



The Best Gear of 2008

At ScubaLab, our mission is to help you be an informed consumer of dive gear. We do that by conducting thorough and objective reviews of equipment and letting the results speak for themselves. In the past 12 months, in both ScubaLab Reviews and our First Look column, we've had the opportunity to evaluate almost 200 different gear items, from dazzling dive computers to high-end regs; travel BCs to dive knives; 7mm wetsuits to dive luggage—and

ScubaLab looks back on a busy year, and picks the gear that will stand the test of time. By Bill Kendig

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so much more. While almost all of it turned out to be pretty good stuff, there were some definite standouts. This being our last issue of 2008, we thought it the perfect time to go back through our reports and designate a few of our favorites. Here are our top picks, the most distinctive designs, and the best buys we discovered in 2008—along with a few favorite items from prior years that we think still define the best in user-friendly gear. For more info on any of this gear, be sure to refer to past issues for the full reviews, or go to tosclubadiving.com/gear.

REGULATORS

Our annual review of new regulators, incorporating ANSTI breathing machine scores and ergonomic evaluations by human test divers, is the most rigorous—and closely followed—evaluation ScubaLab performs. Over the years we've seen steady improvement in all classes, styles and price groups. Most can handle recreational diving demands with ease, but in our July 2008 review of 17 new regs, these models really stood out even under extreme torture.



OUR TOP PICK FOR '08

Sherwood Scuba SR1

The SR1 was this year's show-stopper. It's the first balanced piston first stage we've seen with a dry-sealed spring chamber. This innovative design provides the dry-sealed/reduced corrosion benefits of a diaphragm reg, with the performance/durability benefits of a piston reg. The second stage is lightweight and has a dual-purpose control knob that adjusts both breathing resistance and venturi effect. The reg delivers chart-topping breathing performance even at extremes, is bone dry and easy to use at depth. It looks good too, with a polished chrome over brass first stage and a velvety finish on the second stage to make it easier to hold onto. Pretty, with plenty of muscle. Price: **\$650**



MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

Mares Prestige 12

A simple design, a steadfast performer and easy on the wallet—that's the Prestige 12. The heart of this reg is its time-tested MR12 first stage, which made its bones long ago for rock-solid reliability but has been updated with a new Tri-Material valve for even better durability. The new plastic second stage is lightweight and eschews user adjustments; just put it in your mouth and breathe easy. Price: **\$375**



MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

Aqua Lung Mikron

The Mikron's balanced diaphragm first stage is not much bigger than a golf ball, the pneumatically balanced second stage measures just over 2 inches by 2 inches and they're strung together with an ultra light braided hose. The result is a compact reg that weighs a third less than most, but delivers excellent breathing performance. That's what we call a marvel of engineering. Price: **\$569**

PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

Atomic Aquatics T2

Introduced in the summer of 2005, the T2 raised the bar and redefined regulator performance on both the breathing machine and among our test divers. This all-titanium super-breather is still one of best high-performance regulators of all time. Price: **\$1,549**



DIVE COMPUTERS

Seen the new iPod? No? Don't worry, a new one is on the way. That's about how fast dive computers hit the market, too. Last year we reviewed a dozen new data crunchers. This year, believe it or not, 14 more showed up, capable of even more very cool computing moves. Here are our favorites from June's review.



OUR TOP PICK FOR '08

Uwatec Galileo Sol

If you like gadgets, you'll love this feature-rich computer. Never before have we seen a unit that can do so much data crunching, and yet lets you access it so easily. It will do virtually everything but call you a cab, and is so chock full of features it will make your head spin, from wireless air integration and multi-gas tracking to a heart rate monitor and the best digital compass feature around. All of this is presented on one large, easy-to-read, easy-to-navigate screen. No, you haven't died and gone to Geek Squad heaven, you've just gone diving with the ultimate new dive computer. Price: **\$1,980**



MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

Zeagle N2ition

While the N2ition is new to Zeagle, it has also been marketed under different names by Tusa and Dive Rite. We like this computer for its multi-gas capability, large color-coded bar graphs and low price. Its expansive screen and big, bold digits are easy to read, and three control buttons offer user-friendly navigation. If you're not totally tec but want the option of switching to a deco gas occasionally, then trust your N2ition. Price: **\$399**



MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

Oceanic DataMask

The DataMask is hands-down (and hands-free) the most innovative dive computer of 2008, this by virtue of its heads-up display that puts all critical data on a small screen inside the mask. Task-loaded divers with hands full of camera gear will appreciate being able to monitor their dive status simply by glancing down. No more fumbling with gauges? Now that's progress. Price: **\$1,495.95**

PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

Suunto D9

In the category of wristwatch-style dive computers, the D9 is king. It exudes precision engineering, with a titanium casing, stainless-steel trim ring and bold screen digits that present crisp, easy-to-read data displays. Plus it's got all the goodies, including a digital compass, wireless air integration and multi-gas capability, and now it's available with a rugged titanium band. Price: with titanium band, **\$1,925**; with rubber strap, **\$1,850**



WOMEN'S BCs

In the August issue, we assembled a team of experienced female divers to evaluate 2008's crop of BCs designed specifically for women. No pushovers for foo-foo colors, these women picked the following BCs as their top choices, and we're not about to argue with them.



OUR TOP PICK FOR '08

Scubapro Bella

Not just a scaled-down version of a men's BC, the Bella is cut for the female form. There's ample room in the chest and hip areas, and quick-release buckles and power inflators have been downsized to fit smaller hands. The wrap-around air cell comfortably hugs the body, and cushioned shoulders help distribute the weight of tank and weights. In the water and out, this jacket-style BC was a big winner. Proof positive: It was the first BC grabbed up when time came for some fun dives after the day's testing was done. Need we say more? Price: **\$617**; with Air2, **\$738**

TRAVEL-FRIENDLY BCs

With airline baggage fees on the rise, we went in search of simple, low-profile BCs that could pack easily and still offer the stability, buoyancy and features a diver needed for tropical dive travel. Of the new travel-friendly BCs reviewed in May's issue, these were our faves.



MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

Mares Aliikai MRS+

The back-buoyancy Aliikai MRS+ offers a slightly lower MSRP than many of the women's BCs we tested, but it's a full-featured, versatile model which works especially well for women who like their diving on the go. Its unique "Quick-Pak" system lets you fold it up to about half its normal size for packing. Plus it's plush, comfy and stable. Price: **\$600**



MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

Aqua Lung Pearl i3

Get a load of this i3 inflator system. Aqua Lung got rid of the corrugated inflator hose and replaced it with a lever mounted on the left side of the air cell. Lift up on the lever to inflate, push down to deflate. The BC is also loaded with female-friendly features, but the i3 is the shiny item on this bad girl. Price: **\$675**

PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

Scubapro Ladyhawk

The Ladyhawk has been a back-buoyancy favorite among female divers since its introduction back in 2001. This year Scubapro recut the shoulders a tad to help distribute the weight more evenly. Apparently it was a good tweak—the BC landed in either the first- or second-place spots on six out of seven test diver favorites lists. We rest our case. Price: **\$604**; with Air2, **\$725**



OUR TOP PICK FOR '08

Mares Pegasus

The low-profile Pegasus is so streamlined, so comfortable, and so free of chest clutter, you might think you're diving with no BC at all. But don't be fooled. This unassuming back-buoyancy travel BC actually has enough lift capacity (45 pounds) and ballast capacity (26 pounds) for temperate-water diving, which means you can use it on local dives as well as on vacation. It's loaded with cool features, including an ergo-designed power inflator, MRS+ mechanical-release weight system and a unique harness that includes parachute-style thigh straps (they're removable if they don't suit you). It all boils down to a lot of buoyancy control in a low-profile package. Price: **\$425**



MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

Cressi-sub Flex

At just over 4 pounds (size medium) this compact travel BC weighs 40 percent less than most other jacket-style models and folds into a compact carrying bag, but still provides outstanding buoyancy control. It doesn't have an integrated-weight system, but it does provide mesh sleeves inside the large cargo pockets and a pair of trim pouches near the tank for balancing out your ballast load. Price: **\$429.99**

PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

SeaQuest Balance

The Balance was introduced back in the 1990s and while it has been updated over the years, its basic design principle remains constant—a simple, back-buoyancy BC offering lots of lift and an uncluttered harness that maximizes comfort and stability at depth. It now comes with a Sure Lock weight-ditch system and a newly redesigned drop-down pocket, but it's still the Balance, and that's all right with us. Price: **\$570**



MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

Hollis ATS

The ATS (Advanced Travel System) is a new concept in tech BCs. Designed for hard-core divers who don't want to travel with a heavy backplate, everything on the ATS is scaled-down and streamlined yet still heavy-duty, with D-rings positioned for deco bottles, canister lights and other accessories. Price: **\$499.50**





FINS

While we didn't conduct a head-to-head review of new fins in 2008, each model we reviewed in the First Look column underwent a full battery of speed and maneuverability tests on the feet of the ScubaLab staff. Here are the models that impressed us.



OUR TOP PICK FOR '08

Aqua Lung Slingshot

You can own three pairs of regular fins—soft, medium and stiff—or you can own one pair of Slingshots. Offering a “three-gear” power band adjustment system, depending on what gear you shift into, you can choose from the subtle feedback of an all-rubber split-fin to the ankle-humming stiffness of a traditional paddle fin. We tested the Slingshot with underwater speedometers and found that in first and second gear it could generate speeds comparable to the fastest split fins. Adjusting the power bands (shifting gears) is easy, you can do it at depth, even wearing gloves. Price: **\$219**

MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

Yeah, we're double-dipping here, but design-wise, no fin came close to the innovation on display with the Slingshot. The entire construction concept is unique.



MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

Mares Raptor

The first split fin design from Mares, the Raptor blends natural rubber rails with a composite blade for a lightweight, smooth-flexing kick. Mares recently upgraded the fin with new, easier-to-use ABS+ cam buckles but didn't raise the price. Can't beat that. Price: **\$160**

PRIOR YEAR FAVORITES



Apollo Bio-Fin C-Series

The Bio-Fin has been tuned and tweaked over the years, but it's always impressed us. The all-rubber construction gives it a natural, flexy feel for a smooth, easy kick. It consistently outruns all comers with its high-thrust, low-stress performance. And how about those excellent spring straps? Price: **\$270**



Atomic Aquatics Smoke on the Water

With its basic black frame and smoky gray translucent blade, this open-heel split fin looks stealthy and performs like a dream. A new variable pitch spring strap makes donning and doffing easier than ever. Price: **\$249**



Mares Avanti Super-Channel full-foot

A sweet combination of rail thickness, blade length, foot pocket and maybe just a little magic makes this full-foot fin one of the best performing we've ever tested. It's comfortable, fast, maneuverable and priced just right. Price: **\$80**

MASKS

The mantra for modern masks is “less is more.” Today's best masks are lightweight, low-profile and low-volume, plus they have efficient buckle systems and lay flat for packing. This year we looked at 15 models, both frame and frameless, in all shapes and sizes. These were our top picks.



OUR TOP PICK FOR '08

Atomic Aquatics Frameless

The Atomic Frameless earns our respect partly due to view, partly due to fit, but mostly because of the 100 percent commitment to get it right. Regular tempered glass wasn't good enough for the Atomic design team, so they went for an Ultra-Clear lens for better visibility and less distortion. One size didn't fit enough faces, so they came out with a medium-fit version. Finally, they figured dropping such a fine mask in a gear bag unprotected wasn't such a smart move, so they designed a low-profile case to match the low-profile shape of a packed mask. We can't wait to see what they'll come up with next. Price: **\$99**



MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

Tilos Excel

Offering one of the best horizontal and vertical fields of view among the masks we encountered this year, the Excel is comfortable, seals well and comes with a jaw-dropping price tag. What's not to like? Price: **\$36.05**

PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

Scubapro Frameless

This classic still graces the faces of many hard-core divers. Its rectangular lenses and squared-off nose pocket give it a macho appeal befitting its 20 years of service. In spite of its age, it still provides a field of view comparable to newer designs, and an easy-adjust buckle system that's right up there with the best of them. Price: **\$115**



MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

Oceanic Pioneer

What makes the Pioneer unique is its lightweight metal frame and contoured buckle system that attaches to the skirt so the mask can fold flat for traveling. Also unique: it's available in a Limited Edition model with a specially numbered black metal frame and certificate of authenticity. The dual lenses are made of ultra clear glass and offer the widest field of view of all masks tested this year—a full 90 degrees. Price: **\$109.95**; Limited Edition, **\$129.95**



7mm WETSUITS

Nothing short-circuits a day of diving fun faster than chattering teeth. Luckily, manufacturers are making giant strides in temperate-water thermal protection, increasing flexibility and decreasing water intrusion of 7mm wetsuits. Here are a few of our favorites from our September 2008 review.



DIVE LUGGAGE SYSTEMS

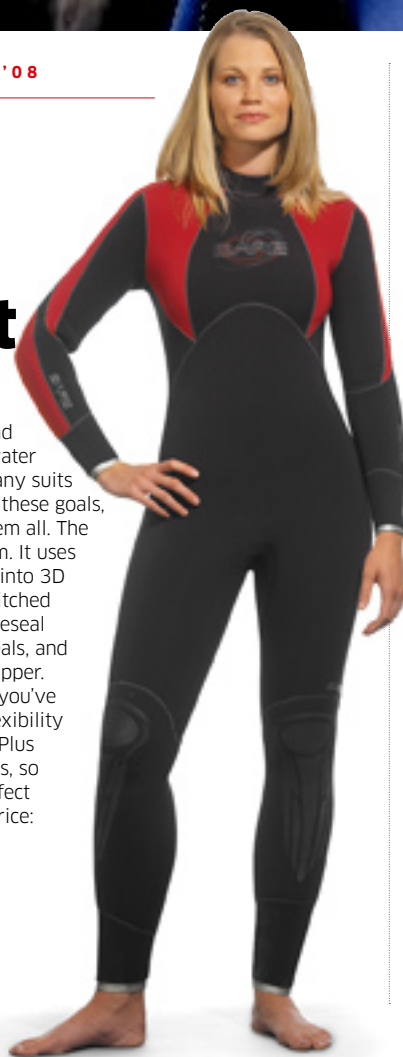
In the October issue we explored a new packing strategy to beat baggage fees and increase the chances for a successful dive vacation should your checked bags go astray. The key was using a system that divides the travel load between one carry-on and one checked bag. We looked at eight different setups. The following systems came out on top.



OUR TOP PICK FOR '08

Bare Elastek Full Wetsuit

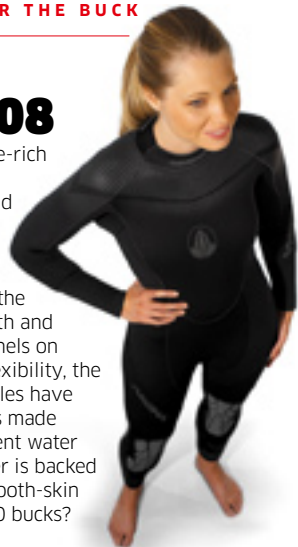
A good suit has to provide adequate thermal insulation yet still be flexible, and it has to be able to keep water seepage to a minimum. Many suits can achieve one or two of these goals, only a few can achieve them all. The Bare Elastek is one of them. It uses high-stretch neoprene cut into 3D panels, glued-and-blind-stitched seams, really efficient Glideseal smooth-skin and gasket seals, and a G-Lock water-blocking zipper. Put them all together and you've got a suit that's high on flexibility and that keeps water out. Plus it's available in lots of sizes, so chances of finding the perfect fit are pretty darn good. Price: **\$367.95**



MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

Akona AKMS508

Nobody does feature-rich suits at rock-bottom prices like Akona, and this 7mm fullsuit proves the point. Made with standard stretch neoprene in the torso area for warmth and Quantum Stretch panels on arms and legs for flexibility, the neck, wrists and ankles have generous-sized seals made of Glideskin to prevent water entry, plus the zipper is backed with self-sealing smooth-skin flaps. All this for 300 bucks? Nice. Price: **\$300**



MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

Mares Trilastic 8-6-5

Mares got creative on this one by using different neoprene thicknesses to maximize thermal insulation while avoiding that straitjacket feeling you get when wearing thick wetsuits. 8mm Tri-Core is used in the torso, more flexible 6mm neoprene is found in the arms and legs, and 5mm smooth Sapphire smooth-skin seals the neck, wrists and ankles. The combo is a winner, providing warmth where you need it and flexibility where you want it. Price: **\$400**



PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

Henderson H2

For years, Henderson's Hyperstretch Titanium (left) set the standard for comfortable 7mm suits. Now the baton has been passed to its successor, the H2 Titanium (right). The H2 is made of ultra soft extended memory foam rubber sandwiched between layers of Aquasilk (a Henderson exclusive) creating a durable, nonpilling material that stretches like the original Hyperstretch but is even more comfortable. The H2 also has a great sealing system and comes with lumbar padding. We expect big things from this comfy warmer. Price: **\$489.99**



OUR TOP PICK FOR '08



Pinnacle Aquatics Hybrid Carry-On w/ Kangaroo Daypack & Endeavor

We like simplicity, and this travel system is all that, plus it's versatile. The Endeavor's single cavernous compartment holds the bulkiest dive gear, while the Hybrid carry-on packs the most important stuff plus offers a padded laptop sleeve. The Kangaroo Daypack unzips and goes with you into the airline seat loaded with your in-flight essentials like an iPod, *Scuba Diving* magazine and munchies. Now this is the way to travel. Price: Hybrid Carry-On w/Kangaroo Daypack, **\$185**; Endeavor Roller Bag, **\$215**

MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK



You get a lot of packing space for not a lot of cash with this combo. They're easy bags to work with too. The Carry-On is simply a scaled-down version of the Roller Backpack. Both offer large main compartments with a unique lid pocket that can expand to fit a pair of fins. Price: Excursion Roller Carry-On Backpack, **\$120**; Excursion Roller Backpack, **\$148**

PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

Akona AKB176 & AKB188 <10 lbs. Bag

This travel system hasn't been around all that long so it may be a bit presumptuous to call it a prior year favorite. But for a luggage combo it comes pretty close to perfection. The Carry-On offers plenty of storage and a unique-access laptop sleeve. The <10lbs Bag's main compartment is roomy but cinches down with compression straps to keep it streamlined and stable. Price: AKB176 Roller Carry-On, **\$150**; AKB188 <10lbs Bag, **\$210**

MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

Scubapro Dive N' Roll

How do you carry three bags and a cup of coffee? By zipping them all together into one rolling unit. At the ticket counter unzip the top two bags and check the main hard-shelled case. The bags go with you into the plane, where the larger goes into the overhead and the smaller goes into your seat. At your destination they all zip together again for an easy roll to your hotel. Price: **\$350**



Mares Cruise Roller

Perfect for live-aboard diving, this big bag has five cavernous storage compartments, removable essentials pouch and choice of backpack straps or wide-wheelbase wheels for getting a full set of gear from point A to point B. But when you're not using it, the Cruise Roller folds into a space-saving package about the size of a briefcase. Price: **\$180**



DIVE KNIVES

You gotta love any sport that lets you carry a knife. While you may never need it to fight off a giant squid, you could find yourself entangled in a mass of fishing line, and that can be just as scary. In the November issue we collected six new slicers and put them to the test. We found these to be a cut above the rest.

