

Local dive shops offer first-class instruction

BY TOM TRACEY

Record-Eagle staff writer

In his work-a-day world, Ed O'Keefe III of Traverse City is president of Chateau Grand Traverse Winery. Outside of work, however, O'Keefe is a self-described "diving zealot."

"Diving is how I deal with everyday stress," he said. "It's very peaceful down there. It's viewed much like yoga — you're focused and composed."

The son of a scuba diver, O'Keefe grew up enjoying snorkeling and casual diving. As life went on, diving opportunities became more of an on-again, off-again proposition, but he never gave up his dream of becoming a certified scuba diver. After the Sept. 11 tragedy, O'Keefe finally decided to do something about it.

"I took the ball and ran with it," he said.

For an investment of about eight nights and around \$250, O'Keefe earned his first scuba diving certification. Since that time, his diving trips have taken him to such exotic locales as Micronesia and the Galapagos Islands.

Through it all, O'Keefe remains impressed with local diving courses.

"The quality of instruction is pretty amazing up here (in Traverse City)," he said. "The rudimentary skills you're taught here can save your life later."

Scuba North in Traverse City is one of several local dive shops that offer instruction, charters and related clothing and equipment. Scuba North classes range from entry-level pool diving all the way up to certified rescue diving.

Specialized courses are also available, including ice diving, salvage diving and shipwreck diving.

"Our charter boats are often booked by divers around the country," said dive instructor Stephen Raths of Scuba North. "We train and dive with people of almost all ages — from children as young as 12 years old to adults in their 70s and beyond."

The most popular local destinations for divers are shipwrecks near the Manitou Islands, Lake Charlevoix, Straits of Mackinac and Whitefish Point, Raths said.

The Manitou Passage is popular among beginners, with depths zero to 45 feet and clear visibility. For intermediate divers, Lake Charlevoix offers deeper water (35 to 65 feet) and a greater number of intact shipwrecks, such as the Keuka and the Elizabeth II.

More experienced divers find the Straits of Mackinac to their liking. The shipwrecks are larger and deeper (40 to 130 feet) and the water conditions are more challenging.

Advanced divers with training in cold and deep water diving techniques can

tackle Whitefish Bay in Lake Superior, where shipwrecks abound. Higher-level skills are essential here, with water temperatures hovering near 40 degrees Fahrenheit year-round and dive depths that can exceed 165 feet.

"The wrecks of Whitefish Point range from wooden schooners of the middle to late 19th century, to large steel steamers from the middle 20th century," said Raths. "Due to the cold, many of these wooden ships still maintain many of their original characteristics."

On site, divers are paired into buddy teams of two.

"On charters, we take up to six divers or three buddy teams," he said. "If the wrecks are shallow (zero to 100 feet), our dive times range from 20 minutes to about an hour and if deep, (100 feet or deeper) we usually have a 15 to 20 minute dive time, with the possibility of decompression times for a safe ascent."

Typical equipment for a dive consists of a wet or dry suit (determined by water temperature), tanks, regula-



Courtesy of Bob Thorpe

Jeff McIlroy floats through the wreckage of the William H. Barnum during a Scuba North charter dive trip.

tors, harness or buoyancy jacket, weights, computer, lights, mask, fins and snorkel. In fact, the term SCUBA refers to Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus.

"Diving has been described as an extreme sport, but most of us are not diving for a thrilling, life-risking rush," Raths said, "but rather for relaxation and (for) viewing a preserved maritime history that can only be accessed through the use of scuba. There has been interest from the obvious water

enthusiasts, but also from those who have spent little to no time around the water and wish to expand their horizons."

Great Lakes Scuba is another full-service Traverse City dive shop that offers classes, equipment and scheduled dive events. For novice divers, owner Jack Enger likes "The Pipeline" behind the Traverse City power plant.

"It's easy to access, and there are two huge crates filled with stones at the intake that attract fish for viewing," he said.

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