

Daejeon Web

In an Octopus' Garden

I'm not what you'd call a likely SCUBA diver. I don't swim particularly well. I look funny in a wetsuit. I haven't given much thought to fishkind since my last goldfish died in 1978. And the only time I ever actually tried a SCUBA course, I panicked. In the kiddie pool. So the prospect of packing on thirty pounds of gear and tubes, staring down my underwater claustrophobia and my sinus headache, and hopping into a shark tank last Sunday morning seemed...well...weird. But having been daunted by diving once (the twenty minutes I spent crying at the bottom of the kiddie pool was insufficient to certify me, except psychologically) I decided there was nothing for it but to face my fears. I headed out to meet Michael Jones and the sharks of the Busan Aquarium.

For many people, no matter how intrepid, the process of going underwater in a dive suit for the first time - mouth-breathing with the face submerged - is an intense experience. And a good instructor is an important factor in translating that intensity from intimidating to invigorating, from hyperventilation to goggle-eyed wonder. Michael Jones is that kind of teacher. Michael runs Scuba In Korea (www.scubainkorea.com), a web-based dive club for foreign divers in Korea. For a 55,000 won fee per diver (75,000 for the non-certified), the Busan Aquarium allows Michael to usher the curious, the brave, and anybody else fearless enough to squeeze into a wetsuit right into their shark tank.

I am none of the above. But when Michael meets me at the aquarium door at 11:30 am on the morning of our dive, and brings me down the escalator into the sea of glass-fronted tanks, I forget, for awhile. The aquarium is a world unto itself, each window and tank a different habitat. The place has a muffled, underwater sound to it, machines and echoes overlaid by children's shouts. It smells, unsurprisingly, of fish. And fish there are, more fish than I've ever seen. Speedy little guys zip past the glass in colors as crazy as a Grateful Dead concert. Kids call "Nemo!" to the clownfish, and rap on the

windows. The piranhas have a tank to themselves. As does the Korean otter, who, in the marine mammal corridor, is busy ignoring the common foreign otters segregated on the other side of his plexiglass partition. The jackass penguins, stubby little jesters, hold court with the crowd. As we stop and giggle, Michael tells me that if you put a finger to the glass and drag it the thirty-foot length of their display window, one or another of them will stay right with you, beak to finger, not missing a beat, the whole way along. Waddlers on land, they are beautiful in the water.

We make it to the big tank. Michael points out the sharks, gray shadows below the water. "That's a nurse shark, also called the spotted ragged-tooth," he says of a sleek Jaws extra loitering about three meters below us, in its toothy, eight-foot glory. We concur that "spotted ragged-tooth" seems to be a more appropriate name for it than "nurse shark," at least from this angle. I wonder absently what nurses did to the poor sod who named it. I am a little awed by the proximity of the creature, and amazed by the idea that I am shortly supposed to be getting in the water with it. Then I notice that the nurse shark has friends - not only are there other sharks pulling into view along the front of the tank, but smaller fish polka-dot the water above them, circling and darting. I see a ray sail along the bottom. It's alive down there.

There is no specific point at which the dive experience officially begins; rather, in the transition through the aquarium into its backrooms, we divers-to-be simply start to feel like we belong in the place. There are three of us in the group, plus Michael. By the time we make it to the lunch room where we'll spend the next hour or so preparing and learning, Michael's already told me more about marine life than a Jacques Cousteau special. We lock our stuff in lockers, and settle in. He examines the papers wherein we promise not to sue him, smiles, and outlines the parameters of the journey ahead. He fills us in on the aquarium's history, and who we're likely to see in the tank. He's comfortable, he's excited. I begin to feel more sincere in my enthusiasm. Michael knows his fish, at least the ones here, and it is obvious that he likes them. He has pictures of all the different species in the tank, pictures he's taken on previous dives. He hands them around like a Florida grandmother, smiling

indulgently at the thuggishly charming antics of "Uncle Paulie," whom he named after the character in "Goodfellas. Paulie is a 200 kg grouper whom even the sharks move out of the way for. I make mental notes to move, too. And at that moment, I realize that yes, I do really want to dive. Today. Not just to prove I can, not just to try something new, but because I want to be down there, underwater, with these animals and this person who finds them so fascinating. And Michael's infectious attitude remains right through the training - the sense that he know what he's doing, and that he loves it.

