



My Dive Into Adventure

Worried you don't have what it takes to become a certified scuba diver? Hey, if a girl from New York City who could barely float in the water without getting water up her nose can do it, so can you.

BY CHARLENE ALLEN & ROD KLEIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROD KLEIN

» **I'm hooked on diving.** There is just so much to see in the ocean! You never know what's around the next coral head. And Grand Cayman, where I completed my open-water checkout dives to get my dive certification, is the perfect place to interact with the ocean. I did my last two checkout dives on Turtle Reef, which has a mini wall that drops down to 60 feet. There was so much to see—great big, silvery tarpon, a large grouper that had to be seen to be believed, a canyon between two gorgeous reef walls. But before I got to this point, I had to overcome some obstacles.





» **I needed to** get used to breath control, buoyancy, having water in my face, kicking correctly and just the strenuous nature of walking with a scuba tank on my back. (I was happy that I had spent time in the gym doing squats!) At first I was very nervous. From talking to other divers, I found out that this is often the case. We took things very slow. I think I did at least six or seven long pool sessions with Jeff, one-on-one. Not everyone has this luxury, but I recommend as much practice time as you can schedule. I got better and more comfortable over time. My fear of the unknown was replaced by curiosity. Curiosity led to confidence, so I knew what to do as I was learning skills that I'd be tested on later. Maybe most important, I learned the importance of having a buddy underwater—buddies always help each other.

» **If you had told me a year ago** that I would be a certified scuba diver, I would've laughed at you. Going into the ocean, breathing compressed air, laughing at underwater behaviors and feeling the hand of God in this oceanic fishbowl—and loving it—was beyond my imagination.

I've always been athletic, but the only time I tried to learn to swim was in summer camp when I was nine years old. I wasn't really afraid of the water, but I felt uncomfortable having water go up my nose and that would cause me to panic.

One day, I read an article about travel and scuba trips in an outdoor adventure magazine. Traveling to exotic places has long been a dream of mine and the article planted a seed in my mind.

That's where photographer Rod Klein and dive instructor Jeff Sisil come into the story. Rod is a friend of mine, and he convinced me to try scuba. Without him, I doubt that I ever would have done anything except thinking about learning to dive.

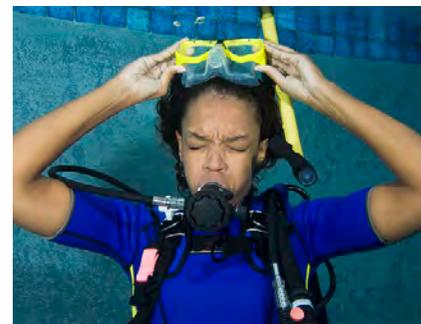
Rod invited me to a "Splash Party"—an introductory scuba experience—that Jeff was having at the pool at the dive shop where he worked. I was just going to see if I liked scuba.



» **The Splash Party was a great** way to get started, especially for someone with limited swimming experience. We started with snorkeling in the pool, and then Jeff and Rod gave me some basic tips—how to equalize so that I wouldn't hurt my ears, basic hand signals for communicating underwater, using my tongue as a "splash guard" during inhalation in case there was a little bit of water in my regulator.

Breathing underwater was very strange at first, but after an hour or so swimming around just to get the feel of breathing underwater, I was hooked.

Jeff and I then planned a schedule where I could do the academic portion as self-study at home. When I was ready, I would go over everything



» **Mask clearing, at the beginning was just one big pain.** I had a hard time coordinating blowing out my nose while looking up and pressing the top of the mask against my face. When I had to take my mask off, it was even more difficult. I felt panic every time I removed it for the mask-clearing skill. I hyperventilated and couldn't calmly blow the water out of my mask through my nose. I just kept getting water up my nose. The solution for me turned out to be simple. We changed my standard mask to a purge-valve mask, and this made all the difference. After this, learning all my other skills was a piece of cake.





» **After completing** the academics and the confined-water (pool) skills, I decided to make my four open-water checkout dives—the final requirement for getting your C-card—on Grand Cayman. Grand Cayman had everything I wanted—warm, calm water and great visibility.

» **As beautiful** as the Caribbean is, it is more challenging than the pool. There are no waves or current in the pool. Rod helped me here and gave me a few tips for calmly completing my skills—BC removal, mask-clearing, etc. We did the first two certification dives off the shore of Cobalt Coast Resort and Divetech and the second two at Turtle Reef. Before I knew it, I was a certified diver!

The day after I got certified, we did a two-tank boat dive. For me, boat diving was more challenging than shore diving because the choppy water caught me offguard. My guide helped me stay focused and calm. I dived every day for seven more days. Each dive was a lesson in itself and I found my skills and comfort level getting better with each giant stride.



» **What I found is that each dive** is a lesson, so don't expect perfection. I get a new dive lesson from each dive experience. But my inexperience was overcome by my natural curiosity and my surprising will to conquer new ground.

TIPS FROM CHARLENE

Still not sure you've got what it takes to be a diver? I've got some tips

» **Choose a good instructor.** Get a personal referral from someone you know, or at least go to your local dive shop and interview a few of their more experienced instructors. A good, patient, experienced instructor can make all the difference.

» **Give yourself lots of time to complete the course and get lots of practice.** If that means having a private instructor or a small class, it's worth it. If you have time, complete the academic and confined-water work at home. Get a referral from your instructor, and do the final certification dives in a tropical location with warm, clear water. Doing all the skills and classwork while on vacation just adds more stress to the experience.

» **Get a "snorkel set"—a mask, fins and snorkel.** To ensure a proper fit, seek help from the staff at the dive store, or see "Gear 101" on p. 54.

» **Be prepared for your pool and open-water sessions.** Be well rested and hydrated.

» **Practice relaxing** your muscles and a slow, easy breathing rhythm.

» **Ask lots of questions.** Don't be timid about asking to have something explained again.

» **Just do it!** This will be the beginning of a lifelong adventure.