tell you how many dives I’ve made and still every single time I see something I’ve never seen before.” said divemaster Bryan Conerly.

Not only is the visual experience breathtaking, but the atmosphere has an emotional effect on the diver.

“When you’re underwater it’s very relaxing, almost euphoric. When you’re underwater, you’re away from the phone, TV, computer, traffic — it all goes away. You’re in a different world. It’s quiet and very serene. It’s just you and nature,” Conerly said. “You’re seeing the other two-thirds of the Earth that most people have never seen before. That’s the neatest thing right there.”

BY MARIANNE LOBAUGH  
PHOTOS BY MARIANNE LOBAUGH  
AND SUBMITTED BY BRYAN CONERLY

# DISCOVER AN UNDERWATER UNIVERSE



Mike Abston, left, conducts scuba training at SeaBreeze sports pool.

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"It's exciting to try something new — always," Mary Harris said of her recent decision to pursue scuba-diving certification offered through The Villages Lifelong Learning College.

Her exposure to the sport came just three years ago while on a cruise.

"I took a discover diving class in Barbados three years ago. I loved it. I said, 'I've got to do this,'" the Village of Largo resident said.

Harris' career provided the desire to explore marine life.

"I was a science teacher, so I love the critters. I love seeing the fish and coral up close. I even saw a nurse shark," she said excitedly of a recent dive in the Florida Keys.

A recently certified diver, Harris said scuba is a continual learning process and that practice builds confidence.

"When you put on a regulator and you're under the water, at first it's a little unnerving but you learn to conquer your fear," Harris said.

She has big goals for her new sport.

"I'm going to Australia in October. I want to dive the Great Barrier Reef," Harris said.

While some who come to the Lifelong Learning College for diving classes have little or no experience with scuba, others have experience from years ago and want to refresh and update their knowledge and skills. John Barlow is one of the students in that camp.

"In 1964 I was an Army skin diver, but I've been out of the water for so long that I decided to take the class and get recertified," Barlow said.

The Village of Sabal Chase resident has a very good reason for wanting to dive back into the water again.

"My daughter Beth is a marine biologist and she and I are going to take up some recreational diving. She's a master, so I've got to stay up with her," Barlow said.

The former serviceman remarked about the changes in the sport since he last experienced it.

"The biggest change is the regulator (for breathing) and the jackets are quite different. Technology has improved nearly everything," he said.

Barlow said he is looking forward to getting back in the water and sharing the experience with his daughter.

"The adventure underwater is a whole other world. The environment is completely different. It helps you to appreciate where you came from," Barlow said.





Those wishing to learn scuba skills have convenient options presented by The Villages Lifelong Learning College with Bryan Conerly and Mike Abston leading the classes with more than 50 years of combined diving experience. Conerly is a divemaster and Abston is a Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) certified instructor since 1994.

The two are excited about bringing scuba instruction to residents of The Villages and to be able to offer classroom and hands-on experience at SeaBreeze Recreation Center.

"People can drive their golf carts to classes. The location is very close and convenient for them," Conerly said.

The pair said they have talked to many Villagers who have expressed serious interest in giving scuba a try.

"I've met a lot of people who have said they want to try it. They have an interest, but at the same time they have a hesitation because they are not sure they will like it," Conerly said.

Specifically with those Villagers in mind the divers developed the Discover Scuba class, which allows participants to try scuba to see if they are interested in going further. The session begins with a one-hour classroom session, then moves to the pool to get in the water and try the equipment.

*Left: Mike Abston assists Village of Hadley resident Joe Bilyk with his vest. Below: Abston demonstrates a safety technique to Tom Hyatt of the Village of St. Charles. Above right: Bryan Conerly applies an anti-fogging solution to Tony Flanagan's mask. Below right: Mary Harris of the Village of Largo swims in the SeaBreeze pool.*



"This is to see if people like it and feel comfortable with it," said Abston, adding that at least 80 percent of those who attend Discover Scuba do usually go on to become certified.



One area of concern for potential divers are health issues, which the instructors review with students before beginning the courses.

"We have a medical questionnaire that all students must answer," Conerly said. "If people have medical issues, it doesn't mean they will be disqualified from diving, it simply may mean that they need to take some additional precautions."

Conerly said that they will work with anyone who has clearance from their physician and that most health issues can be safely managed.

"People that have health issues with their back or joints, if it's not too severe, they can dive if it's OK with their doctor. When you're underwater, you're weightless. It's not a big impact on those issues. The biggest challenge is people with breathing problems, but even some of those people can still dive. We always take precautions to make sure everyone is safe."

Conerly emphasized that safety is the top priority of everything related to what they teach.

"Safety is the key to successful diving. It's like driving a car: You have to learn how to operate the car safely and obey the rules of the road and you will travel safely," Conerly said.

Divers preparing for certification can sign up for a three-day course, Introduction to Scuba Diving, a combination of classroom and pool training. It provides students with the knowledge and skills needed to safely gain experience in a diving environment. The course materials follow the training methods of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors. Students do not have to own any equipment to participate in classes as equipment rental is offered as a convenience.



