

Managing Risks in Remote Dive Expeditions: Dirty Dozen's Approach and Lessons Learned

At Dirty Dozen Expeditions, we pride ourselves on our core values and our manifesto which are centred around doing the right thing, even when it's difficult. While we understand that not every customer may share our values or be looking for the same type of experience, we remain committed to upholding our principles in all aspects of our remote operations while also maintaining a safe and respectful environment for our employees and dive team during our expeditions.

The Dirty Dozen operations are planned and executed with safety as a core value, ensuring that the tension between financial and resource limitations and the safety of the individual and the organisation is actively managed. We apply the four key principles of risk management to achieve this:

- treat the risk by keeping expedition team sizes small, and preparing teams and operations accordingly;
- transfer the risk via 'full-trip refund' insurance cover, liability waivers, and on-site arrival and continual safety briefings;
- tolerate the risk at an acceptable level, which includes having pre-dive Splash checklist and emergency protocols in place as we are operating in an inherently hazardous environment;
- terminate the risk, when we as an organisation, or as individuals on the dive, perceive the level of risk to be unacceptable and stop diving. Unacceptable isn't just personal safety but also organisational and operational risk factors.

There are always several considerations involved in decision-making and risk management on remote diving expeditions. Along with a medical assessment, the implications of a decision can impact other participants and boat crew and therefore need to be considered. In a remote location, the time to the nearest emergency facility is a key factor and in a place like the Galápagos Islands, DCI requiring treatment practically, means ending the expedition for everyone. This is why the DCI risk is mitigated differently from diving close to emergency facilities. The boat captain, local guides, and Dirty Dozen assess the situation together and decide accordingly. The expedition leader makes the final call.

During a recent expedition to Galápagos Islands, we adhered to the expedition manifesto. There was no designated standby or in-water safety diver, but this was covered in the on-site briefing. Guides were present and their role was to find the best dive spots, typically leading the dive rather than following. Participants had their experience reviewed before the trip and were expected to dive without personal supervision underwater. However, a surface safety supervisor was present to provide safety oversight, including the execution of the Splash checklist. The consistent use of the Splash checklist helped to identify numerous safety-critical errors, such as rebreather tanks being closed before entering the water despite user pre-dive checks being completed, as had been the case on previous expeditions.

Checklists are just one part of the wider human factors in diving philosophy that Dirty Dozen Expeditions embraces, we also include The Human Diver's online education programme for all team members, paying for it if they complete it before embarkation. Not all of our guests avail themselves of this offer as we cannot force them to undertake it. However, it adds important knowledge to both the expedition team and the organisers to manage risks in an expedition setting.

We understand that there were instances where communication was not handled as well as it could have been between the guests in question and our team, and we are committed to improving our communication processes to ensure that all guests receive clear and timely information when needed.

We all make mistakes, irrespective of experience and knowledge, as such, the only way to develop and improve is to reflect, share and learn from previous operations.

Lessons Identified:

- There can be a difference between expectations of a managed leisure trip and a remote location expedition - this gap needs to be identified early to manage those expectations.
- Communications between the organisation, the leadership team, and the expedition team need to be much clearer and in a timely manner when things change to reduce ambiguity and stress.
- The difference between the decision-making processes for remote dive operations and local liveboards has been validated and needs to be explicit in expedition briefings.
- The role of Expedition Leader and ultimate decision-maker within an expedition needs to be explicit and not implied.
- It is important for individuals to take personal responsibility for their safety by thoroughly reviewing and understanding the pre-departure information provided by the organisation. However, we recognize that the information needs to be reinforced. Consequently, we have a responsibility to ensure that critical information and tasks are validated with individuals before embarkation, before diving commences and before each dive to mitigate any potential safety risks.

You can read more about some of our procedures and learn a lot more about our destinations in our open-source knowledge base: <https://thedirtydozenexpeditions.com/knowledge-base>
Should you have any questions or feedback, please feel free to contact us on info@thedirtydozen.org