OUR TOP PICK FOR '08

Riffe Silencer

You can't get more cutting surface than with a stiletto knife, which takes advantage of both sides of the blade. The Silencer has a smooth, sharpened edge on one side, and a serrated edge on the other, giving you a choice of cutting surfaces along with a serious point. Made of hardened 420 stainless-steel, this knife blade will saw through almost anything a diver might encounter, and proved to be the best all-around cutter in this year's review. Price: **\$90**



MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

XS Scuba Beta Titanium

The Beta Titanium is similar in size and shape to a traditional dive knife, it just does everything better. The titanium blade is lighter than stainless steel yet totally resists rust and you get both smooth and serrated cutting edges plus a line-cutting notch. Bonus: The locking sheath is excellent. Price: **\$110**



MOST DISTINCTIVE DESIGN

XS Scuba Fogcutter Delta

This two-in-one cutter works great as a traditional knife or as shears with its top-notch scissor action. Price: **\$80**



PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

Spyderco Atlantic & Pacific Salt

Using a special H-1 stainless-steel in their blades, these cutters can really hold an edge and are virtually rust-free. Available with smooth or serrated edges, we favor the folding versions—the Atlantic Salt and Pacific Salt—for their compact size and durability. Price: Atlantic Salt, **\$109.95**; Pacific Salt, **\$99.95**



FAVORITE DIVE ACCESSORIES

The basic gear gets you underwater, but it's what you do down there that requires a variety of gear we call accessories. Here are some destined for our gear bags.

PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

SpareAir

This is the original portable bailout bottle and still a great way to get a few extra breaths—and back to the surface—when disaster strikes. Price: **\$299**; Nitrox model, **\$320**



NEW THIS YEAR

Atomic Aquatics SV1/SV2 Snorkels

The design of the SV1 and SV2 is a study in physics and engineering. Directly inside the mouthpiece is a one-way scupper valve that evacuates water, eliminating the "gurgling" effect you often get on the inhale. Just below this is a second purge valve that keeps ambient water at bay. The SV1 has a flared top while the SV2 has a semi-dry top that keeps splashed water from entering the breathing tube. And you thought snorkels were simple. Price: SV1, **\$55**; SV2, **\$65**



NEW THIS YEAR

Aqua Lung Airsource 3 AAS

Aqua Lung has taken alternate inflator reg design and ratcheted it up a few notches. As a safe second, this pneumatically balanced backup reg breathes smoother than many primary regs. As a power inflator, it delivers total ascent control. Bonus: Aqua Lung replaced the Airsource 3's LP hose's quick-disconnect fitting with a screw-down fitting similar to the one used on a primary reg's second stage. This permanent connection allows for better airflow, plus keeps sand, salt and corrosive moisture from getting into the second stage mechanism. Very cool. Price: **\$230**; if purchased on a new Aqua Lung or SeaQuest BC, **\$150**

NEW THIS YEAR

Dive Rite LED 500 Corded Flashlight

As a flashlight the LED 500 can't be beat. It's virtually indestructible, user-friendly and pumps out a lot of light. It will burn for 12 hours on just eight AA batteries. Its Delrin body and aluminum twist-on light head are depth-rated to 1,000 feet. The optional corded adapter transforms the hand-held LED 500 into a canister light. Price: Flashlight only, **\$450**; with corded adapter, **\$599**



NEW THIS YEAR

DUI Polartec Powerstretch Jumpsuit

In drysuit diving, the suit keeps you dry, but the undergarments keep you warm. This new Polartec undergarment offers just-right insulation, plus it's high-stretch, so you can get a snug fit. Price: stock sizes, **\$538**; made to order, **\$738**



PRIOR YEAR FAVORITE

DAN Surface Signal Kit

This kit offers multiple attention-getting options, including a 6-foot safety tube, a Wind Storm whistle audible to about a half-mile, a signal mirror and a chemical light stick. The tube can be clipped to a lower D-ring leaving hands free to flash the mirror and blast the whistle. We don't leave the dock without it. Price: **\$75** for DAN members; **\$86.25** for nonmembers