I go off to the change room and emerge, wetsuited, looking vaguely like a jackass penguin myself. Michael, bless him, arranges our weight belts and tanks and apparatus - one of the perks, for us lazy folk, of this not being official certification training - and leads us into the shallow pool at the entrance to the shark tank. The water only comes up to the waist, so it's ideal for kneeling down and practicing the skills we've just been taught in the lunchroom. We practice breathing. We practice underwater. We practice taking out the regulator through which said breathing is occurring, and putting it back in. Underwater. I fail the first time. I try twice and sputter back up to kneeling position, embarrassed, off-balance. Michael, watching carefully, lets me do what I need to do to calm myself. He motions to the other two to stay down and keep breathing, then sits up himself, patient and willing. He shows me again what to do. We re-submerge. I do it well. He gives me the okay sign. I feel cool, like I might actually make this happen.

And then we descend. Three meters or so down a rope neither looks, nor even feels, like a massive distance. But once down there, ears equalized, bouncing awkwardly along the bottom of the tank, all the senses operate differently. Peripheral vision is cut off by the mask, and a strange, constant barrage of white noise is all that the ears can really take in. Tiny fish bump against legs and butts, but I cannot track the ones who collide with me...I cannot seem to move quickly enough to see them. I keep my hands in towards my body, for fear of the smaller fish confusing me with lunch. These little snappers are no sharks, but their teeth, warned Michael, are still sharp enough to pinch. I err on the

side of caution and meander through the tank with my thumbs in my armpits. My eyes are wide.

They widen even further when a six-foot lemon shark approaches, just over my head. I gaze at its rows of teeth from directly beneath, frozen by the amazement of proximity. It swims over me, elegant and fluid, its underbelly an eerie, waxy white. It ignores me completely. For just a moment, I am sorry.

The twenty-minute tour of the shark tank, which begins only when all members of the group are fully submerged and have given the okay sign, slides by fast. We waddle our way around the circumference of the tank, waving away mackerel, waving at kids through the plexiglass, smiling for pictures. I feel alternately like a superstar, on the action side of the glass, and like a zoo animal, wowing the crowd and waving for peanuts. One of my companions tries a brief standoff with Uncle Paulie the grouper, but gives way when the three-foot fish lips get close. Fish first, down here. We miss the sea turtles, who, like us, are apparently hiding their appendages from the snappers. Resting for a minute on the pebbly floor of the tank, I find a shark's tooth, delicate and ornate. I glimpse another ray fleeting along the rockline, and realize how awkward and ungainly the motion of load-bearing bones and muscles really is. I push myself upwards and feel a moment of weightlessness and joy.

Throughout the dive, Michael's steady, focused manner doesn't waver. He points here and there at various sights, snaps photos, and keeps patiently herding us, his little flock of wide-eyed undersea tourists, back together. He's good at what he does. I'm grateful. It was the most interesting Sunday afternoon I've had in ages, and I didn't cry once

After the dive, still high on adrenalin, I talked to Michael about Scuba In Korea and his underwater life.

Tell me the story of how you began diving.

Michael: *I took the PADI Discover Scuba diving course while on vacation on Boracay Island (in the Philippines) in 1998. I was hooked immediately and signed up for my first certification course upon surfacing from my first*

intro dive.

Describe how diving feels to you. What's your favorite aspect of being underwater? Least favorite?

Michael: How does diving feel? Well, first of all, you're weightless, which is a pretty unique feeling. I also love the descent on deep dives straight into the blue. You can't see the bottom from the surface, and it suddenly fades into view as you get deeper. It's kind of like skydiving in slow motion. I really love everything about diving, so it would be difficult to say what my 'favorite' aspect of it is. I guess if I had to pick one, it would be that divers get to see things up close that most people in the world don't get to. I hope that changes though...I hope more people start diving. My least favorite aspect? Hmm...lugging a kit bag of wet dive equipment through airports and bus terminals on the way home from a dive trip.

What certifications have you achieved in diving?

Michael: I'm certified as an Open Water Scuba Instructor (OWSI) which is the first level for instructors in the PADI (Professional Association of Dive Instructors) system. I am also certified through PADI as a Enriched Air (Nitrox) Diving instructor and as an Oxygen Therapy instructor. In addition, I have a PADI certification in Emergency/First Response first aid care and I have a DAN (Divers Alert Network) certification in Oxygen Therapy.

