

UK BRAND AMBASSADOR ONE YEAR ON...

Looking back over the first year as the UK Brand Ambassador for Huish Outdoors.

By James Neal

I still have to pinch myself, even now, one year on. I really can't believe it... I'm the UK Brand Ambassador for Huish Outdoors... little ol' me! And I've loved every single minute of it so far. To be honest I have found the role to be multi-faceted. On the one hand it's been a very humbling experience and I take it very seriously and I have tried my hardest, despite my own personal limitations as a result of illness, to do my very best. Consequently, I set the bar high for myself from the outset and now have to maintain that level... which can be a challenge sometimes. But I like a challenge! I think I was made for this role, it suits me, and it suits my skill-set from my life before I suffered a subarachnoid haemorrhage.

The road to recovery has been very long, very difficult and at times, very painful, both physically and emotionally. I really found out who my friends were and I lost my identity and everything that defined me as an individual as a result of the damage done to my frontal lobe. I literally didn't know who I was anymore!

The role of Brand Ambassador has been phenomenally helpful with my on-going recovery as it has given me a new 'sense of purpose' and it has helped me to recover some of my old skills. I enjoy writing these articles, reviewing the equipment used and recanting my diving adventures. But it takes me a long time and an enormous amount of effort. What once would have

taken me an hour now takes me most of the day! So writing some of these articles has taken me a week or even two! I've put my heart and soul into the role and I wear them both on my sleeve, so what you see is what you get. I've been criticised and ridiculed, but that's fine, there will always be haters. To those people I say, "go through what I've been through, try a day in my shoes, and then see if you can keep up!"



The diving itself has really fuelled my recovery and writing everything down after the dives has helped with the short-term memory issues that I suffer from. It has also helped with the chronic cognitive fatigue that I have to manage, as I am forced to rest. I discovered, quite by accident, that 'surface intervals' made for superb fatigue management. So I now try and run my life much like a dive-day. I try to ensure that I take regular breaks (surface intervals) after every task (dive). And it works! I feel better for it and by 'doing little and often' I have actually been able to regain a little bit of the 'old me'.

Recovery from 'brain injury' is measured in years and I accept the fact that I will never fully recover. I will never get the 'old me' back. Despite that, I consider myself extremely fortunate because 80% of those that suffer what I did do not survive. So I am lucky, someone was looking down on me that day and decided there was more for me yet to do... and I feel like this is part of it.

The last year has, like any other year, had its highs and its lows. There have been some stand-out moments and experiences and I've had a lot of laughs along the way, usually at my own expense. But if you can't laugh at yourself then you've no right to laugh at others! So here are my highs and lows from 2019, the moments that made me laugh, the ones that made me cry, the dives that are now etched in my soul and

the kit that took me on those adventures.

2019 High Points

It goes without saying that actually becoming the UK Brand Ambassador at the start of 2019 really did kick-start the year and set the tone for the months that followed. It was an epic year.

Receiving two very large boxes full of shiny new dive kit has got to be every divers' dream! Getting to dive things that I would never have otherwise had the opportunity to try or would have otherwise probably not considered has been a real privilege. I've had the pleasure



of being able to ‘play’ with equipment and try all sorts of different bits of kit and I must admit, it has been a real eye-opener. I was very much set in my ways with my thick, heavy, crushed neoprene drysuit, a padded undersuit and, let’s not forget... my jet fins.

I also had the opportunity throughout 2019 to really put all of the equipment through its paces... it’s been dived, a lot! It’s taken some punishment and a fair amount of abuse and survived remarkably well. Some of it still looks like new despite having done in excess of 150 dives! The Zeagle Recon fins have been a revelation to me. The comfort and the power of them, remarkable fins. I love them!

The BARE HDC Expedition drysuit is just a thing of beauty. I have come to absolutely adore that suit. It is so light, so comfortable and the amount of movement it allows is remarkable. I simply can’t imagine going back to a traditional back-entry / rear-zipped suit. Equally, the BARE Ultrawarmth base layers and SB mid-layers have kept me incredibly warm despite the fact there is absolutely no bulk to them whatsoever. The combination of these with the Expedition drysuit has resulted in my being able to reduce the amount of weight I carry by a whopping three kilos!

