



Going Off the Deep End

A college gym class in Iowa leads one man a long way from the cornfields.

by ANN ABEL

→ THE GURU OF DIVING IN THE British Virgin Islands got his start in Iowa. Yes, that Iowa. Randy Keil was taking a scuba class to fill a gym requirement at Iowa State University. Right there in Ames, dead center of the state, he decided after one dive that he'd make a career of working underwater. Somewhere. "My mom told me I'd never make a living with diving," Randy recalls. But then came hard-core underwater training in Guantanamo Bay during the Vietnam War. Tough, yes. But it was the Caribbean. After the war, Randy soon made good on his promise and moved to Tortola. More than 40 years later, Randy, now 66, has 10,000 dives under his belt.

Q: So you didn't listen to your mom?

A: She tried to talk me out of a career in diving. Growing up in New Jersey we never met one scuba diver. You couldn't blame her skepticism. It was one of the rare times she was wrong.

Q: You claim 10,000 dives. Is that some sort of expat record in the BVI?

A: Actually, there are divers here who might have more. But I believe I'm the only one who is still at it day in and day out. I'm blessed to dive as often as I do.

Q: Dive instructors in the Virgin Islands aren't exactly hard to come by. How did you land a dream job?

A: Being a Green Beret who specialized in diving helped. After the Army I was a third-grade teacher in Pasadena, California, where I also taught diving at

the dive shop at Peter Island Resort. So yes, it worked. And after my experiences right out of school, this move was easy.

Q: Experiences?

A: In the Army, during a five-minute underwater survival test, I saw a Green Beret candidate being hauled out of the water. His lips were blue, and there were no breathing movements in his chest. I asked the sergeant what was going on. He glanced at the stricken



My doctors suspected brain damage. One said, "It's hard to tell. He's a diver."

night. One of my dive students was a girl from North Carolina who convinced me I should send my resume to every known dive center in the Caribbean.

Q: And it worked?

A: I got one response, from George Marler's Aquatic Centers in the BVI. That feisty girl and I thought we'd go for a little while to check it out. We moved to the islands in the early '80s and never left. Now we run Paradise Watersports,

candidate, who was receiving CPR, then looked at his watch and said to me, "What are you doing out of the water? You've got two more minutes."

Q: What could measure up to moments like that in a place like Peter Island?

A: There are times when a huge bull shark or great hammerhead swims by and gives guests a good eyeballing. Then it swims in front of me with a toothy display that says, "Don't forget your place in the food chain!" Those are the adventures I treasure now.

Q: You raised two kids here in the BVI. That had to have its share of challenges.

A: Raising a family here on a divemaster's salary is tough. But Austin is 16 and plays starting right wing on the national rugby team, and Lauren is 29 and the

ARMANDO JENIK

operator of Richard Branson's private submarine. Where else can you do that?

Q: Not Iowa. But you have challenges here.

A: One of the biggest adjustments was leaving a place where grocery stores are open 24 hours a day. Here, we didn't even have electricity all day. Elementary school was also difficult for Lauren because she was often the only expat in her class. And there's the driving with cows, horses and sheep on the roads — plus people who like to stop to talk to friends.

Q: Does everyone in the BVI dive?

A: Actually, very few of the locals dive, which gives those of us who do it for a living a bit of celebrity status. I was once in a car accident and taken to the local hospital with a concussion. As the doctors were discussing my case, I heard one say, "Do you think there's any brain damage?" And the other one said, "It's hard to tell. He's a diver."

Q: So you have this dream job here in the BVI. Do you ever complain?

A: I complain about guests who tell me what they want to do in excruciating detail and then don't show up. And guests who don't listen to me.

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When in the BVI ...

SLOW DOWN

Not just with driving but also with work permits and immigration. I didn't think I'd ever find a bureaucracy worse than New Jersey's Division of Motor Vehicles, but the BVI's immigration offices beat it.

BRACE FOR IT

Animals in the BVI aren't loved as family members like they are in America. I'm still shocked to see how many locals raise fighting dogs or roosters and let all pets breed without any oversight. This is the reason we spay and neuter.

LISTEN CAREFULLY

English is the official language, but you wouldn't know it. I'm embarrassed to tell locals I don't understand them because the accent and word placement are so different from the English I know.



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