

Thrill-Seeking Hospitalist Alleviates Stress Through Scuba Diving

May 1, 2016 • [Carol Patton](#)

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Not much intimidates Jasen Gundersen, MD, president of the acute care services division at TeamHealth, an outsourcer of hospital-based clinical and specialty services based in Knoxville, Tenn. Besides traveling 150,000 miles a year overseeing 2,500 hospitalists at 285 facilities, Dr. Gundersen has climbed frozen waterfalls in Vermont and New Hampshire, raced in bicycle competitions, and skied mountains towering 10,000 feet.

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But his love for adventure is now focused below the surface. Over the years, he has spent many weekends diving in open waters surrounding southeast Florida; Cozumel, Mexico; Turks and Caicos; and the Cayman Islands. He believes there's no place on Earth that is as peaceful, serene, or even magical as under the ocean.



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Growing up in Connecticut, Dr. Gundersen and his family frequently vacationed in the Bahamas, where he was introduced to scuba diving.

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“As a teenager, I really loved diving,” he recalls. “Every time we went to the Bahamas, I always tried to go diving or snorkeling.”

However, the harsh Connecticut winters and frigid Atlantic Ocean prevented him from diving. More delays followed, namely medical school.

After graduating from the University of Connecticut School of Medicine in 2000, Dr. Gundersen completed his three-year residency in family medicine at the UMass Memorial Medical Center. During the next two years, he worked as a physician and [hospitalist](#) at the Family Health Center of Worcester, a federally qualified health center where he did everything from examining sore throats to delivering babies.

In 2005, he launched a small [hospital medicine](#) program at the University of Massachusetts that quickly grew and bumped up his title to division chief for hospital medicine. Then in January 2011, he accepted a new position as chief medical officer at TeamHealth, requiring him and his wife, Elizabeth, also a [hospitalist](#), to move to Florida.

Within several weeks, the couple started diving near their home in Pompano Beach. He says Elizabeth, his “diving buddy,” was eager to learn and developed a passion for scuba diving that rivals his own.

“We did 80 to 90 dives in the first year we were down there,” Dr. Gundersen says, explaining that unlike many sports, diving doesn’t require athletic ability, size, or strength. “We normally did recreational diving, where you basically can always swim slowly straight to the surface. You don’t stay down long enough that you build up enough bubbles in your system that you have to stop on the way up.”

Sharks and Shipwrecks

Since then, Dr. Gundersen purchased a 38-foot powerboat, became a PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) open-water scuba instructor, and earned a U.S. Coast Guard 50-ton master captain’s license. He and Elizabeth are certified for advanced nitrox and decompression diving, technical diving that requires the use of different gases to decompress when heading to the surface, and diving in overhead environments, such as caves or shipwrecks.

“One of our favorite wrecks is called the USS Spiegel Gove that sits on the ocean floor in Key Largo,” he says, adding that on occasion, they also swim with hammerhead sharks. “The walls of the ship go 30 feet up on each side. You can swim where they loaded the cargo and see the old crane above you. It’s

spectacular.”

Among their favorite spots to dive is Eagle Ray Pass in Grand Cayman, where entire schools of spotted eagle rays live, he says, adding that 17 rays swam and floated around them during one dive.

Fortunately, after some initial costs, he says the sport isn't too expensive, roughly around \$1,500 to get started. Basic scuba gear costs approximately \$1,000. Likewise, certifications can run \$350 a piece. Boat trips range between \$60 and \$100, unless you prefer shore diving, where you park at the beach and simply swim into the ocean. Then add a few extra dollars to fill your tank with air.

Scary and Serene

Although the Gundersens are accomplished divers who prefer warm waters and flat seas, Dr. Gundersen says only one moment of one dive actually scared him.

Years ago, he, Elizabeth, and a friend were wreck diving. Diving protocol is based on follow the leader, where divers swim into wrecks one at a time, follow each other, and signal their turns. Somehow, their friend unintentionally swam in between Dr. Gundersen and his wife. Elizabeth and the friend then turned to see something inside the wreck, but the friend failed to signal to Dr. Gundersen that they were turning.

“I went a bit farther and turned around,” Dr. Gundersen recalls. “He and Elizabeth were gone. It gave me a moment of panic. I'm particularly careful about staying with my diving buddy and making sure we don't get lost. It wasn't dangerous but broke the cardinal rule of what you're supposed to do when diving. I swam back and found them.”

While that was a rare experience, he says diving, when done properly, is the most peaceful and serene activity that people may experience. When under water, all you hear are your air bubbles. There are no cellphones ringing, emails or texts to respond to, or work issues to resolve.

“[Work-life balance](#) is a really big deal for me and my team to prevent burnout,” Dr. Gundersen says. “It allows me to have my personal time to enjoy and relax so when I'm back at work on Monday, my batteries are recharged. I'm ready to go.” **TH**

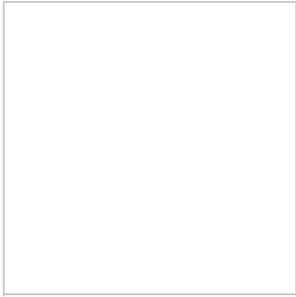
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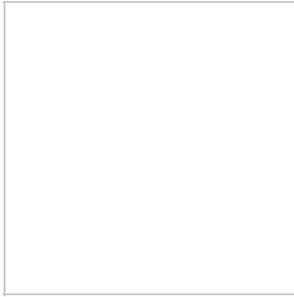
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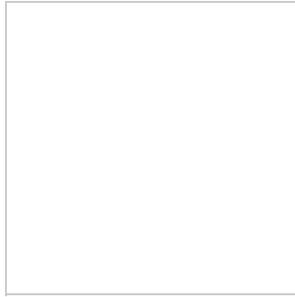
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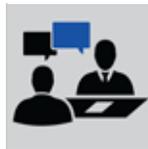
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