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ARMADILLO SIDEMOUNT



By Curt Bowen

"I have never seen a
more streamlined
sidemount harness",
Tom Mount I.A.N.T.D.

Side Mounting... The Armadillo Way!

Side mounting may never be the same again with the new Armadillo rig. Thanks to the research and dedication of Curt Bowen and Brett Hemphill, the Armadillo is a reality and now commercially available.

Side mount cave exploration is not a new technique by any means. It has been around for many years, but only since 1999 has it gained any type of recognition as a viable method of exploration. Some of the first side mount cave explorers were Woody Jasper, Lamar Hires, Brain Kakuk, and Wes Skiles. They pioneered their own side mount rigs in their garages and made them work. Continued modifications to these original rigs brought side mounting into the more mainstream and provided the ideas behind the Armadillo.

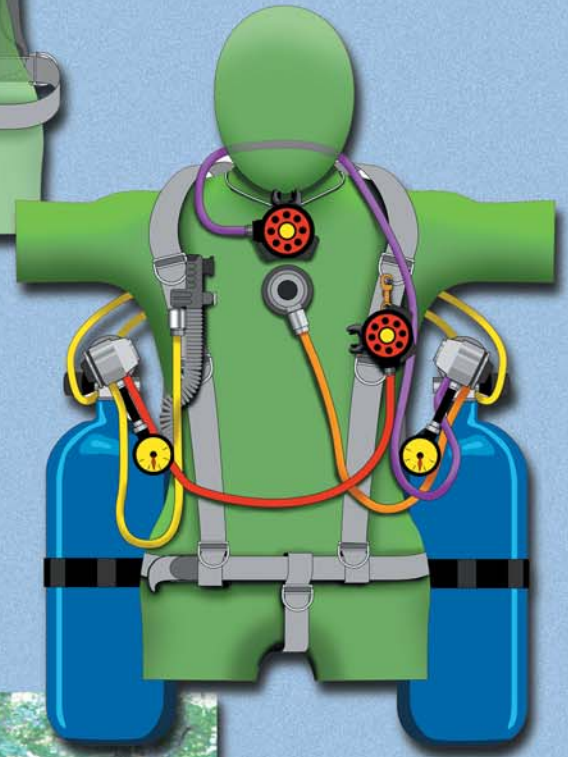
Side mount was originally developed to allow the exploration of restrictive underwater cave passage that was not accessible by standard back mounted cylinders. Side mount configurations allowed the diver to maneuver through much smaller passage by placing the cylinders on the divers side, thus reducing the overall girth of the diver. Side mount rigs also allowed for the easy removal and replacement of cylinders underwater, enabling the hard-core cave explorer to squeeze through even smaller restrictions by removing one or both of the cylinders and pushing the cylinder in front of them through the restriction.

Cave explorer Brett Hemphill originated the Armadillo side mount rig. Brett's original idea was to develop a single one-piece harness and keep it simple and as clean as possible. The first rig was designed and assembled in his garage with weight belt webbing, grommets, and stainless bolts and nuts.

Curt Bowen, cave explorer and publisher of this magazine, had conducted several expeditions to the Yucatan and was in search of a simple dive harness that would allow for the use of multiple size cylinders, allow the explorer to wear climbing equipment with the harness, and also be flexible enough to wear while walking several kilometers through the thick jungle.



The main idea behind the Armadillo harness is to provide the diver with the ultimate in equipment streamlining. This type of system prevents snags in cave restrictions or while exploring deep inside a shipwreck.

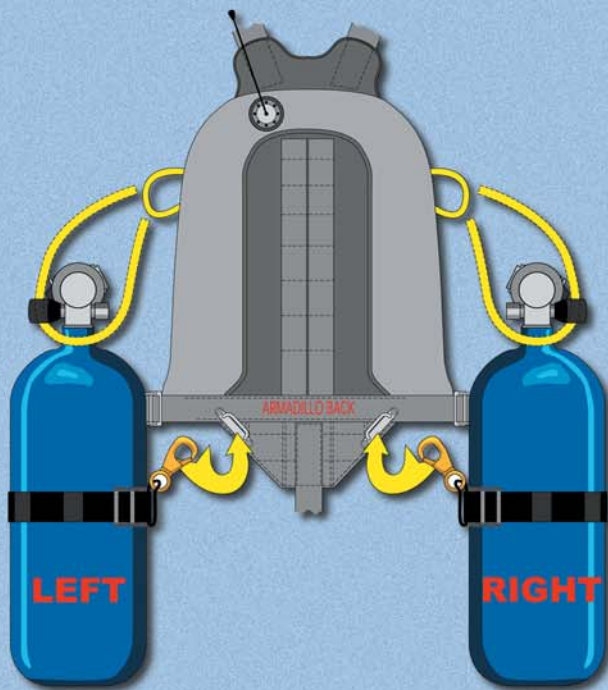


The Armadillo harness is designed for ultimate streamlining and simplicity. A simple strap design allows the unit to fit almost any body size or shape.



The Armadillo Harness was designed for the toughest diving environments.

