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Learning to scuba on Long Island: Take these steps before diving into water

Scuba diving student Aashna Sharma, 12, made it through her first open-water class at Prybil Beach in Glen Cove on June 3. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

By Ellen Yan

[Special to Newsday](#)

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Another world, foreign in time and culture to most Long Islanders, lies as close as the sandy shores at low tide.

Scuba divers know it well — crustacean-encrusted canons from a Revolutionary War time ship; colorful fish following warm currents from the tropics to an old Hamptons bridge; bottles from a rumrunning ship that sank during the Prohibition Era; a squid with colored speckles that shine copper in the light.

Want to dive into this? You don't even have to swim well. What you need is the spirit of an explorer.

"I've dove in many places all over the world, and Long Island is still my best location for diving," says Barry Lipsky, President of the Bayport-based Long Island Divers Association.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **First-time scuba divers** will start out in a small pool before making it to deep water.
- **An open water certification** course can cost \$600, while a new mask, socks and flipper can cost \$150.
- **Long Island divers say August and September** are prime months for beginners.



Scuba students Aashna Sharma, 12, and Delaney Donato of Massapequa get ready for their first open water dive at Prybil Beach in Glen Cove on June 3. Credit: J. Conrad Williams Jr.

Lipsky explains: "It's more of an adventure ... You're really not going to see the bottom when you first start. All of a sudden you come down an anchor line and this tremendous shipwreck appears in the abyss and you realize you're going back in time to an era when the ship had its destiny and came to the bottom of the ocean off Long Island."

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August and September are the prime months to scuba off the Island, several divers say — even if it's your first time. Unlike springtime, the waters are warm late summer. Colorful tropical fish hang out, increasingly more common here as they arrive on ocean currents growing warmer due to climate change.



Scuba diving students enter the open water for the first time at Prybil Beach in Glen Cove on June 3. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

FIRST STOP: THE POOL

For beginners, some of the best places to learn are dive shops and swimming schools, experts say. Most follow certification programs established by one of the major teaching associations, such as the Professional Association of Diving Instructors and National Association of Underwater Instructors.

These associations largely have the same standards, but scuba schools have different requests of students, with some requiring them to have their own masks and flippers, for example, and others finding it easier to help beginners get the right fit with rentals.



Sarah Appel of Shoreham and Samantha Rassner of Wading River learn the fundamentals of scuba diving at School of Fish Swim and Scuba in Rocky Point on June 5. Credit: Tom Lambui

At the School of Fish Swim and Scuba in Rocky Point (572 NY-25A; 631-744-7707, schooloffishswimandscuba.com), students take a remote, online course, then spend up to six hours in the school's pool learning how to adjust buoyancy and check tank oxygen levels, among other lessons, says general manager Dean McCormick. The last step is open-water diving, he says. Students are taken to Long Island Sound to make four dives, sometimes just by wading from a beach to swim underwater. The class is \$775.

"One of the things that surprises most people is all the noise from the bubbles," McCormick notes.

Several places offer a range of programs. "Discover" classes allow students to scuba in the pool after basic lessons, and while they aren't certification level courses, they're great for people who aren't sure if they'll like scuba diving. There are refresher courses and also advanced ones that teach "technical diving," which allows divers to go deeper than 130 feet.



Sarah Appel of Shoreham, Samantha Rassner of Wading River, and James Mundell of Glen Cove learn the fundamentals of scuba diving at School of Fish Swim and Scuba in Rocky Point on June 5. Credit: /Tom Lambui

Beginner classes also welcome those with quadriplegia, people with autism or learning disabilities, and war veterans missing limbs, says Dan Halloran, general manager at Scuba Network dive shop in Carle Place (204 Glen Cove Rd., 516-997-4864, scubadiversusa.com), where such students can be certified under different standards.

“For people with paraplegic injuries, diving is very therapeutic,” he says. “They’re able to be mobile again because they’re in a neutrally buoyant environment. Now they’ve got some semblance of sense of control back, which actually is one of the most wonderful things to see.”

Children ages 10-15 can get junior open water certification to dive up to 40 feet.

Medical questionnaires and doctors’ authorization to take scuba diving classes are common.

Fees can add up. An open water certification course can cost \$600, while a new mask, socks and flipper can cost \$150. Certified beginners who want to practice can save money and learn by joining dive clubs.

NEXT UP: MAKING IT TO THE SEA

The rewards of underwater exploration can be massive, divers say.

The old Ponquogue Bridge in Hampton Bays has been considered a top-notch destination, especially for beginners.

It's a drawbridge that fell into disrepair and was supposed to be dismantled, but Southampton Town changed course after a campaign by the Long Island Divers Association. The base and fallen bridge pilings have become a rich marine habitat. Sea horses, anemones, shellfish, grouper, yellow butterfly fish and more shelter there. Aquariums from around the country go there to collect the tropical specimens, saving them from a winter's death.



Scuba in action in Long Island waters by the Eco-Photo Explorers. Credit: Christopher Weaver and Michael Salvarezza

Much of the Atlantic Ocean resembles a desert, divers say, but it's dotted by vibrant habitats, some accessible just by swimming from the beach and others requiring a boat trip.

Rail cars, old Tappan Zee Bridge steel and barges make up artificial reefs that encircle the Island and have been popular destinations (divers target the Rockaways, Fire Island, Shinnecock Inlet, Smithtown, Matinecock, Mattituck [and more](#)). They're home to sea bass, coral, barnacles and sponges.

History buffs can explore sunken ships from various eras, divers say. They include the World War I USS San Diego, which sank off the coast in 1918, and the rum runner Lizzie D (1922).

It's like an "amusement park" to Chris Weaver, co-owner of Setauket-based Eco-Photo Explorers, which specializes in underwater photography.

One favorite is the HMS Culloden, a British ship that ran aground off Montauk during the Revolutionary War. It's barely recognizable as a ship because after more than two centuries, time and storms have battered the wreckage and stretched the debris field.

Still, some cannons and timber, all crusted with marine life, are accessible to beginners and can even be seen on the beach at low tide.

"Each ship has a different story," Weaver says. "You're touching that wreck, you're touching history."



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