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Tankless Scuba Diving

Sea Breathe snuba rig makes a handy tool and a cool toy.

The last few years, we've used a neat, 12-volt battery-powered "snuba" rig—a snorkeling-scuba hybrid—to inspect our test boat's hull. We first reported on this rig, the SurfaceDive Deck Snorkel, in the Aug. 15, 2004 issue.

A Canadian company, Scu-Buoy Products Inc., recently sent us a very similar product called the Sea Breathe Electric Snorkel.

Both use similar components: a 12-volt compressor mounted inside a plastic container. The compressor pumps air through a hose to a floating air reservoir. A second hose connects the reservoir to a scuba regulator attached via a belt (Sea Breathe) or chest harness (SurfaceDive).

We used both rigs on the same day, paying close attention to their ease of use, stowage, and the comfort and fit. We also used a decibel meter to measure the noise levels of their 12-volt compressors. Typical gas-powered Snuba setups are much louder than these electric devices. And, of course, the electrically powered snubas don't emit stinky exhaust. The gas-powered compressors, however, do pump out more air.

For a more permanent battery connection, we'd replace the clamp-on connectors with proper ring terminals and use a battery that accepts those terminals.

Practical Sailor testers liked the fit and feel of the Sea Breathe's regulator slightly better than the SurfaceDive. One tester did not care for the Sea Breathe's belt harness because it kept slipping off her waist and moving upward, while the SurfaceDive's shoulder-slung harness stayed in place. A male tester found the belt more comfortable than the SurfaceDive's harness.

We measured the decibel level of each compressor from 1 foot away. The SurfaceDive was a bit quieter: It registered 79 decibels, compared to the Sea Breathe's 82 decibels.

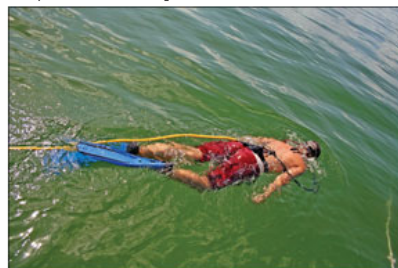
The Sea Breathe has the edge in storage as it uses a soft, plastic bladder that can be deflated and folded, while the SurfaceDive utilizes a hard, cylindrical buoy that does not deflate.

The plastic box of the Sea Breathe we tested cracked in one corner. The company has since replaced this type of box with a more robust one.

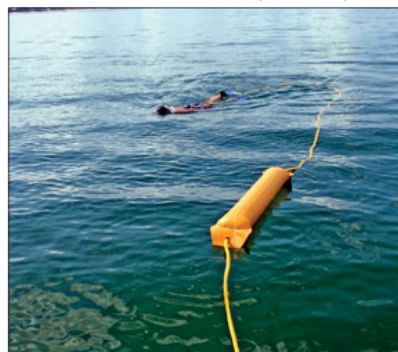
Our SurfaceDive unit is a few years old, and we've had trouble finding one available now. Several attempts to contact the maker went unanswered, but we did find a few websites that still sell them. We also learned that Sea Breathe is taking care of some of SurfaceDive's warranty work.

We recommend the Sea Breathe, which offers a 12-month warranty on its units. It works as well as the SurfaceDive and has superior storage for a little more money. (The SurfaceDive costs \$1,080, compared to the Sea Breathe's \$1,195.)

Note: If you use these compressors on a boat or dinghy with a running engine, make sure that the compressor is not near the engine's exhaust.



One tester found the Sea Breathe's belt harness uncomfortable as it kept riding up around her ribs.



It's inflatable bladder makes for easy stowing.



Sea Breathe Electric Snorkel



Surface Dive Deck Snorkel