

# Midlife & Beyond...



## And Still Going Strong — Baby Boomer Divers

### The baby boomer

generation is defined as that segment of the population born between 1946 and 1964 (myself included), the children of parents starting families in the post-WWII era. We've been saddled with many labels over the intervening decades: hippies, yuppies, the "me" generation, etc. But who are we, really? And what is the significance of being a baby boomer and a scuba diver?

### A Diverse Group

With an age span of 18 years between the youngest — now turning 43 — and the oldest, 61, we are an extremely diverse population cohort. The leading edge qualifies for Social Security next year and many have already retired or will within the next couple of years. They include such notables as Cher, "The Donald," *National Geographic* photographer David Doubilet and both our current and immediate past presidents.

By Linda Lee Walden

LYNN LAYMON PHOTO

Boomers tend to seek active vacations and have a growing interest in making physical activity an everyday part of their lives.



BARRY GUIMBELLOT PHOTO

The youngest boomers are still forging careers, raising teenagers and putting older kids through college while planning for a secure retirement. Sandra Bullock, Russell Crowe and Barack

Obama are well-known 40-somethings.

Despite their age range and diversity, certain characteristics distinguish America's baby boomers from their parents' generation, as well as the ones that follow.

For one thing, there are almost 80 million of us in the United States — a huge population bulge caused by the deferral of marriages and births until after WWII.

Comprising more than 26 percent of the population, boomers are represented in 48 percent of American households. Every seven seconds a boomer turns 50 and every 11 seconds one of us reaches the big 6-0.

Suffice it to say that there are enough baby boomers out there to have a major effect on the national economy and lifestyle, as well as the scuba diving industry. In 2004 they accounted for 40 percent of consumer demand and 48 percent of discretionary purchases. Today this cohort is responsible for 80 percent of luxury travel.

According to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), boomers seek active vacations and have a growing interest in healthy lifestyles and making physical activity an everyday part of their lives.

Sixty is the new 50 and 50 is the new 40. Baby boomers think of 50 as “early middle age,” and “old” is 70 plus. Life expectancy has increased to 77 for men and 84 for women, allowing boomers plenty of time for new experiences — including scuba diving.

## Baby Boomers and Scuba

Some of you, especially those who were already diving in the 1980s and '90s, may recall the tremendous growth in the scuba industry during those decades. This expansion was, to a large extent, fueled by baby boomers becoming certified to dive and then pursuing that newfound hobby.

While no industrywide statistics are available that track whether those divers are still active, indications are that the boomer generation still exerts a sizable influence on the scuba community. According to the *Dive Training* readership survey, the average age of newly certified divers continues to rise.

The 2006 survey indicated that after certification boomer divers tend to become more active than younger divers. They are also more likely to make the

long-term commitment to scuba indicated by the purchase of a regulator and buoyancy compensator.

Industry figures suggest that a significant percentage of active scuba instructors belong to the baby boomer generation.

Newly certified boomer divers are searching for personal fulfillment rather than seeking thrills. Many are starting to check items off their “must-do” list — those things that they’ve always dreamed of doing but had not found the time or financial resources to accomplish. Now with children grown and disposable income increasing, older boomers are revitalizing those dreams.

For some, including Denis Finnegan of Portland, Connecticut, this includes scuba diving. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, but other considerations always came first. Now I have the time and money and I’m loving diving near home as well as taking trips to the Caribbean.”

The scuba industry has taken note of the surge of boomer divers and works hard to hold their interest. Significant advances in equipment technology and training techniques in the past 25 years have changed the perception of scuba from a macho sport to a pastime that practically anyone can enjoy.

Equipment is easier to use, more reliable and safer and gear designed for women has become widely available. Certification courses now use the carrot rather than the stick approach. Dive travel is a staple of virtually every scuba center. Resort dive operations provide more and more services to guests and live-aboard dive boats have evolved from bare-bones to luxury yachts.

As a result, boomers have responded by upgrading scuba from Dad’s domain to a family affair. The percentage of female divers continues to rise and for the first time it is common to see parents connecting with their children and grandchildren as dive buddies.