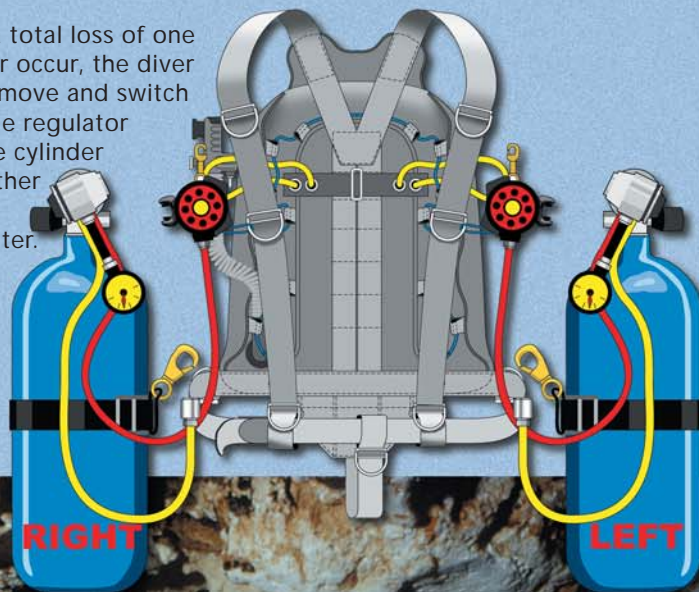
Constructed from thick 1050 ballistic nylon material with double sewn reinforced attachments, the Armadillo Harness provides the diver with the ultimate low profile BCD and harness built into one unit. The Armadillo contains no extra bolts, nuts, or large metal plates but offers the diver over 40 pounds of lift.



Cylinders are attached to the rear D-rings by the use of an adjustable cam strap. A bungee system pulls the cylinder valve tightly into the diver's armpits allowing the cylinder to lie horizontally along the diver's sides.

By removing the cylinders from the diver's back (back mount setup) and placing them along the diver's sides, easy and quick access is allowed to all hoses and valves during any part of a dive. Should a problem with a regulator occur, many times it can be quickly evaluated, fixed, or if necessary, turned off.

Should a total loss of one regulator occur, the diver could remove and switch the whole regulator from one cylinder to the other while underwater.



For two years, the Armadillo evolved. Tested in multiple locations such as Florida's high-flow caves, Mexico's Cenotes, and the Exumas' boiling blue holes, the Armadillo performed to great satisfaction.

The birth of the first commercially available Armadillo took shape in June 2003 by *Advanced Diver Magazine* contracting Zeagle to produce the first Armadillo side mount rig. After a month in manufacturing, the Armadillo side mount rig made its debut on July 25, 26, and 27 in its first "Setting up and diving the Armadillo" side mount class. Through the leadership of Curt Bowen and Brett Hemphill, the first Armadillo class was a huge success. Dave Miner, Steve Straatsma, Rusty Farst, Jakub Rehacek, Jon Bojar and Jitka Hyniova were the Armadillo's first victims. Here's what they thought...

Dave Miner: Bradenton, Florida
The Armadillo turned side mounting into pleasurable diving. I dove side mount years ago, but never got "truly" comfortable with two heavy steel tanks hanging off my side, metal plates digging into my hips, and a general feeling of being unbalanced. The Armadillo has changed that.

The Armadillo took time to configure and set up, but once it was tweaked to my body size, it performed like a champ. The Armadillo's clean streamline profile and comfortable fit has convinced me to start side mounting again. There are a vast amount of caves in north Florida that can only be dived in a side mount configuration, and you can bet that I'll be diving them.

Rusty Farst: Ft. Myers, Florida
My previous sidemount harness now seems jerry rigged in comparison. Arranging my video equipment to the Armadillo is easier and faster, and things stay where I put them, what a concept. Even I found myself ready to dive the same time as my buddy, and that's unusual. Does anyone want a used sidemount harness, real cheap?

Jakub Rehacek: Tampa, Florida
I have been following the development of the Armadillo sidemount for some time and I liked what I saw. I used one of the prior prototypes on my rebreather. It works great for wreck diving, but is especially suitable for cave diving.

Armadillo sidemount combined with a Closed Circuit Rebreather (CCR) (photo lower left) provides maximum redundancy possible, since it can be used with any size bottles slung under the armpits. The gas in the sidemount bottles is used only for bailout emergencies, or to hand off to a buddy in out-of-air situation. Quick-connect fittings on sidemounted bottles provide an additional gas source for the CCR in case of total gas loss from the on-board cylinders.

When I got my production model of the Armadillo, I was sure that it was going to be my primary open circuit kit, as well. It is nicely streamlined and has enough attachment points for stage bottles, scooters, and all necessary gear. I even use it for single tank wreck diving (upper right) as it has slots for cam-bands on the back of the bladder. Mounting and Steel 100 was no problem on my previous dive trip to the Graveyard of the Atlantic in Moorehead City, NC. The rig was well balanced and all gear was in familiar places, since it is configured the same way as for cave diving. Only the bottle was on my back and a small Aluminum 40 was under my left shoulder for bailout. Overall, it is a slick piece of gear and my current favorite for all kinds of diving.

The Armadillo harness is currently available only through *Advanced Diver Magazine*. The retail cost is \$550 and includes the harness, LP inflator, and all stainless hardware. Armadillo sidemount cave courses are also available through designated cave instructors which you will find listed on ADM On-Line.

The Armadillo users manual is also located on ADM On-Line as a pdf acrobat file and is downloadable at no charge.

www.AdvancedDiverMagazine.com



Photo: John Coffey



Many remote dive locations do not offer the use of back mounted doubles. The Armadillo harness allows the diver to use any size single cylinders. Photo: Curt Bowen descends over the wall in Grand Cayman using two independent aluminum 72s.

Photo: Jim Kozmik

