

In a state of sunshine

UCi's Michael Cocks reports on the challenging and intensive training at the Commercial Diving Academy in Florida, USA

In mid-February I travelled to Florida, USA, and dived at the Commercial Diving Academy in Jacksonville and Ocala. This was the 32nd visit I have paid to a commercial diving school over the past 20 years – possibly a world record.

This visit was one of the most enjoyable and impressive for a long time. The school has recently received Canadian certification, which gives its certificates HSE and IMCA approval and it is expanding rapidly. I am always grateful to a school for allowing me to dive with its students, in view of my age (73), high-profile and limited diving skills.

The school was set up in 1995 as the Gulf Coast Commercial Diving Academy by Captain Ray Black, who was keen to make



Michael Cocks (left) and the Commercial Diving Academy's Captain Ray Black. Photo: Lans Stout

certain that divers were trained to dive safely and competently. As Grant Jameson did with the Professional Diving Centre in South Africa, he paid for much

of the school's set up through his saturation diving. Realising the need to find a site where he could train more students, in 2001 he met David Weisman, the owner of a yachting marina in the Trout River, Jacksonville. By a lucky stroke they decided to become partners in the school. David is a scuba diver but the real benefit he brings is his financial expertise.

STRONG

The school has six tanks, two of which are used for welding, with another used for chain sawing. The Trout River has a very strong current and the students have to cope with a current approaching three knots. Luckily, I was allowed to dive at slack water. The students have a

number of tasks to complete and the week I was there they were being tested in rigging, both in and out of the water.

The students are also able to survey a nearby bridge. In almost black water, they are tested and are usually in the water for two and a half hours; on two days they have to perform this feat of endurance twice. Luckily they are kept fit by 30 minutes of physical exercise each morning at 6.30am, followed by a jump from the bridge into the river and a swim.

SPARTAN

On the whole, conditions at the school are fairly spartan and a lot tougher than at most schools. The students sleep in dormitories of 16 and get ►



Academy students go for an early morning swim

► three good meals a day. They can also take an advanced Emergency Technician course, which involves visits to a hospital and injecting each other – not an orange.

As part of the course they become master scuba divers but can get instructor qualifications as an extra cost. All the instructors are highly experienced commercial divers and I was well looked after by the lead instructor, Grant Hibbard. Students are helped in obtaining work, as under American education rules the school has to find jobs for at least 70% of the trainees. In order to obtain the full Canadian certification the course is to be extended from 16 weeks to 20, with all students completing the required deep dives.

After two days it was off to the

sinkhole at Ocala, about a two-hour drive away. The dive site is set in the middle of a wood and accommodation, shower and rest rooms are provided. There is also a restaurant, serving excellent food. Unfortunately, while I was there the unseasonal weather meant it was a little chilly.

DEEP

The hole is more than 240 feet (73 metres) deep and the school will shortly introduce a five-day mixed gas course. My first dive was in a KMB 57 with Captain Black in a wet bell to 165 feet (50 metres) – a real privilege – and I also dove down to 50 feet (15 metres) on one of four stages for a total dive time of 90 minutes; this time I wore a KMB 77.

There are also stages at 20, 70 and 140 feet (six, 21 and 42 metres), and as at Jacksonville

the students have to complete testing tasks. Each diver has a computer on his wrist, so his depth can be monitored, and at least one student has a head mounted camera. Equipment is of the highest quality and each dive is closely controlled. I was pleased to learn that only two of the 22 required divers were in the wet bell; I always feel the diver should be tested coming up the hard way after a deep dive and doing in water stops, hanging on the shot line.

I could not be more impressed by Captain Black's diving record and the dedication he shows to the school; he has recently built a house on the site at Ocala. I could not have been better looked after at both sites and the enjoyable dives I had, without incident, have convinced me I can go on

diving for a few more years.

As a stockbroker I learned quickly to assess if a company was a happy and well run ship; I can do the same with a dive school and – although when asked by a student which is the best school I always reply Chino (but then say you have to be serving a prison sentence of at least five years) – I could not have been more impressed by my time at CDA and hope I may be invited back in warmer weather to go down to the lowest stage at Ocala and to try to master some of the Trout River current.

Details – David Weisman, Commercial Diving Academy, 8137 North Main Street, Jacksonville, Florida 32208, USA; tel: +1 (904) 766 7736; website: www.divecda.com