The family aspect of scuba diving carries with it not only the advantages of readily available dive buddies and quality recreational time, but also the responsibility to educate future generations about environmental issues affecting the survival of the planet’s reefs and fisheries.

For some individuals, aging has had little effect on diving style. But could we be paying a price for not acknowledging potential changes in our diving fitness? The answer depends partly on whether an individual has experienced changes in health status since his last medical evaluation for fitness to dive.



BARRY GUIMBELLOT PHOTO

Boomers who fell in love with scuba in the 1980s or '90s when dive travel was first becoming popular can't help but notice the gradual deterioration of reefs and fish populations at some of the most frequented dive destinations. The generations of divers following the boomers have only what they see today on which to base their concept of a thriving aquatic ecosystem.

It is the responsibility of experienced boomer divers to educate younger divers about this sliding baseline by sharing our knowledge of what healthy underwater habitats looked like 20 years ago, before it is too late to save the reefs. We can also set an example by being ecologically aware divers and by supporting conservation initiatives.

## Issues Affecting Boomer Divers

One pervasive characteristic of the baby boomer generation is that we try to deny the aging process. If we can't defeat it with surgery, we work to delay it with diets and prescription medications.

Not that this attitude is necessarily bad; our generation as a whole is health-

ier and more active later in life than our parents' was. However, although we may be mentally as sharp as we were in our 20s (and we'd like to think we're a whole lot smarter), physically our bodies may not allow us to perform at the same level we could two decades ago.

What does this mean for baby boomer divers? For some individuals, aging has had little effect on diving style. In an informal and unscientific survey conducted over the course of several dive trips, the majority of boomers interviewed who had been diving for several years denied making any changes in their diving routine as they get older. They still do the same number of dives per day, stay down as long or longer and continue to seek new challenges.

Boomers are, apparently, still going strong when it comes to diving. But could we be paying a price for not acknowledging potential changes in our diving fitness? The answer depends partly on whether an individual has experienced changes in health status since his last medical evaluation for fitness to dive.

Students enrolling in the Open Water course and subsequent continuing edu-

cation scuba courses that involve time in the water are required to complete a medical questionnaire. If the answer to any question on that form is yes, the student must obtain approval from a physician before beginning water work.

Even if the answer to all medical questions is negative, however, most scuba training agencies require students 40 and older to secure prior approval from a doctor knowledgeable in diving (hyperbaric) medicine. These medical forms are good for only one year, so if you haven't enrolled in a continuing scuba course recently, chances are your medical evaluation is out of date.

To judge whether potential health issues are really a significant concern for baby boomer divers, let's look at a few statistics for the general population of the United States:

According to the American Heart Association's Statistical Fact Sheet, 2007 Update [2004 statistics], 39 percent of the population ages 40-59 (in 2004) have some form of cardiovascular disease (CVD), including coronary heart disease (CHD), high blood pressure and stroke. CHD is America's No. 1 killer

and stroke is No. 3. Thirty-five percent of the boomer age cohort is estimated to have high blood pressure.

Primary risk factors for CVD show disturbingly high percentages in the boomer age group. Twenty-three percent of men and 19 percent of women have cholesterol levels in the high-risk range (over 240), and more than 50 percent are over 200 (borderline high). More than one-quarter of boomers smoke. Defined by Body Mass Index (BMI), about two-thirds of us are overweight (BMI greater than 25) and one-third is categorized as obese (BMI greater than 30).

The links between these conditions and scuba are revealed in the annual Divers Alert Network (DAN) Report on Decompression Illness, Diving Fatalities and Project Dive Exploration. According to a summary of the 2006 report (2004 statistics), of the 88 fatalities involving U.S. and Canadian divers, heart disease was listed as the “initial triggering event” in 9 percent of the autopsy reports received. BMI data for 49 fatalities said, “74 percent were overweight or obese. Forty-five percent were obese or morbidly obese, representing a higher proportion than in national surveys.”

The issue of excess weight is particularly disturbing as it can lead to decreased aerobic fitness, strength and flexibility and added stress on joints. It is a contributing factor to diabetes, which produces further health problems. (For more information on diabetes and diving see, “Yes, No or Maybe?: The Latest Medical Information on Diabetes and Diving,” *Dive Training*, February 2007.)

