

A New Diver Day With VSAG*by Lloyd Borrett,* *www.borrett.id.au*

Wow, I'm really, really looking forward to this. My first ever dive with VSAG!

Nobody here yet. Oh well, they said be at the bottom car park for nine, so here I am at eight thirty ready to go. Perhaps I would have had time to stop at the cafe for breakfast after all. And perhaps not. I think I'm too excited to eat, thinking about all the things I could see out there, in the open blue sea. Well, green sea. Well, dark grey, really.

Never mind, I'm sure it'll be fine once we get going. Whenever that is. Some time today, I hope.

Here's John Lawler and his boat! Yippee! What do I do to help get the boat ready? Undo the straps, take the flag off of the prop and stow all of the bits. I'll do all those things, then, shall I, while you watch and make sure I'm doing them properly?

Oh here is Mick Jeacle with his boat, and Greg Richards is with him. Legends one and all. There, we can go any time now. We have to wait for Mick to finish his breakfast. Obviously he did stop at the café on the way down. Well if Mick needs his breakfast, I can't argue with a man of his eminence.

Finished, sir? Let me take the wrapper and put it in a bin for you. Now can we go? We can! We can go diving!

What now? Get my kit aboard, not forgetting my weight belt.

What now? Shut up and wait for everyone else to arrive. Did I tell you this will be my first dive with VSAG? I'm so excited I can hardly speak! Just think of the things we're going to see today! The fish and the soft coral and the...

I'm sorry, I beg your pardon? Go and fetch the launch ticket? Where do I get that from? The machine over there. OK.

Here comes the rest of the team. Great people, all of them. Oh my word! That's Alan Storen! He's a legend, he is! The greatest diver of them all! He's done everything! He's been everywhere.

None of you has even got your kit aboard yet. Don't we need to get a move on? Err, aren't we going to get the rest of your gear aboard so we can get away? I'll give you a hand, if you like. If you all just point to where your gear is, I'll go to your cars and carry it back to the boat and make sure it's neatly stowed away, ship-shape!

I'll just help you launch the boat. My this ramp is slippery! No, it's all right, I can get up by myself. My, that was unsettling, but I don't think I've broken anything!

What do you want me to do now? Stand in the water and unhook the boat when you're ready. No problem I'll stand here and do that for you. Wheee, but this is odd! I'm up to my waist in cold seawater, and I can't feel a thing.

Oooh, the engine's running! We're almost away. I can get in now! I'm in and we're off!

Wow, this is bumpier than I expected. And that sounded like a big bang to me, was it OK? This seems like a very fast boat. It isn't that fast, but it doesn't do too badly once it's on the plane? What's that? Oh, I see, most of the hull comes out of the water, leaving just the bit at the back supported, so the prop has less water to push out of the way. I'll pretend I understood that for the moment and find out more later.

Are we on the plane now, then? Too many divers and too much kit. Ah, well. Why are we stopping? Why are you taking the top off the engine?

It's running again and we're off again! Where are we going? Out to the heads. Right. I think I could have worked that out for myself, actually. What I really meant was, where specifically? To a nice reef, just off Queenscliff. OK, great. What will we see there?

I said, what will we see there? Yes, it is a bit hard to chat with the engine noise, isn't it?

Here we are, here we are! I'm in first? I'm diving with the master, Alan? Get out-ta town! My first ever dive with VSAG and I get to dive with Alan!

Time to get kitted up. There isn't a lot of room in one of these small boat thingies, is there? If I watch Alan, though, I can pick up some tips. Weight belt first, then hood, then the left glove, then the BC and tank, then fins, then the right glove. Ready when you are, sir.

Oops! Buddy check. I was so excited, I forgot. I hope Alan doesn't think I'm a complete idiot.

Oh, is this a drift dive? No. Okay, so what's the buoy and line for? Safety line. Oh, sorry. What's the pick on the end of the line for? Isn't it deep enough down there?

Oh, we roll in off the side of the boat. I've never done that before. This is so exciting. I'm in the sea! Why is Mick glaring at me? I don't think I did too much damage to the side of the boat as I rolled in.

Wow, look at the bottom. It's magic. Soft coral everywhere. This is brilliant!

