

Breathing Easy Below

regulator tests find the good and the not-so-good

Last year, the British magazine *Diver* tested several regulators in the mid-price (\$300-\$500) and high-price (more than \$500) ranges and came up with some interesting performance ratings, including a real dark-horse surprise.

Diver's tests are known for their lack of bias, which means they aren't responsive to advertisers. Teams of divers performed in-water tests, but more important the regulators were then machine tested for the effort needed to crack open the valve and to inhale and exhale. The ideal profile involved as little total breathing effort as possible. The tests were conducted in accordance with international testing standards.

Among the top-of-the-line regulators, Atomic M1 (around \$700) was clearly the first choice. According to one test diver: "It felt good to breathe from and the purge was a delight to use. A great design." In the bench tests, it wasn't the easiest-breathing regulator, but *Diver* reported: "After the initial effort needed to open the valve, very little more work was needed during inhalation."

Close behind were the Apeks ATX100 and ATX200 (Apeks is a British make distributed in the U.S. by Sea Quest). The Aqua Lung Legend LX Supreme proved the easiest-breathing in bench tests, followed closely by the Scubapro S600/MK25. The Mares Abyss/MR22 also rated well despite a large initial cracking pressure to open the valve.

Not so highly regarded were

the Dacor Viper Metal and the Oceanic Omega II/DX4 (both requiring more effort to breathe), the Cressi-Sub Airtech ("I felt I had to consciously draw in each breath"), the Poseidon Xstream Deep 90 ("The air came in quick pulses and the purge blew out my other end!").

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In the mid-price range, four makes emerged as clear favorites: the Apeks ATX 50 ("This is the one I would choose to buy without any hesitation whatsoever"), the Aqua-lung Legend (easiest breathing of the lot), the Tusa Platina RS 230 ("A lovely breathe, and great performance") and the Mares V16 Epos ("A nice smooth suck — a Gucci among regulators.").

That quartet was closely followed by the Oceanic Gamma 2 DX4 and Scubapro MK25 R380 models. Also-rans included the Sherwood Blizzard (difficult breathing at depth), the Dacor Viper Tec (problems with exhaust bubbles and purge button and less-than smooth breathing performance), the Cressi-Sub XS ("More of a Ford Fiesta than a Ferrari"), the Poseidon Cyklon 5000 ("Too much air and too much water") and other brands not readily available in the U.S.

Diver had previously compared bottom-of-the line regulators and was "agreeably surprised to find that nearly all the regulators tested were capable of giving the air needed by two divers at one time at 40m-plus."

Favorites included the Mares MR2 Axis, the Dacor Fury, the Scubapro MK2/R190, the Aqua Lung Calypso, and the Ocean Reef Enterprise.

Nevertheless, one regulator stood out. When it came to a leisure dive on the last day, everyone wanted to use the Oceanic Alpha 7 SP4. Testers appreciated the compact and light second stage, and one called it "a treat to breathe from."

Bench tests produced an almost perfect breathing profile, from cracking through inhalation and exhalation.

The only drawback is that it's not recommended for use in cold water, like several regulators in this category. But for other uses, the Alpha 7 SP4, which retails for \$270, so impressed the editors of *Diver* that when they reported on high-priced regulators a year later, they slipped the modestly priced SP4 into the lineup and wound up asking, "Need you spend so much on a regulator when the inexpensive Oceanic Alpha 7 is so highly thought of?"

If you're thinking of running out and buying an Alpha 7, remember that the tested model was the SP4 with an unbalanced piston first stage, not the more expensive Alpha 7 CDX with a balanced diaphragm first stage.