

# Zanzibar's 2010 Hyperbaric Chamber Attendant and Operator Course



Image by Morné Christou.

By Tammy D. Holter

**Since** my first Zanzibar diving experience more than a decade ago, I was overwhelmed with the diversity of marine life in the waters off this idyllic island less than 6° from the equator. Over the years, I have become more and more involved not only with our dive centre, Scuba Do Zanzibar, but with the industry as a whole.

The dive centres in Tanzania formed a consortium in late 2005. The concept was originally to overcome the difficulties of importing PADI training products into a remote destination. The idea of working together has grown and now it not only gives us added buying power from PADI, but also from many diving industry suppliers. This consortium of diving companies is now working together on important marine conservation initiatives with our Department of Fisheries and Environment. Currently, the Zanzibar diving industry is working even closer together by promoting diving safety

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through the Hyperbaric Chamber Support Programme which our diving doctor, Dr Henrik Juhl, has recently resuscitated.

Zanzibar has been very fortunate over the past four years to have the guidance of top diving doctors such as Dr Isabel, Dr Bruce, Dr Luba and now Dr Henrik. Their guidance has taken us from the old school thinking that decompression sickness happens only to the “dodgy divers” who do not follow safe diving practices, to our current understanding that a diver can get bent – even without doing anything wrong! Although diving is one of the safest adventure activities, as the Zanzibar diving industry grows and more people of all ages and fitness levels get involved, statistics show there will be a greater need for an operational chamber with the support of medically trained personnel.

Having taught over 400 people to dive and being a certified diver for more than 15 years, I only recently witnessed my first diver with an undeserved case of DCI. A healthy female diver in her early 30s experienced a skin bend after two very conservative dive profiles. I was personally acting as dive master on the dive and can attest as to how conservative her dives were as I slowly ascended with her, making safety stops on each ascent. Hearing about the concept of an undeserved case of DCI and actually seeing it are two different things. It was this one incident which encouraged me to educate myself even further on recognising the signs and symptoms of DCI – far beyond what is taught in standard dive theory. This experience also heightened my interest in hyperbaric medicine and motivated me into getting more involved with our Chamber Support Programme.

I had the fortunate experience of attending the November 2010 Hyperbaric Chamber Attendant and Operator Course, sponsored by DAN-SA, with our instructor, Morné Christou. It was an amazing personal learning opportunity as well as an important event for the diving industry of Zanzibar. The Zanzibar Hyperbaric Chamber facility gives peace of mind to all divers who visit and enjoy the wonderful diving here in Zanzibar and the whole of East Africa.

The first part of the week's training covered the Hyperbaric Chamber Attendant Course.

The attendant's role involves being inside the chamber with the injured diver. This person has the responsibility of monitoring the patient's signs and symptoms and communicating with the doctor to assist the patient with the oxygen mask, and to be familiar with operating the chamber from the inside in case of emergency and be familiar with all emergency procedures. We are also in a position to brief the injured diver on chamber procedures, check that they are adequately dressed with no flammable clothing, jewellery, etc., and assist them in and out of the chamber. Together with Morné, we followed each pipe to and from the chamber and learned to problem solve anything that could potentially go wrong. We were taught how to bring the chamber online as well as take it offline after a treatment, always leaving it in a state of readiness.

On my first chamber dive, I knew very little and had no idea that I could control it from the inside. As a diver, I know that when I am diving I can control my descent and that I will not hurt my ears if I experience a squeeze. Therefore, on this first chamber dive I had an overwhelming feeling that I was not in control which, combined with the sounds of the chamber being pressurised and the changes in temperature, was quite an intimidating experience. This has given me insight as to what it might be like for an injured diver to go into a chamber for their first time while most likely experiencing pain from the injury. As the chamber attendant, it is my job to try to put the injured diver at ease and prepare them for what they are going to experience. By my second chamber dive, I had learned how to control the chamber from the inside and Morné and Dr Henrik repeatedly presented challenges for us to solve which not only built our confidence, but also made the experience of being inside the chamber much more manageable!

Once we mastered being on the inside, we learned to control all aspects of the chamber from the outside. We were really put to the test and given example treatment tables to follow while our instructor and doctor were throwing many, many scenarios at us. Overall, the course was very intense; we learned a tremendous amount and were left feeling confident to operate the chamber if and when needed.

About a month after our training, just around sunset, I received a call from Dr Henrik. He was at the chamber with a patient. As I had been in the office all day and our other instructors who are operators had been diving, it was my turn to go. On my 30 minute drive to the chamber, I was reviewing all of my training in my head and getting myself prepared. I arrived at the chamber and it was decided that I would be the attendant on the inside with the patient. Once

inside, everything we had learned in training came back to me. It was amazing to see the patient get relief as soon as we reached our treatment depth.

The team of chamber operators and attendants from Zanzibar is made up of volunteers, mostly dive masters and instructors working on the island. When treating an injured diver, Dr Henrik relies on his team of attendants and operators who are on call to come and assist. As most dives are during the day, initial chamber treatments are likely to happen from late in the afternoon to the middle of the night, so it is important to have quite a few of us trained up to ensure we can support Dr Henrik. At Scuba Do Zanzibar, four of our instructors trained as operators and attendants so that we are in a position to assist. Currently, we have a team of 14 trained operators and attendants from One Ocean, Bahari, Peponi and Buccaneer Dive Centres, as well as a few independent divers not working in the industry who volunteer their time. The overall safety of diving in Zanzibar, as well as our ability to handle any sort of diving emergency, is an asset to the whole industry and a clear benefit resulting from the co-operation of the diving operators in the industry.

I invite you to come and experience the beautiful, diverse diving we have in the Indian Ocean off the East African coast. In addition to our magnificent marine life, we can offer you the peace of mind that, in the unlikely event you or your buddy have a diving accident, our diving doctor and his chamber support team, together with DAN-SA, will be there to help! I am very happy to be part of the team of Zanzibar chamber operators and attendants.

Karibu Zanzibar! 

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