



Solo diving - there I said it. If you mention the S word at a dive site more often than not folks get a little freaked out, give you a funny look and assume that you have a death wish. It is easy to see why, the first SCUBA course teaches us two things; never hold your breath and always dive with a buddy. Yet the idea that solo diving will automatically kill you is akin to the myth that doing it solo will make you go blind. If you can't imagine yourself in a cave alone, what are you doing inside a cave? If you wouldn't swim three hundred feet into a cave by yourself what are you doing three thousand feet in with a buddy?

More often than not buddy diving is a case of 'together alone'. It is not unusual to see a so called 'buddy pair' miles away from each other inside caves from Florida to Australia. When it all goes pear shaped what help exactly will they give to one another? If you can't see your buddies light you have no hope of knowing when they are in trouble nor giving them any assistance, period, let alone assistance in a timely manner. Let's face it, most people will be lucky to get the help they need from their buddy when it matters most.

So is having a buddy giving YOU a false sense of security? If you can't imagine being in a cave by yourself, if nothing else you are relying on your buddy for emotional support. You cave dive long enough and eventually it is all going to hit the fan - are you confident you can handle it alone? If you aren't, are you really holding up your end of the bargain? If you can't help yourself when you encounter a problem, how exactly are you planning on helping your buddy?

I would argue that solo diving makes you a better diver and in the end a stronger buddy if you

choose to enter such liaisons. When it comes to diving with other people you know what your limitations are, you know how far you can push yourself and you will not be swayed by peer pressure or a false sense of security to go further or deeper than you should.

You should be comfortable in a cave by yourself and you should know what kind of a diver you are. Are you aggressive or more conservative when you are alone? Does your trim suffer if no one is watching? Have you got the presence of mind to fix problems that arise? Can you plan a dive and execute it without someone watching over you? Have you got cave awareness or will you get lost as soon as your eye drifts away from the line?

The main argument to support the theory that buddy diving is superior to solo diving is that 'two brains are better than one.' No matter how much redundant equipment you have, the theory goes, at the end of the day you only have one brain so it is nice to have a backup. This theory suggests that somehow two people working together to solve a problem will mean that it is more likely to be resolved, for example two people lost in a cave are more likely to get out after communicating about their predicament.

I would argue that it is precisely this redundant brain that is likely to be the source of potential problems to begin with. You can control a lot about your diving; you can control yourself, your gear, your route and how far inside a cave you will venture. Yet you cannot control what goes on in your buddies brain. What another person is thinking or feeling at any one time is often a mystery. Are they pushing themselves to be there? Are they happy and focused on the dive or have they had a bad day at work and they're feeling suicidal or homicidal for that matter? Humans in general aren't exactly real good at communicating. Our two lost mates from the example above probably got themselves in the 'crap! where's the exit?!' predicament because of a lack of communication in the first place... 'I thought you were keeping track of where we are?' 'No, I thought you were - you where the one leading!' Surely the double fatalities that occur would prove that a redundant brain can't solve all problems.

There are times when solo diving in my opinion is clearly a good option, in tight silty passages for example, a buddy would hinder rather than help. Doing it solo is often more effective, but of course, just like with the real S word, it can be more fun with a buddy. If you can find a buddy who has a similar breathing rate, a similar pace, similar goals and interests inside the caves and they have as much interest in your satisfaction and pleasure as their own, then you are indeed more likely to have more fun and a good time. Yet anyone can tell you that finding a perfect match is no easy feat.

They say that happiness is only real when it is shared. If indeed you dive with a buddy in order to share the experience and have more fun, then I would suggest a little bit of buddy awareness probably wouldn't go astray. If you want to dive with someone that's exactly what you should do dive together. Too often people get in the water at the same time, but aren't really diving together. Why pretend? What's the point? You want to solo dive then that's what you should do.

Solo diving is not everyone's cup of tea and you should be realistic so that you don't bite off more than you can chew. Keep in mind however, that just because you are with a buddy this does not necessarily mean you are any safer than you would be if you were alone. Is solo diving taking on additional risk perhaps. We all draw the line somewhere and decide what risks are acceptable during the pursuit of our passion and the exploration of the underwater world. Knowing yourself and understanding your limitations, reflecting on your own behavior as a buddy and scrutinizing the attitude of those you dive with is a good first step towards cave diving safety in my book.