

## LONG ISLAND

# Long Island scuba community looking for others to dive in

**By Bill Bleyer**

Special to Newsday

*Updated August 15, 2019 7:00 PM*

Nine-year-old Cub Scout Daniel Rucano of East Hampton was excited to try out scuba gear for the first time this summer with other members of Pack 426 at Hampton Dive Center in Riverhead as part of the shop's outreach to young people.

"It was very exciting to try something new," Daniel said of his experience in the 20-by-40 pool. "It was amazing that you could breathe underwater like a fish. I can't wait to try it again."

While Daniel is still too young to be certified to dive on his own, the number of people on Long Island getting the training has been increasing slowly as with the rest of the state, according to the leading certification agency.

But that good news for the sport has been offset by some troubling trends in local diving over the past few decades.

Divers in the 1980s and 1990s had a choice of more than a dozen charter boats to take them to shipwrecks off the South Shore or in Long Island Sound. Now there only five, and only two offer regularly scheduled trips open to individuals.

Likewise, the number of dive shops in Nassau and Suffolk offering training and equipment sales has fallen by a third from more than a dozen.

This sea change in the Long Island diving community stems from multiple factors, primarily higher costs and the increasing allure of more affordable tropical vacations.

The problem is not that fewer Long Islanders are diving. It's that fewer people are diving on Long Island, especially from charter boats .

Most remaining dive shops say the number of people training for dive certification has been stable or increasing slightly. That mirrors a trend that the Professional Association of Diving Instructors, the world's largest diver training organization, has tracked.

“The number of PADI certifications issued to New York State residents annually has increased more than 5.5 percent in the last five years,” PADI spokeswoman Paige Thornley said. And “the age of divers is getting younger for certifications in New York,” which bodes well for the industry.

“Our numbers for certifications are pretty consistent and maybe there's a slight increase,” Hampton Dive Center owner Randy Randazzo said. “But I think there's more people traveling to the Caribbean or the Pacific because maybe the economy's a little bit better than it had been.”

That's a problem for Long Island dive shop and dive boat owners. Fewer divers are going out on the local boats that are left, and many of the divers going south bypass the shops, buying gear and booking trips online — and even earning their certifications during the tropical vacations.

Yet, another bright spot along with the rising number of certifications is that beach diving locations, among them Ponquogue Bridge in Hampton Bays and Secret Beach in Greenport, have been increasing. Beach diving is relatively user-friendly: It's free, doesn't involve a long boat ride, can be done without getting up at the crack of dawn and only requires basic scuba gear.

Diving on a shipwreck or artificial reef off the South Shore is more a labor of love. It requires a higher level of certification and equipment that can cost thousands of dollars. And the boat trip that usually starts

“The boat diving is decreasing because of the cost and the gamble on the visibility,” which can range from almost zero to 50 feet or more, said Capt. Ralph Towlen of the Shinnecock dive boat Half Time.

## **Diving’s ups and downs**

Capt. Steve Bielenda, owner of the dive boat Wahoo from 1980 to 2004 and former president of the Eastern Diveboat Association, said the Sea Hunter out of Freeport was the first dedicated dive boat in Nassau or Suffolk in the mid-70s. “The heyday was the late ’70s coming into the ’80s” when there were three large dive boats that could take as many as two dozen divers and many “sixpacks” that could take as many as six divers.

“A lot of things happened at the same time” to diminish the local industry, Bielenda said. “The dive resort industry in the Caribbean and other tropical locations was expanding and more people began diving on vacations.”

Starting in the late 1980s, many advanced wreck divers began using more complicated gas mixtures that would allow them to stay down longer. But that shift toward intimidating technical diving scared away some divers who were less experienced.

“Now the boats are more geared to technical divers than recreational divers,” said Martha Katz, owner of Scuba Network of Long Island in Carle Place.

“There’s not enough clientele to have any big boats anymore,” Bielenda said. His insurance costs started at about \$2,500 and increased over the years to \$7,000.

“Now it’s 10 grand,” he said. “Then you have to pay for Coast Guard inspections, the upkeep on your

yet.” And fuel costs have risen steeply.

“I basically ran out of customers,” said Capt. Dan Berg of Baldwin, 59. The former owner of a series of four dive boats named Wreck Valley, he sold the last one a year ago and now works as a nurse. “Ten years ago people were filling up my boat for the summer, booking two or three months in advance.”

Capt. Tom McCarthy, 32, owner of the six-passenger dive boat Tempest based in Freeport for seven years, said his boat is usually full because “we have enough close-knit friends but unfortunately it has limited us to certain real popular wrecks like the San Diego and the Oregon.” They are deeper wrecks not suitable for newly certified divers and the limited variety makes it harder to attract additional divers.

Dive shops are trying to fill the void of beginner-level boat dives by chartering the sixpacks for shallower dives. But the number of boat diving opportunities continues to shrink. Capt. Neal Stark, owner of the Sidekick based in East Moriches, this year posted a notice on his website: “After over a decade in the public dive charter business, ... [we have] decided to change operations to private charters only” — and only with groups that have chartered in the past.

## **Dive shops try to adapt**

Katz, 64, who has owned Scuba Network of Long Island for 23 years, is encouraged that her certification business has remained stable. “I see a lot of younger people,” she said.

But she is frustrated by the disappearance of the larger dive boats that could accommodate a whole training class.

“It’s half-and-half,” Katz said of her customers who want to dive on Long Island versus tropical locations. “Long Island diving is not promoted as much as we want to,” she said. Her shop sponsors a dive club “and we try to push local diving” while also organizing trips around the world.

Darren Nelson, 57, of Jamaica, Queens, who works on immigration issues for the federal government, is among Katz’s recent certification customers who is interested in diving Long Island beaches and boats — and tropical locations.

