

What a Dive



[1099PROFILE]

STORIES OF BOSS-FREE PEOPLE

You could call Dave Aunkst a jack-of-all-trades. He does a little welding, a little cutting, some construction, a bit of inspection. But there's a catch: He does it all underwater. Aunkst is a freelance commercial diver. "On any given day, I could be asked to do so many different things that I really can't specialize in any one," he says.

Aunkst's specialty, of course, is working underwater. "Conditions can range from horrible to terrible," laughs the 30-year-old Floridian. "It's so dark down there that I consider it a good day when I can put my hand against my faceplate and actually see it."

Scuba divers strap on mask, tank, and fins, and swim near the surface. Aunkst wears a helmet and breathes through an air hose connected to a compressor on the surface. And he dives deep: He generally plies his trade at depths of 30 to 50 feet, walking along the bottom in boots, struggling against the current and the uneven terrain. In this world, there are no colorful fish, no beautiful reefs, no crystal-clear water.

A job could be anything from pulling up the old pilings of a condemned bridge to laying pieces of underwater pipeline end to end, bolting the flanges together as he goes. In the five years he's been diving, Aunkst has worked on a variety of projects. On one gig, he might be cutting holes in the ice to get into the water so that he can inspect pipeline. On the next, he's breathing an arcane mixture of helium gas to reach depths where the water pressure turns air into a mind-numbing narcotic. And on the gig after that, he's using an underwater torch to carve derelict ships into movable pieces.

A project might take a few hours or a few months, be down the road from his home in Jacksonville or on the other side of the world. For Aunkst, there is no such thing as a typical job.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DAVE AUNKST

by Jerry Shine

20 Questions

"I never assume anything when someone calls with a job," Aunkst says. "There are just too many variables."

To get a handle on each new project, Aunkst keeps a series of questions ready and goes through them with all potential clients. The list is a long one. Here's a sampling: Where is the job? How long will it take? Will he be able to come home at night or on weekends, or will he be away for the duration? Does the job pay by the hour or by the day? If by the hour, is it time-and-a-half after 8 p.m. or only after he's worked 40 hours in a week? If by the day, how many hours a week will he be expected to work? Will he be bunking in a hotel room alone or with someone else? How much is the per diem, and will he get it up front or as part of his paycheck?

"We go through the details one by one, and then I'm in a position to say yes or no, or to try to negotiate a better deal," says Aunkst.

One factor he never discusses with a potential client is how badly he needs the work. "I try to keep at least three months' income in the bank," he says. "But if I'm down to my last \$500 and the mortgage is coming due, well, I might take a job I would otherwise have turned down."

IP STATS

Field:

Commercial diving

Specialty:

I like nuts-and-bolts projects, like assembling structures. They're technically more challenging than, say, a dredging job.

Hours per week:

About 70

Main current client:

Thomas Contracting, Jacksonville

Rates:

Usually \$200 per day

Yearly earnings:

\$45,000 to \$50,000

Best way to get clients:

Word of mouth

Worst wage-slave job(s) ever held:

I was fresh out of high school, working as a maintenance man in a factory, scraping rust and wiping up oil.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DAVE AUNKST

Getting By with a Little Help from Two Strangers

Once he's at a site, Aunkst is teamed up with two other divers who may or may not be freelancers. (Some companies employ in-house divers and just bring in independent professionals as needed.) When he goes in the water, the other divers stay on the surface: one tending his air hose, making sure there isn't too much or too little slack in it, and the other monitoring the radio, maintaining communication with Aunkst throughout the dive.

"I usually stay down three to four hours," he says, "although if the water is cold and I start losing dexterity in my hands, I'll come up a little sooner." When he surfaces, the team members rotate jobs, and the second diver goes in. Three to four hours later, the third diver takes a turn.

It may seem a simple system, but it's actually a complex relationship in which three people who don't necessarily know one another are responsible for one another's safety. If the compressor breaks down while Aunkst is underwater, the person tending hose better be paying attention and know how to work the emergency air system. If Aunkst's depth or bottom time begin to exceed prescribed limits, the person on the radio better have been keeping track. A rapid decrease in air pressure can leave a diver with a potentially crippling, even fatal, case of the bends.

