

SIDEMOUNT NIRVANA

Sidemount is my 'go to' configuration of choice, but setting-up a new wing is never that straightforward, or is it?

By James Neal

I learnt to dive, much like everyone else, on a single cylinder and BCD. I was on my honeymoon at the time and it was the first holiday I had had in a number of years, being self-employed and working 100 hour weeks, I simply never had the time!

So I found myself on a Caribbean beach with no Internet or WiFi, no mobile phone, no email and absolutely no idea how to 'switch off'. I was going crazy!

I'd always wanted to learn how to dive, since I was a kid in fact, and I actually bought my first set of regs and cylinder back in 1989!

Unfortunately I'm asthmatic though, always have been, and back then the thinking was that if you had asthma then it wasn't safe for you to dive.

Fast forward to my honeymoon and the thinking had changed somewhat, so you can imagine my surprise when the 'pool guy' got the instructor and doctor over for a chat and I was told that I could now learn to dive if I wanted to... my boredom problem had just been resolved! And so I spent a large portion of my honeymoon sat by the pool with my nose in the 'Open Water' manual reading dive theory and trying to get my head around the tables in between G&Ts!

Doing my first backward roll off the side of the Zodiac into the clear waters of the Caribbean is a memory that I will cherish forever! My life was forever transformed from that moment.

Upon returning to the UK I immediately sought out the local club and dive centre. I also bought a set of second hand kit from

a technical diver called Trevor who was retiring from the sport. Consequently I found myself owning a twin-set and stages!

I had all of this kit reconfigured to suit my needs. The twin 12s were split and used as single cylinders and the stages were rigged as twin 7s. I then did my 'Advanced Open Water' in the twin 7s.

I think I was extremely driven to try and make up for all the years diving I felt I had lost due to the asthma and so I pursued numerous courses and went diving at every available opportunity. By the time I was a Divemaster I had bought my first sidemount wing and was cave and mine diving!

I find flooded mines particularly alluring to dive... for the most part I enjoy the challenge of getting into them and the reward for the effort is simply sensational diving, crystal clear waters and a journey back in time play a part, but the emotional and physical challenges are, for me, the real reward. The sense of achievement gained and then relished on the journey home.

With this kind of diving there really is

only one configuration that suits the job. And that is sidemount. It was born out of cave diving through as much necessity as

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anything else. Consequently it lends itself to mine diving for all the same reasons.



My first sidemount wing was the Hollis SMS 100. It was a good wing to start with as it has a great deal of lift, I still own it and use it for students now.

I then migrated towards a more cave-centric configuration but found that even after completing several hundreds of dives on it I was still 'faffing about' with it and it was an absolute nightmare to get in and out of, primarily

due to the dry glove rings that I had retro fitted to my dry suit.

Many of these wings utilise a standard 'Y' style harness, great if you're skinny, not quite so if you're a bit, er, stockier shall we say... like me!

The Hollis Katana has an 'H' style harness, which in my opinion works a

lot better, especially when you're broader shouldered. I also find them a lot simpler and quicker to adjust. I was struck by just how quickly I had this wing on and in the water... literally ten minutes flat!

I found it trimmed out fairly nicely on the very first dive, naturally positioning the diver in the desired horizontal plane. I am a sidemount perfectionist and something of a trim obsessive! The standard bungees were a little too short for me, and so I had to change them. They were incredibly easy to replace. Simply unzip the bottom and feed them through the outside of the wing and through a band on the inside and then simply knot. A friend of mine presented me with some rather fetching red bungee to match the red bits on the wing itself.

I was struck by the fact that there is no dump sited on the back of the wing, at the base of the spine. This pleased me as I have always struggled to reach them!

Instead the Katana has a small pull dump, which comes over the left shoulder. As a



concept I really like this, but I found the toggle to be far too small and light and I subsequently struggled to find it. This became one of the minor modifications that I made to the wing. I simply replaced the small toggle with a much larger one, I also glued a lead fishing weight into it to ensure that it would always hang down and not float up.

Having done this I now find that this type of dump is simply superb, every time I reach up I can locate the dump with ease and without dislocating one of my shoulders! Nor do I have to come out of trim to vent excess gas volume during ascents.

The other minor modification I made to the wing was to add a bungee clip from Andrew Goring. I find this to be a particularly nice way to keep the wing tip bungees connected together.

Having made those minor adjustments I then added the Hollis canister torch to the configuration and went for a dive.

I honestly think the Hollis Katana is a superb sidemount wing. It is so much easier to adjust and get 'just right'. It's a joy to dive and it's a lot easier to 'live with' than many others. I particularly like how easy it is to get in and out of... gone are my contortionist exhibitions as I struggled into and out of my old wing. This is very much the stand out moment for me with this bit of kit. The shear ease of use.

The Hollis canister torch fits beautifully into the webbing of the crotch strap and has two very handy clips that allow to simply clip the battery pack to the bottom of the wing. Again, this is making everything about this rig 'easy to use'.

The torch itself is certainly impressive, the build quality is superb and it feels substantial. I particularly like the large recessed on / off switch on the end of the canister.

In this position it aids the diver's trim and is easy to access. I run the cord up from the right hand side across the midriff and down the left arm. It has a fabric style strap that is comfortable to wear and easy to adjust.

The 8 degree beam of the torch is fairly narrow and concentrated, ideal for expedition type diving. The single LED is very powerful giving an impressive 1000 lumens of light that cut through the dark very nicely.