“It’s always something I wanted to do,” he said. “I just love it. You’re in a different environment with the fish and you feel free.”

“They want to have it done in one day,” he said. “You can’t learn to scuba dive in a day.”

“As far as local diving goes, we do whatever we can to get them on the boats and do local beach diving with our dive club,” Randazzo said.

While the internet may have hurt his business, Randazzo also increasingly relies on it, using social media to publicize dives and events. Every other spring his shop holds a free “Try Scuba Open House.”

“Last year we had about 40 people come, and eight of them signed up for classes,” he said.

He also offers sessions to groups of Scouts — like Daniel Rucano — and other young people who want to try out scuba gear.

Not every shop owner is willing or able to adapt to the changing market. Ralph Collis, 61, owner of Long Island Scuba in North Lindenhurst for 17 years, closed his shop at the end of July. “I’m just a little tired after 39 years, and the business isn’t what it used to be,” he said. The number of people he’s been certifying has dropped precipitously from 1,200 a year in the 1980s and 1990s. “Now it’s lucky if it’s 50 or 75.”

But the Wellwood Avenue location will remain a dive shop. Danny Rivera, 35, owner of Good Life Divers, who has been operating out of his home in Oyster Bay, is taking over half the space.

Rivera said he had gotten a lot of feedback from divers that they didn’t know where they could dive on Long Island. So more than three years ago he started a Dive Local program, offering three guided local dives for \$100 that includes mostly shore dives from Brooklyn to the East End. He said so far 115 different divers have participated.

## **Promoting Long Island diving**

The Long Island Divers Association has been grappling for years with how to deal with the Island’s changing and shrinking dive world. President Barry Lipsky, 64, of Bayport, said his organization has been focusing on increasing access as a way to boost area diving. “We’ve been exceptionally successful,” he said.

LIDA persuaded the Town of Southampton in 2015 to rehabilitate rather than demolish the damaged northern and southern sections of the old Ponquogue Bridge in Hampton Bays that was used by fishermen and as a site for diving. “That is the best shore dive on Long Island,” he said, because of the great visibility and tropical fish the Gulf Stream brings up in the fall.

The organization also worked with Greenport Village officials for two years to gain access to Secret Beach, an area previously closed. LIDA has also been working with the Town of East Hampton to replace damaged dune stairs to provide access to HMS Culloden, wrecked during the American Revolution on the north shore of Montauk.

Lipsky has also been collaborating with state officials to augment the artificial reef system off the South Shore as well as to persuade the state to sink a large vessel as an artificial reef there to attract more divers.

In the meantime, the efforts to encourage local diving were boosted this summer when the Army Corps of Engineers dropped debris from dismantled area bridges onto the artificial reef off Fire Island. What Lipsky called a “significant bonus to scuba divers” was the addition of a 53-foot boat named the Hudson, which was sunk in 61 feet of water just southeast of Fire Island Inlet.

“This new wreck site will be a tremendous educational center for scuba divers, especially divers just after their initial open-water certification,” Lipsky said. “Many of the wrecks around Long Island are difficult for novice divers to penetrate. This new wreck will provide large openings for divers to learn the skills of wreck diving in fairly shallow water.”

LIDA also brings students from New York City to dive at Ponquogue Bridge and Boy and Girl Scout troops to Secret Beach to increase awareness of diving opportunities on the Island.

Berg said that when he began to dive in 1979 it was easy to find lobsters and spear large blackfish on beach dives, or come back with lobsters that were as heavy as 14 pounds or find artifacts at shipwrecks on boat dives.

“It was very easy to fall in love with the sport,” he said. “Those days are long gone. Now you really have to want to do it.”

## **GETTING CERTIFIED**

You must be certified by a training agency through a dive shop or dive resort to dive on Long Island and most places in the world. The number of sessions and cost can vary widely. Basic open-water certification requires online study, one to three review classes at a shop, then several pool dives followed by four open-water dives. The cost generally runs from almost \$400 to \$800, depending on the shop.

For dive shop locations that offer certification, visit the Long Island Divers Association website, [lidaonline.com](http://lidaonline.com).

# WHERE TO DIVE ON LONG ISLAND

Long Island offers beach dives or boat dives to shipwrecks or artificial reefs off the South Shore.

The most popular beach dive sites are the Ponquogue Bridge in Hampton Bays and Secret Beach in Greenport. Access to the latter is through trips organized by the [Long Island Divers Association](http://lidaonline.com) (lidaonline.com) or dive shops. LIDA also presents an annual film festival, the next one on Jan. 25 at Hofstra University.

Dive boat trips cost \$110 and up depending on the distance offshore. Captains usually require at least an advanced open-water certification before allowing someone to board.

While there are hundreds of shipwrecks off the South Shore, decreasing demand for boat dives has left captains traveling primarily to the two most popular shipwrecks: the Cunard steamship Oregon, which sank in 130 feet of water off Fire Island in a collision in 1886, and the USS San Diego, a Navy cruiser sunk in 110 feet of water off Fire Island by a mine laid by a German U-boat during World War I.

The dive boats:

- Tempest, Freeport: Capt. Tom McCarthy, [eastcoastwreckdiving.com](http://eastcoastwreckdiving.com)
- Sea Hawk, Freeport: Capt. Frank Persico, [seahawkdiver.com](http://seahawkdiver.com).
- Half Time, Shinnecock: Capt. Ralph Towlen (group charters only to wrecks and artificial reef), 631-921-5181 or [CoastalWG@optimum.net](mailto:CoastalWG@optimum.net).
- Sea Turtle, Montauk: Capt. Chuck Wade (wreck dives and shark-cage experiences), [seaturtlecharters.com](http://seaturtlecharters.com)

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