"We're paid for a lot more than just the work we do underwater," says Aunkst.

On the Road Again . . . and Again

For considerable chunks of time each year, Aunkst is on a job away from home. Had he chosen a different path, though, he might have been away even more. He quit his job as a production supervisor with a company in New Jersey to pursue his passion for scuba diving. He enrolled in a commercial-diving school, graduated, and then faced a decision: Did he want to work as an offshore or an inland diver? Offshore divers descend

to extreme depths, sometimes in excess of 1,000 feet, and live and work in sea-floor habitats for weeks at a time. Inland divers work shallower lakes, rivers, and bays.

“The money is offshore,” says Aunkst, “but I tried it and didn’t care for the lifestyle — living on a boat or an oil rig 15 to 20 days at a stretch. Inland is less money, but you feel more like a human being. Even when you’re on a job, you can still go out at night and have a beer or get some dinner.”

Still, the amount of time he’s away — he once spent six months in Puerto Rico — can wreak havoc on his one-man business. How does he handle incoming checks, work offers, and bills that have to be paid? “That’s where ol’ mom comes in,”

Aunkst laughs. “All my checks go straight to her house, and she takes care of my monthly bills — mortgage, insurance, electricity.” Potential clients reach him through his 1-800 beeper number or via email.

Too little work also can generate problems. “The longest I’ve ever been out of work is five months,” says Aunkst. “I actually

took three of those off on purpose after a long job in Africa, but when three unintentionally stretched to five, things started getting tight.”

The cornerstone of hiring in the inland-diving business is word of mouth. Contractors in need of another diver typically ask the divers already working for them for recommendations. “That’s one of the keys to staying busy,” says Aunkst. “After five years in the business, I’ve met a lot of people, and I make a real effort to stay in touch with them. Inevitably, somebody gives your name to somebody else.”

Aunkst also has a core of companies with which he likes to work, and he calls each of them, one right after the other, when he needs to. Just recently, he set up commercialdivers.net, a Web site for commercial divers. Divers pay him a yearly fee to post their résumés on the site, and contractors pay for unlimited access. Aunkst is not making a lot of money from the site, but he has landed a few jobs from contractors who didn’t even realize the site was his.

“I guess it’s always feast or famine,” he says, “but I love the work. There are certainly times when I get fed up with it — I mean, getting into a wet wet suit on a cold morning is the worst — but I can’t imagine finding anything that I love doing more than this.” **1099**

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF INDUSTRIAL DIVERS, MELBOURNE



Q: What was the worst project you ever worked on, and why?

A: Haiti. Do not ever go there. The job sounded good over the phone but when I got there, the equipment was terrible, the living conditions were appalling, and there was constant infighting between the two contractors who hired me. And to top it off, I ended up getting screwed out of \$900. That was three weeks in hell.

Q: What was the best project you ever worked on, and why?

A: Refurbishing the Living Seas aquarium at Epcot in Walt Disney World. We had 200 feet of visibility, warm water, and fish all around. I couldn’t believe they were actually paying me for it. The job lasted two months.

Q: What do you say when people ask about your job?

A: I tell them I do underwater construction — welding, burning, putting things together, blowing them apart.

Q: What’s the best thing about being an IP?

A: The ability to choose your own lifestyle: when you want to work and who you want to work for. You’ve got the freedom.

Q: What’s the worst thing about being an IP?

A: Not knowing when the next paycheck is coming or how much it’s going to be for.

Q: Do you have any advice for other IPs?

A: Time is your most precious commodity. My neighbor has a big house and a driveway full of trucks, but if he misses two weeks’ work, he’s in bankruptcy court. I’d rather be able to take a few months off without worrying about it.

Q: What is your guiding philosophy?

A: I just try to do an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.

Q: If you could be anything other than what you are now, what would it be?

A: Rich.

