

Editor's Picks

This School is Cool

SCUBA Diving Veteran Mike Parker Teaches D.C. Denizens the Art of the Dive

written by
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If you thought you had to leave D.C. to find water sports beyond paddleboating on the Potomac, you were wrong. You can learn to scuba dive without leaving D.C.!

Mike Parker, a native of Bethesda who has lived in over 60 countries, took his first dive 35 years ago at the Bethesda-Chevy Chase YMCA.

One year later, he began teaching scuba classes to locals. Parker says his teaching method is unique at his school, the **SPE Dive School** (Scuba Professional Education School, ScubaEDU.com), because he plans his classes around the schedules of busy professionals.



Photo credit: Mike Parker

After holding classes in a local Holiday Inn for years, Parker opened his own instructional facility last year in Chevy Chase, with three different classrooms and a showcase of scuba gear. Parker's school does not operate a dive shop—one of the few scuba schools anywhere not to—which helps him focus on his students more.

In order to get scuba certified, one must take 36 hours of instruction (24 in the classroom and 12 in the pool), pass a written test, and complete four dives. "Many students" Parker said, "come in to take a scuba class before they are going away on a trip. They want to get certified before they go so that they can dive on their vacation. For those students, we offer an 'international referral' that allows them to complete the dive part anywhere in the world that offers scuba instruction."

For those who do not already have their own trip planned, Parker says there are two alternatives. If you lack the time or money to take a long trip, you can dive in a quarry or other local body of water. "In fact," says Parker, "that's how I completed my certification. I couldn't afford to go anywhere else." However, if you can slip away for a four-day weekend, Parker takes his students on trips to the Cayman Islands to complete their certification. "The best part of this job is watching my students. They're like my children—I get to mold them and watch their progress. It's like raising a child except instead of paying for them, they pay me!"

His favorite part of diving is that it relaxes him. "Scuba diving feels like being entirely weightless...and [is] the best therapy for stress."

But what makes scuba so special? "It's like being on another planet entirely away from earth without being able to think about any of our daily/usual problems," Parker says.

Scuba diving also allows you to see things you wouldn't see just floating around at the beach or even snorkeling. For every one marine creature that has been identified, there are about 1,000 that remain unidentified. You can also see beautiful coral reefs, thousands of colorful fish, and "most importantly, peace—what's missing on earth!"

Parker is pretty fearless. He said that even on his first dive, he wasn't that scared. "I was a little nervous the first time I was breathing out of a tank," he said, "but that's it." He says sometimes he becomes uncomfortable when he is training with his students and he is worried about someone.

Occasional concerns aside, with a lifetime experience of over 9,000 students, he's certainly onto something, doing something right.

SCUBA SCOOOL FACTS

Youngest Student Ever: 10 years old (the youngest age at which one can train)

Oldest Student Ever: 90-91 (His instructor was 85.)

Deepest Parker Has Ever Dove: 250 feet

Favorite Country: Brazil

Favorite Place to Dive: Cayman Islands