A related concern stems from the increasing numbers and combinations of prescription and over-the-counter medications that baby boomers take to combat or prevent these and other conditions, such as osteoporosis, menopause and thyroid imbalance. According to Dr. Petar Denoble, senior research director for DAN, the sheer numbers of medications complicate evaluation.

While no specific adverse drug interactions have been cited in diving injury and fatality investigations, Denoble says that divers should introduce new medications or change dosages well before a

dive trip. Always make sure your physician is aware that you are a diver, especially when prescribing medications that affect the central nervous system.

Other, less critical, conditions also begin to affect boomer-age divers. Someone once told me that when I turned 42 I'd need reading glasses. She must have been clairvoyant because, sure enough, that year I started to notice that I could no longer clearly read the display on my underwater camera. Reluctantly, I eventually had to resign myself to ordering a mask with prescription reading lenses.

One issue that is particularly touchy for age-conscious baby boomers is thinning hair. This may seem to have little to do with scuba diving since once we emerge from the water we all have a bad hair day. However, the top of a diver's head is directly exposed to the sun whenever he or she is on the surface, unless a hood is worn. Not only sunburn but skin cancer is a concern for an unprotected scalp. This can easily be solved by wearing a nylon cap available from dive-wear manufacturers.

One common belief that has yet to be substantiated is that as we age our resistance to hypothermia decreases. Instead, increased susceptibility to cold is thought to be a result of declines in physical fitness and changes in body composition. For me, I've let go of the idea that it's wimpy to wear a 5 mm suit in tropical water. And after a few days of repetitive diving I'm likely to add a hooded nylon vest.

## Diving Fitness and Style

Lest the reader conclude that simply because baby boomers are getting older (whether we want to admit it or not), we should hang up our regulators and stick to golf, let me state that quitting scuba is not the answer. On the contrary, many baby boomers are just getting started as divers. And more and more of us now have the time and means to dive when, where and how we prefer.

There is no upper age limit to scuba diving; it can be enjoyed just as much at any stage of life. And it is one of the few physical pursuits that folks of all ages can

# Talking About My Generation

Ever wonder how generations get named and what those names mean? Demographers, or folks who study population characteristics, are the ones who create generation names based on significant events that occur over time — generally about a 20-year period, plus or minus. Naming generations is certainly no hard science, and many generations have overlapping dates and names. To follow are a few examples.

## 1920-1924

**The Lost Generation** was a term originally used to identify a group of American literary expatriates living in Paris. Also known as the **G.I. Generation**, which more generally describes the generation of young people who came of age in the United States during and shortly after World War I. Also referred to as **The Greatest Generation**, in honor of those who were affected by World War II.

## 1925-1945

**The Silent Generation** was the generation born between the two World Wars, who were too young to join the service when World War II started.

## 1946-1964

**The Baby Boom Generation.** For more than a decade after World War II there was a worldwide increase in the birthrate.

## 1965-1979

**Generation X, 13th Generation, or Baby Buster Generation.** Most of this generation of children tended to be influenced by video games and MTV.

## 1980-2000

**The Millennial Generation.** Also known as the **Boomerang Generation, Echo Boom Generation or Generation Why?**, they straddled the Cold War/Space Age and Internet eras.

## 2001-Present

**The New Silent Generation or Generation Z.** Also called the **Internet Generation**, they are strongly influenced by new technology including the rise of mass communication and the Internet.

Sources: Wikipedia and Ask.com



Scuba can be physically demanding; boomer divers should have regular checkups and maintain healthy levels of aerobic and muscular conditioning.

enjoy together, which is why it makes such a perfect family activity. The message is that we need to stay in shape to be able to dive safely and should consider altering our diving style to accommodate physical changes associated with aging.

Although scuba can be incredibly relaxing and require minimal energy, for safety sake, you do need a reserve of strength and stamina. Denoble says that because of the relative weightlessness and freedom of movement while underwater, you may not feel unfit in familiar diving situations under typical water conditions. But should a sudden current arise, surface conditions deteriorate or an equipment malfunction occur requiring increased exertion and causing elevated stress, lack of fitness can lead to unfortunate consequences.