Any further plans?

Michael: One of these days I hope to get certified as a DMT (Dive Medic Technician) and Hyperbaric Chamber operator. I am very interested in dive medicine.

What places have you been diving?

Michael: Around the Philippines, Thailand and all over Korea. Would like to get to more places, but...time and money...I have a three week live aboard trip planned for the Andaman Sea (west coast of Thailand and Myanmar) for April. I'm hoping to see my first whale

shark.

**Do you have a favorite place in the world to dive?
Why?**

Michael: Well, of the places I have been, I prefer the Philippines because I have seen the greatest diversity of marine life there. I am sure there are other destinations that are as good, or better, but I haven't been to most of them and therefore can't compare.

**Do you have a favorite place in Korea to dive?
Why?**

Michael: Jeju or the South coast because the visibility is best there. Jeju is great for soft corals and macro life. There are even seahorses on the south coast. Jeju, in the summer (I don't like cold water diving) is a great dive destination. I can't promote it enough. I think a lot of divers, especially those that work Monday to Friday, dismiss it as too expensive for a weekend trip. It is not that much more than what mainland shops offer. Many dive shops in Korea are charging 180-230,000 Won for a one day trip to the coast with two dives (maybe a little more with boat diving). You can fly to Jeju for less than that. Fly down Saturday morning, do three dives Saturday, spend the night, spend Sunday on the beach (you shouldn't dive and fly on the same day) and fly home in the early evening on Sunday. You can do it for about 250,000 to 300,000.

When did you first visit the Busan Aquarium?

Michael: November of 2002. I was introduced to Ashley Scivyer (the Australian curator) and he invited me down for a shark dive.

How did Scuba in Korea get started?

Michael: Shortly after I was first certified as a recreational diver, I returned to Korea and wanted to go diving. It was difficult to find shops that sold equipment or offered courses and tours in English. I began to find some places with the help of some Korean friends. I decided to do the site to share the info with other divers (and those that want to be) in Korea. I am happy with the way it has turned out. It took awhile, but it is finally

starting to grow and we are beginning to get a bit of a network of foreign divers here in Korea.

Who can dive in the Busan aquarium?

Michael: Anyone can dive at Busan Aquarium (if they are medically fit to do so. The medical questionnaire is on my site). The shark dive experience is for both divers and non-certified divers. The non-certified divers get trained on site before the dive. They are put through the PADI 'Discover Scuba' program.

How many people have you taken into the shark tank?

Michael: I'm not sure. We had our hundredth diver in November...Around 120, 130 or so I would guess.

Have you lost any?

Michael (laughing): We don't talk about that. Seriously, the closest I have come to losing someone is having them almost 'chicken out' during the training phase. I am proud to say that everyone who has done the training with me has completed the dive, though some of them quit and came back two or three times over the course of the day. There is no pressure. If they change their mind, they don't have to do it. If they leave, and want to come back, I am willing to go through the training with them again. It's not a race, it is supposed to be a fun, exciting experience.

What's the most rewarding part of taking people into the tank to dive?

Michael: Well, there are several. One good experience was when I went with a group of instructors. These people were all very experienced...more so than me. They did the dive, surfaced, and signed up to do another right on the spot. These were guys with thousands of dives between them, who had 'seen and done it all' and they LOVED the dive. It is also rewarding when the non-certified divers surface and state that they loved it so much that they want me to certify them. It is also rewarding when people rave about animals other than the sharks...There are some incredible creatures in the tank and it is not all about

the sharks. It tells me that they really appreciate the beauty of marine life. Basically, if the divers like it, it is rewarding for me.

What's the most difficult part of the work?

Michael: Well, I love doing it, so there is not that much that is difficult. I live in Daejeon, so the 9 hours or so of round-trip travel time wears me down a bit, especially if I go and come back on the same day, but I love all of it.

Do you have a favourite animal in the aquarium?

Michael: I really like all of them for different reasons. As soon as I chose one as my favorite, I would feel bad about not selecting another one. So I guess I will sit on the fence and say that I like them all. I am pretty excited about what the aquarium plans to introduce to the tank in the future. I am hoping for more rays (eagle rays are nice) and more species of sharks. We will have to wait and see. That part is out of my hands.

Personally, I'm hoping for an octopus. Now that I've braved the deeps successfully, I'll be back.

By Bonnie Stewart