

TRIED & TESTED

Mini B dive kit

Neale Byart tries a shallow-water dive system designed to help sailors free props, scrub hulls and set anchors

Diving would make it so much easier to free a fouled propeller, scrub the hull, check the anchor set or the condition of a swinging mooring, or inspect for damage after grounding. And on idle summer days at anchor, you can explore the world below the waves.

However, normal SCUBA gear is bulky and requires extensive training. That's why, when the Mini B diving system was launched in 2007, we were interested in testing it. Mini B, which allows you to dive to depths of up to 9m, is claimed to bridge the gap between SCUBA and snorkelling.

Since its launch, a dedicated 'microdive' training course has been created for Mini B. The training is less comprehensive than a SCUBA course, as the restricted depth requires less knowledge, so you can qualify faster. A SCUBA course will take three to five days, but you can get a microdiving qualification in one day, once you have completed the theory.

Theory session

The course starts with a DVD and book-based theory section (£79). It's all straightforward, common-sense stuff because the study relating to decompression, dive tables, dive computers and logbooks isn't required for shallow water microdiving.

The theory course is completed in your own time and there is no final written exam before receiving your certificate. With some previous experience and knowledge, it took me four hours to complete the theory. A complete beginner will need to allow around eight hours, best spread over a few days.

At the end of the theory session

you receive a certificate and are cleared to proceed to stage two – the practical pool session.

Pool session

This half-day session starts with a short theory recap followed by a first look at the microdiving kit and how it all goes together. After that, it was time to don our swim gear, grab our kit and get wet.

I carried out my pool session at Andark's 3.4m-deep pool in Southampton. The pool session, which costs about £125, teaches the procedures for assembling and inspecting your kit, learning how to get into and out of the water, understanding basic diving signals, descending, ascending and

maintaining neutral buoyancy using your buoyancy control device and weights. You also learn how to clear your mask, monitor your air supply and depth gauges, and the procedure for retrieving a lost mouthpiece while underwater.

This may sound like a lot to master in half a day, but once in the water the kit is easy to master

'The kit is easy to master and by lunchtime I was diving like a natural'

and by lunchtime I was diving like a natural.

Open water

The final stage consists of three 20-minute 'check-out dives' down to 9m in open water with a diving instructor, at a cost of about £125. You can do all three in half a day, but I spread mine over a few days.

Hardier souls will save money by doing the check-out dives in the UK, using their own boat, but more delicate candidates tend to go abroad. I went to the Red Sea resort of Hurghada, Egypt. Flights and accommodation for a week in October cost £309, but the warm seas and coral reefs made the extra cost well worth it. ▲



A compelling reason to have this kit aboard: you can free a wrapped propeller

TECHNICAL

Mini B C-pro

A compact sub-aqua system zipped up in a neat backpack



7 Depth gauge. The standard spec C-Pro does not include this. You would be unwise to dive more than a few metres' depth without it

6 Submersible pressure gauge (SPG), shows how much air you have left

5 Five-litre air cylinder – enough air for 30-40 minutes' shallow water diving

1 37cm air hose – from cylinder to valve

2 75cm air hose – from valve to regulator

3 Buoyancy control device (BCD) – a bladder that you inflate or deflate to descend, ascend or maintain 'neutral buoyancy' underwater

4 Regulator – delivers a steady supply of air from your cylinder, at the right pressure

Mini B C-Pro

There are numerous models available from Mini B, but the C-Pro is aimed at yachtsmen. The beauty of the kit is in its packaging. Conventional scuba gear is bulky, but the C-Pro rucksack contains the lot – air bottle, buoyancy control device, regulator, high and low pressure hoses and the connectors. It doesn't have a depth gauge, though – and you'd be foolish to dive more than a couple of metres without one.

While there are other products on the market aimed at shallow-water use, the Mini B range stands out as it has a buoyancy control device (BCD). This is an important piece of safety kit, without which the weight of the other gear could pull you under.

My C-Pro came with a 5 litre tank, which should be good for 30-40 minutes of shallow water diving, after which you'll need to



take it to a dive shop to get it refilled at a cost of about £2. The kit weighs around 13kg, so while not exactly light it's a featherweight compared to

conventional scuba gear.

The £499 C-Pro package costs about £120 less than conventional scuba gear. Its compact size makes it easier to stow on a boat, but like any dive gear it does need careful stowage and regular maintenance to ensure it remains serviceable when you need it.

Mini B is easy to travel with. If you're chartering in warmer climes, the rucksack containing your regulator and

hoses can double up as hand luggage, while the empty air tank (with valve removed) can go in your check-in luggage.

You will need extra gear: wetsuit, mask, snorkel, fins, a weight belt and some weights to overcome your natural buoyancy. I needed around 10kg to overcome my buoyancy in a 3mm wetsuit.

Price £499 (Mini B C-Pro with 5 lit tank) **Contact** Mini B **Tel** 0114 287 7070 **Website** www.mini-b.co.uk