

Arriving at Lake Maggiore, Italy, I felt very happy to escape big, noisy cities and make it to the beautiful and peaceful lake.



I was excited for the weekend ahead, which would be spent on the GUE Basic Fundamentals course. I had heard many glowing reviews from others, along with the warning that it would be an intense few days of training. In the end, both impressions proved to be absolutely true. It was not only an incredible weekend where I learnt a lot and developed my skills, but it was also the most intense diving training schedule I have ever done.

My excellent instructor, Romano, had picked me up from the airport and driven me back to his place, where we started the first theory block of the course. I am especially grateful for Romano and Sheila's welcoming and friendly attitude. We even got many delicious Italian meals! I believe Sheila was preparing our risotto all day on the first day. What an incredible dinner it was!



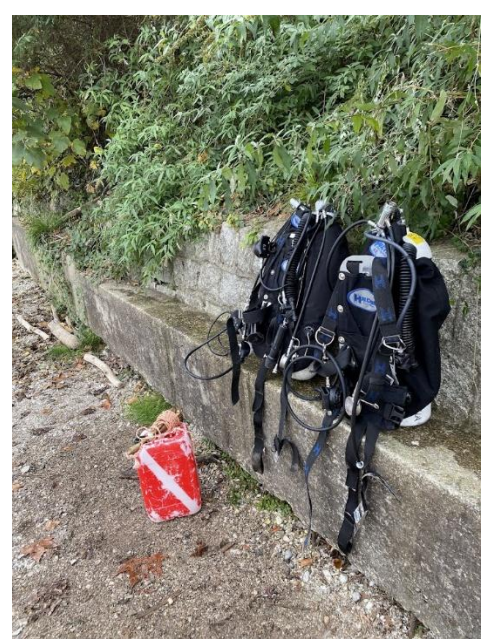
I also had the pleasure of undertaking the course with my fellow GUE student, Mike, a super encouraging and proficient diver. I can't think of anyone better to do the course with! Thanks for being a great buddy, Mike!

After making our greetings and finishing the first set of theory, we moved to the lake to start preparing for the first dive. One thing I really appreciated about this course was the level of preparation that we put into each dive. I learnt a lot about correct and minimal gear configurations. Something that I had previously neglected. I also learnt first-hand why gear configuration is important. On land, it may seem a little over the top to worry about getting the D ring at exactly the right height on the shoulder strap, but I obviously did not put enough effort into that at first. In the water, I spent many wasted minutes fidgeting around trying to reach my clip to detach whatever

was needed for an exercise. After that experience, I improved the configuration and positioning of each item for easier access later.



We also practised and discussed all the exercises before each of the dives. I was amazed how something that seems so simple on land can become quite a challenge in the water. Especially when trying to maintain good buoyancy and trim (rather than just kneeling on the ground to do everything, as I had done in previous, non-GUE, diving courses). During the first dive (and most subsequent dives), we practised a few different kicking manoeuvres such as frog kicks, flutter kicks, and back kicks. In the first dive, I really struggled to maintain the appropriate trim. I felt as though I was always getting tipped backwards the whole time. So, we adjusted some weights before the next dive, and this made a huge difference. In addition, Romano shared some of his diving secrets, and with focus and practice, I felt that by the end of the course, I was able to maintain my positioning in the water much better, leaving my hands free for other activities. One interesting evidence of my improvements in buoyancy and trim was pulling off the helicopter turn (when you stay in one place and rotate around in a circle). This was extremely hard to coordinate. The first time I tried, I was all over the place, up and down and definitely not on the spot. But I practised each night on the floor (yes, after our long theory session in the evening I would go home and lie on the floor trying to coordinate the opposite actions of each leg, I am glad I had a private room!) and after improving the buoyancy and trim I was very happy to find that I managed to roughly pull it off.





Another challenging kicking exercise to coordinate was the back kick. I was making some strange wriggles in the water that were not helping this at all. But I think it was slowly sinking into my body. It seemed that by the end of the course, as long as I didn't think too much, I could just do it when necessary to escape banging into things! This was a great feeling!

The course consisted of many more dives and theory sessions, along with a swimming and freediving test. We practised each activity multiple times until we felt that we had achieved some level of proficiency in them. Romano was always encouraging, whilst also pointing out important mistakes and things we could do to improve. This was one aspect of the course that made it stand out to me over other courses; we didn't just rush through content, ticking boxes, instead we really focused on achieving a level of proficiency with each activity. Similarly, we had the opportunity to ask many questions during the theory content to make sure we understood what we were being taught.

During the last dive of the weekend, we were practising SMB deployment, which was a real test of our skills. Even on land, I remember thinking, "ok that's a lot of steps to have to remember in the correct order"! Even though the concept of what needed to be done seemed simple enough, in the water it was definitely difficult to remember and pull everything off. All our skills came into play here, from equipment set-up and knowledge of gear (e.g., at first, I even struggled to just get my pocket open and find the SMB), to back kicks and helicopter turns for ensuring we didn't bump into each other, and buoyancy and trim control to keep the hand free for all the activities. After a few failed attempts, I eventually made some adjustments and pulled off the exercise, success! After this last dive, we had a debrief, more theory, more excellent food (fish pasta on the last night) and then our theory test. By the end of it all, I was completely exhausted, but very satisfied with a great weekend!



I can not thank Romano and Sheila enough, not only for the excellent and inspiring diving and instruction they give, but also for their incredible hospitality and kindness. I look forward to seeing you again soon! I would also like to thank Jenn Thompson and the GUE team for giving me this great opportunity, along with my dive buddy Mike, for all his great support and excellent teamwork over the weekend.