Joints, muscles and back may not be as limber as they were when you were younger either. Scuba equipment is heavy and cumbersome out of the water and kicking with fins can result in cramping and next-day soreness. Plus,

according to DAN, previous nondiving skeletal injuries may increase ones' susceptibility to decompression illness.

So how do you know if you are physically fit for diving? Unfortunately, there is no specific level of strength or stamina that can be pronounced as the minimum necessary for safe diving. Adding to the dilemma, many divers are not aware of asymptomatic health problems. For instance, most scuba-related cardiac events actually occur with no or little warning during the first dive of the day and under calm conditions.

While enjoyable, scuba diving does put added stress on the body, even under the best conditions. Get checkups regularly and follow the physician's advice. It may be appropriate for your doctor to perform an exercise tolerance test to rule out heart problems.

Plenty of information is available about getting in shape and staying there. Most of it boils down to good eating habits and regular exercise. As far as diving is concerned, all types of physical fit-

ness are important: aerobic endurance, muscle strength and stamina, flexibility and body composition (lean mass vs. fat).

In her book "Diving Physiology in Plain English," Dr. Jolie Bookspan states that, "Without exercise intervention, muscular strength, speed and power all drop off sharply as years pass." However, she goes on to say that, "Regular exercise and stretching considerably slows, even reverses the loss in some cases ... equivalent to stopping or reversing years of aging."

Of course, the best exercises for diving are those that use the same muscle groups, such as scuba, snorkeling or swimming. But any moderately strenuous exercise will help as long as you engage in it regularly (three days a week for 30 minutes each is the current AHA-recommended minimum). As always, it's best to consult a doctor before beginning a new exercise program.

At some point, it's wise for all of us to examine our diving style and consider whether it's time to make changes.

One avid cave diver admitted reluctantly to me that he knew it was time to scale back his penetration diving activities. He said, “Every year those twin 100s [i.e., double gas cylinders] just keep getting heavier and heavier.”

Especially on multiple-day dive trips, it’s easy to become exhausted by the unaccustomed exercise. If you find yourself heading for bed every evening

right after dinner, or just not getting excited about that next dive, it may be worth a look at your diving style.

Fewer dives per day, shorter bottom times, shallower profiles, longer safety stops, taking a day off in the middle of the week and opting for less challenging sites are some of the ways to exchange quantity for quality. While the evidence is not conclusive on the effects

of age on tolerance for decompression illness, decreasing the amount of nitrogen accumulated through repetitive diving creates a wider safety margin.

One way to combat the fatigue brought on by increased nitrogen levels in the body is to use nitrox instead of plain air. Nitrox can allow divers to increase bottom times by replacing some of the nitrogen in air with oxygen; it takes longer at depth to absorb the same amount of nitrogen.


However, to be safer, if you don’t increase your bottom time when using nitrox (i.e., continue to use the air tables or computer algorithm), you will accumulate less nitrogen on a given dive. My husband and I use nitrox whenever available. But we don’t extend our bottom times; we take advantage of the safety margin and continue to plan and conduct the dives as if we were using pure air. From personal experience, we can attest to feeling much less tired at the end of a full day of diving as well as at the end of a dive trip.

Despite what seems like a lot of negatives to being a baby boomer diver, there are some positives. One is that we’ve already made our mark and know who we are and what we want. Accordingly, segments of the scuba industry have upgraded facilities and provided additional personal services, primarily to appeal to the boomer generation.

Many dive charter operations and live-aboards practically do it all for you. They will set up and tear down your gear, carry it to the entry point and buddy with you if asked. (For more information see, “Charter Boat Basics,” *Dive Training*, March 2007.)

Although self-reliance is important for safe diving, a little assistance when needed (pampering if you will) can help keep the fun in the scuba experience.

The baby boomer generation is so large and diverse that we have little in common except factors related to our age. We are the largest segment of active divers. If we take care of ourselves — monitor our diving fitness faithfully and make accommodations for physical changes — we’re likely to stay that way for years.

Happy diving baby boomers; you’ve earned it. 

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