



Snorkelling Factsheet

Equipment

The Mask

The mask is a most important piece of equipment in snorkelling. An ill-fitting, leaking mask can make the snorkelling experience miserable. It is worth spending time when choosing a mask, and here are some of the features to look out for.

Masks are made from different types of material ranging from plastic, rubber or silicone. Silicone masks tend to be more expensive but give improved comfort and durability. Silicone also has much less tendency to cause reaction to sensitive skin.

Lenses should be tempered or toughened glass. This is important to properly protect the eyes whilst ensuring a scratch resistant window to our underwater world.

The glass faceplate may be in one piece or divided into two lenses. Which you choose is largely a matter of preference. Some twin lens masks may rub against the bridge of more prominent noses and cause soreness. Optically corrected lenses may also be added to the mask or optically corrected lenses replaced.

Beginners should look for a low-volume mask, one without extra side or bottom windows. Large volume masks can be difficult to clear of water.

The skirt or body of the mask provides the seal to the wearer's face and should offer a comfortable fit and effective seal. A second skirt of material shaped into the mask provides an extra seal. It is important not to over-tighten the mask strap. The strap is designed to hold the mask in place against the face easily and over-tightening may distort the seal, causing the mask to leak.

The strap is usually of the same material as the mask's body and is designed with a split section at the back to holding it firmly at the crown of the head.

Mask frames come in a wide range of colours. Colour co-ordination has become a key feature of dive equipment and you can choose a mask which matches other equipment. However, ensure that it has a sturdy structure and that any metal fittings are of stainless steel. Also examine the strap attachment and adjustment mechanism. This should be secure and easy to adjust, offering you the ability to easily alter the length of the strap or to fit a snorkel.

So what to look out for when buying a mask? Look at the shape of your face, and in particular the width across your eyes and the depth from hairline to upper lip. These are the dimensions which your mask will have to fit.

Ensure that when you try on the mask it sits below the hairline, otherwise it will constantly leak, and comfortably on the upper lip without constricting the nose. You should also ensure an all-round seal, especially beside the eyes. The simplest test is to fit the mask and breathe in through the nose when the mask should stay firmly in place on your face. It is the narrowness of children's faces which is generally the determining factor as to the age at which they can learn to snorkel.



Snorkel

The snorkel allows us to breathe at the surface without lifting our head. In its simplest form it comprises a tube with a mouthpiece of plastic, rubber or silicone. For comfort, and lack of allergenic reaction, silicone is the material of choice. The mouthpiece has been designed to fit inside the mouth with a retaining flange and bite blocks for the teeth to grip to ensure an adequate airway.

Consider the size of your mouth and what is a comfortable gap for your teeth and estimate the size of the mouthpiece accordingly. Undue pressure on the bite block causes strain at the lower jaw joint. Bite blocks are to rest the teeth against, not to chew on and clearly the more robust they are the longer they will last. However, if they are oversized they will cause discomfort.

Some snorkels are fitted with a purge valve to allow water to drain from the bottom of the tube rather than be ejected by blowing. However the seals of such snorkels can leak if grit or sand fouls the outlet. Sealing the top of the tube with your hand and forcefully clearing the one way seal, thus flushing out any debris, may clear this. A variety of methods have been devised to attach the snorkel to the mask strap including a sleeve or clip or quick-release attachments.

Snorkels are available in ranges of colours to match the mask.

All snorkels are of similar dimensions to allow both ease of breathing and clearing.



Fins

There are two main types of fin, shoe fin and open heel fin.

The shoe or pool fin is ideal for the beginner, being smaller and offering less surface resistance in the water, and is consequently less tiring on untrained leg muscles.

Both types of fin are constructed of similar materials, rubber foot pockets and plastic blades. The open heel fin however is larger, heavier and more robustly constructed, being designed to accept a dry or wet boot and to be used in open water.

The shoe fin, as one might expect, is supplied in shoe sizes, the foot fitting into a slipper-like pocket. Fins for growing children may be purchased slightly larger in size; the slack taken up with ordinary or neoprene socks or by use of a simple device called a fin retainer.

It is important when fitting the shoe fin to fold down the heel before slipping it onto the foot, then flipping the heel back into place. This simple practice will prolong the life of the foot section of the fin.

Fins were not designed to be worn out of water and indeed are only really effective when completely under water. While thrashing along at the surface makes much splashing and noise, it is very wasteful of energy and not an effective finning action.