Oh, oh! What's wrong? Why is Alan pointing at that rock? Why is he tapping the side of his head? I don't know what you mean, but if I nod and look impressed, I can ask him later.

There's a fish! A big, greyish pointy fish. I'm going to have to get a fish book.

Where's Alan? He was here just a moment ago. Oh no, I've lost my buddy. Where are you? Oh no! Oh no!

Aaaaah! What the hell was that? Something tapped me on the shoulder. I daren't turn around. I daren't not turn around.

It was Alan! What do you want me to do? Come over there and get really close to the seabed and put my hand under that rock and... ouch! That really hurts! Get the damn thing off me! No, I mean it, I think I'm going to lose my thumb.

That wasn't nice, you did that on purpose. All right, it was quite funny really — well, it will be when I do it to the first new diver I take diving with VSAG.

Is it over already? Oh no! I've still got some air left. Please can we stay down just a few more minutes? Just five minutes? Just two? Just one more? Oh, pleeeeeease?

What was that? I take my BC off and pass it up. Yeah, mine is a 15 litre

steel cylinder. Heavy aren't they? Oh dear, did I mention I've got 16 kilograms of lead in my weight harness. I think I can fin hard enough to keep my head above water. Harness off, that's better. It's a bit awkward getting out of the water and into one of these small boats isn't it?

Great, brilliant, fabulous! That was absolutely brilliant!

What do we do now? Wait for everyone to finish their dive, then we're heading to Pope's Eye for lunch. Have I mentioned my thumb is throbbing?

Err, Alan, why were you pointing at that rock? I mean, I know if I had a bit more experience I'd understand, but I'm just trying to learn. You once got a big crayfish from under it. A very big cray. There was nothing there today, but twenty years ago there was a great big cray under it. You've never seen another cray anywhere near it ever again, but the one you got was absolutely huge.

So, let me make sure I've got this entirely clear, what you were doing was pointing at a bare rock, with nothing except bare rock to see, except in your memory?

Off to Pope's Eye for lunch we go.

No, I've never been here before. Pongs a bit doesn't it? Yes, those seals are amazing, but the birds are very noisy.

Err, hang on a minute. Why is everyone calling Mick "Big Lloyd"? Lloyd Bridges, Sea Hunt. C#@*. Oh! I get it! But my name is Lloyd and I'm just as big as he is. This is going to be confusing.

Okay, so Alan has bought another cylinder for me to use on my second dive. Many thanks. Where's your second cylinder? Don't worry, you didn't use enough air to need a second cylinder? Wow. I mean, I used almost a full 15 litre cylinder and yours was way smaller than mine to start with. I hope one day I'm as good a diver as you are.

Where are we going this afternoon? A scallop drift dive off of Rosebud. That will be great! I've never dived for scallops before. No worries. Greg is going to show me what to do. And I get to use Alan's catch bag.

This is even better than this morning! It isn't deep and the sun is shining.

Acres of sandy bottom. That's an octopus! Or a squid. I wonder what the difference is. And another of those pointy fish, but this one is brownish-green, not grey, so I'm really going to have to get a fish book.

Where are the scallops? I've only seen a few small undersize ones.

Back on the boat. My catch bag is empty. Oh so the scallops were off to the right were they Greg. But I was on your left. You got plenty of nice large ones did you?

Would I like to go over to that shipping marker and go snorkelling with the seals. You bet!

Wow that current is really strong. Right, I can hang onto this bit of pylon. Oh look at that small seal just underneath me. Aren't they just so cute? That big female seal seems to be worried about something. Now where did she go? Where did that big bull seal go? I'm not so sure about ones that size. Aren't they potentially aggressive?

Back in the boat again and heading into shore. Nah, pal, I'm standing here ready to catch the boat while some other daft beggar fetches the trailer down to the water. I might be keen, but I'm not a slow learner. And I can't possibly winch the boat onto the trailer on account of having a severely damaged thumb.

I've heard legendary stories about a dive day being incomplete without a quiet session in an appropriate establishment nearby. Not today. Another time.

Boat owner paid, it's time to pack up and drive home. Try not to run anyone over as I leave. So, I'm a VSAG diver now.