

Skin Diving Craze Spreads Far From the Seas—Even to Reno

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Underwater Fad Brings Boom
To Makers of Fins, "Lungs";
New Note: A Two-Man Sub

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Next month a gasoline-powered, two-man submarine will slide into the murky waters of Los Angeles harbor on a demonstration voyage.

Patterned after the tiny subs developed during World War II, the craft was imported from Italy by Healthways, a leading manufacturer of skin diving gear, as a sport-car for undersea enthusiasts who don't want to get wet. Priced at \$4,500, it's the latest and most bizarre product among hundreds introduced to meet the demands of the growing skin diving craze.

Sales of such water sports accessories as fins, spears, face masks, and self-contained underwater breathing apparatus are estimated as high as \$30 million to \$40 million this year. That would be a gain, according to the Sporting Goods Dealer magazine, which polled the nation's retailers, of about 18% over last year, when sales were about 28% ahead of 1953.

"Skin diving," says veteran yachtsman Owen Churchill, who introduced rubber fins to this country in 1940, "is the fastest-growing sport in America today." Thomas K. Brown, president of the Barakuda Co., Pelican Cove, Islamorada, Fla., adds that the underwater sport is "on the threshold of the same phenomenal rise in popularity that golf had a couple of decades ago." Newspapers here have started running regular columns on the sport.

A Mediterranean Import

Although still relatively new in this country, skin diving has been popular for at least 20 years around the Mediterranean, and French and Italian equipment is still considered the finest available. Fins and masks have been selling here in gradually increasing quantities since 1946, but the fad did not really take hold until about 1952. Some 400 diving clubs have been formed and estimates of the number of divers range up to 1,500,000. Several million more are believed to have purchased elementary gear.

Skin divers fall into three categories. Most numerous are the casual swimmers who buy a mask and a pair of fins for sightseeing in lakes, rivers, or the ocean. A step ahead are athletic young men and women who go underwater at depths up to 50 feet to hunt fish with spears. Their basic equipment—fins, mask, and harpoon—can be purchased for as little as \$20. Smallest in number are the adventurous and better-heeled enthusiasts who use lungs. Their equipment averages about \$200, including fins, mask, tanks and the like. Lungs range from \$40 to over \$300, depending on workmanship and capacity of the air tanks, some of which hold enough air for two hours' submersion. Lung purchasers also include scientists, police departments, salvage companies, lifeguards, and oil firms which send divers down in search of geological data.

Skin diving is by no means confined to warm-weather coastal states like California and Florida, where it first boomed, but is "popular everywhere there is water," says George Godfrey, assistant to the president of W. J. Voit Rubber Co., a Los Angeles equipment maker. Sears, Roebuck & Co. says "there is a demand for diving lung equipment wherever there are swimming facilities." Sears devotes nearly a page in its catalog to diving gear. "The Midwest, with its many lakes and rivers, has become a tremendous sales area," reports Richard M. Kline, president of Healthways in Los Angeles. New York sales are strong, reports Rene Bussoz, president of U. S. Divers Corp. of West Los Angeles, maker of the Aqua-Lung. There is even a skin diving club in Reno, Nev. Its members dive in abandoned quarries.

Growing California Industry

Because the sport had its American debut in California, most manufacturers and distributors are still located there. Many are small companies manned by sport-shirted young men who are also active divers. Healthways, one of the biggest in the field, was in the bar bell and golf-accessory business for 10 years, before it took to the sea with fins and masks in 1945. From these two items it has expanded until its line now fills a 32-page catalog. It will gross about \$3.5 million this year. Like many other manufacturers, Healthways not only makes its own line, but also makes foreign gear under license and imports items from France, Italy, and Germany. It expects to sell about 14,000 of its Divair lungs this year at prices ranging from \$129.50 to \$205.

W. J. Voit Rubber Corp., licensed by Owen Churchill to make Swim-Fins, made its first underwater splash with a line of fins and masks in 1948. Its products now number 100.