A trip out to Egypt’s Red Sea in July on our own charter with a bespoke itinerary really was a high point. The diving was sensational. Of particular note were both the M.V. Million Hope (Ryusei Maru) and the S.S. Rosalie Moller. Two very, very different dives and yet both equally sensational. I’d really like to go back and dive them both again.

With the Red Sea came the opportunity to dive different equipment, a 5mm BARE Velocity wetsuit, kept me so warm during some very long dives that I actually never felt the cold once, not once, despite some fairly long decompression.

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That trip was simply magical, I took some beautiful photographs and learnt so much as a result of taking my camera in the water several times a day and for nearly every dive. Those photographs and the articles that I wrote about each one have helped me to remember the dives and they are memories that I now treasure. We had a lot of laughs, pranks, practical jokes and good old fashioned stupidity made for a great trip with some fantastic friends. Being the Brand Ambassador for Huish Outdoors enabled me to retain those memories, as they would have otherwise been lost if I had not written about those dives and taken those photographs.

I have several masks at my disposal, the incredible Atomic Aquatics Venom and an Atomic Frameless 2. But for me, my favourite has got to be the Oceanic Shadow. It fits me perfectly, I think it looks cool and it just ‘feels’ right. Although, I did get to try the Zeagle Scope for a few weeks and that very nearly replaced the Shadow as my favourite because the nose pocket in particular was very comfortable.

On the subject of kit that I got to try out, one piece in particular really did stand out. The BARE Exowear gloves. I didn’t

want to give those back... I mean, come on, really? Do I have to return them, seriously? But, if I didn't return them then I suspect my days as the UK Brand Ambassador would have been seriously limited... and so there was no alternative but to buy a pair for myself, and believe it or not, that is exactly what I did! I really can't be without them. They are simply the best! I wear them under my dry gloves and my hands are toasty warm. The gloves are also designed to be used wet, so if your dry gloves leak then they still keep your hands warm. They're ace! I also rate the Hollis Katana sidemount wing very highly. The fact that it employs an 'H' style harness that is so easy to get into and out of whilst wearing a dry suit, and in particular a drysuit with dry glove rings fitted, really does make it so much easier to live with than those wings fitted with a 'Y' style harness. I described the Katana in an earlier article as being

'The Katana is an epic bit of kit. I'd pretty much consider it sidemount perfection in its design and execution.'

'an epic bit of kit.' And 'pretty much sidemount perfection in its design and execution'. I like, a lot!

Likewise, the Hollis 200LX sidemount regulators deliver a reassuring crisp breathe and they just look so damn cool, I describe them as being 'proper Gucci'. Another high point of the year for me was turning fifty! I've reached a point in my life where I'm comfortable in my own skin so to speak and I'm starting to find my way in life again. I've decided that I like being fifty, it's a cool age.

2019 Low Point

On the whole it was a great year, with really only one low point. Unfortunately,

a certain bright orange airline insisted on taking my 'priority' hand luggage off me and putting it in the main hold, despite my advising them of the value of its contents! Needless to say they then smashed my underwater camera housing to bits and they are still messing me about over the cost of repairing it. I guess that's what the courts are for...

2019 Standout Moment?

Diving the wreck of the M.V. Million Hope (Ryusei Maru) was simply sensational. What a remarkable dive. A wreck with a beating heart!

2019 Standout Piece of Equipment?

That's a really, really tough question to answer as I genuinely do love so many different bits of the equipment that I have. The items that stand out the most for me are the Zeagle Recon fins, the Oceanic Shadow mask, the Hollis Katana sidemount wing, and the 200LX regulators, the BARE SB system undergarments and the Exowear gloves (which I bought myself!) And the Atomic Aquatics M1 regs are just wow!

But if I absolutely had to pick out just one piece from all of those then it would have to be the BARE HDC Expedition drysuit. It's simply fantastic.

I'm really looking forward to 2020's diving adventures. I have a trip to Mexico and the U.S.A. booked for mid April and the plan is to dive some of the cenotes. I also have a number of UK adventures in the pipeline including Newquay, Plymouth, Hodge Close, Capernwray, Holme Bank, Portland and the Farne Islands. So 2020 looks set to be another great year!

