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SCUBA MANIA

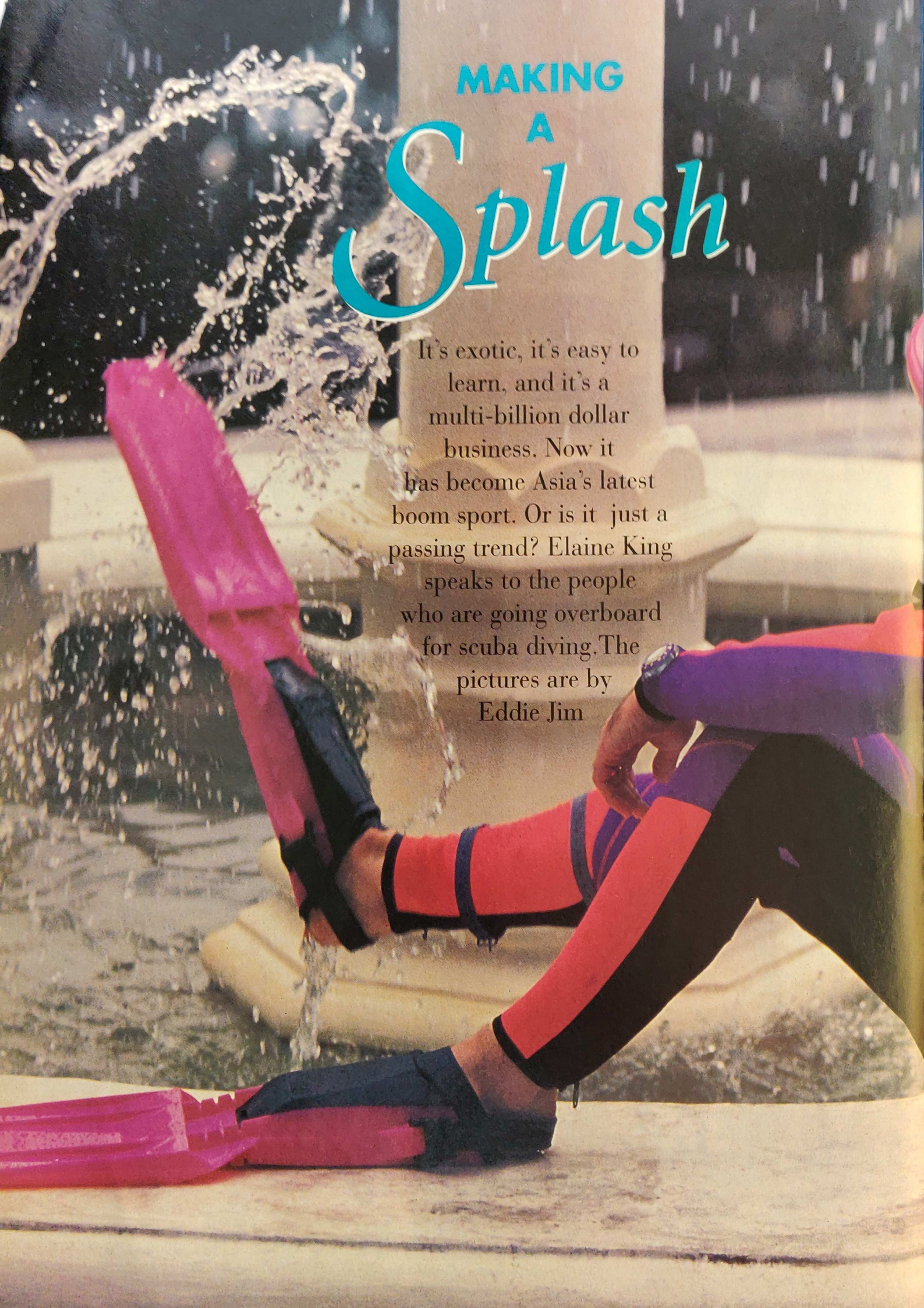
**ONCE THERE WERE
JUST A FEW.
NOW THEY'RE
EVERYWHERE!**

THE PERSONAL WINE SHOPPER

If you want it he'll find it

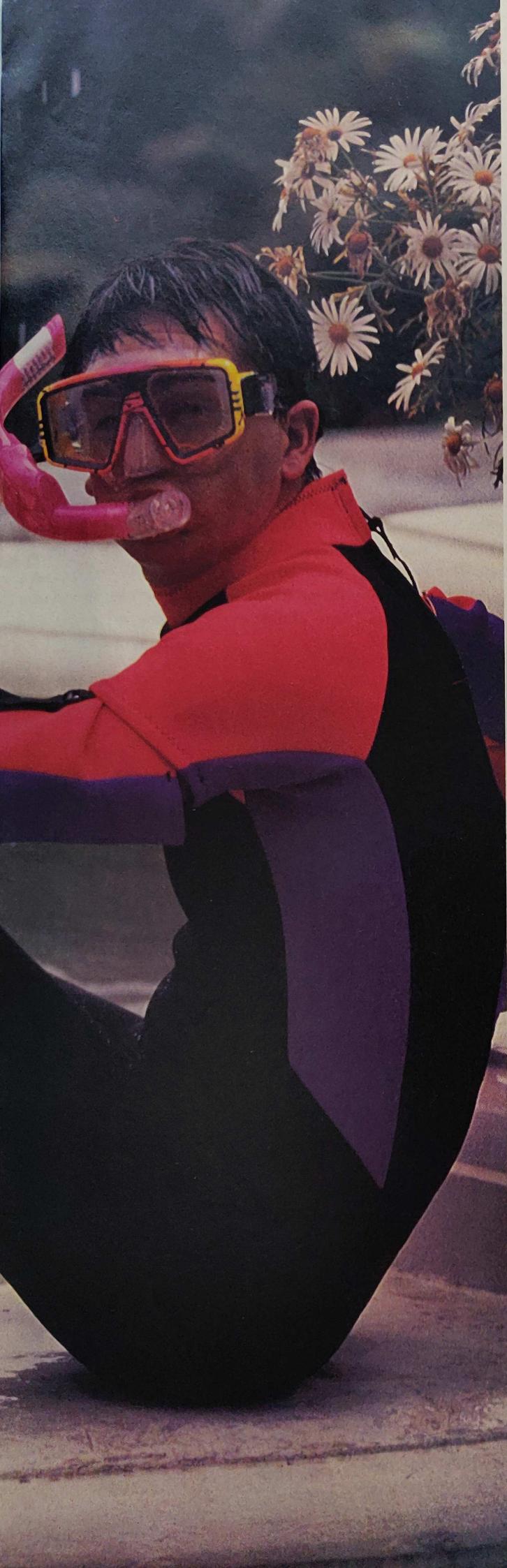
**HOW DREAMS BRING HOPE
TO BLIGHTED YOUNG LIVES**



A person wearing a red and purple wetsuit and pink fins is splashing water. The person is in the foreground, with their legs and fins visible. The background shows a stone structure, possibly a fountain or a pool edge, with water splashing around it. The overall scene is dynamic and energetic, capturing a moment of water sports.

MAKING A Splash

It's exotic, it's easy to learn, and it's a multi-billion dollar business. Now it has become Asia's latest boom sport. Or is it just a passing trend? Elaine King speaks to the people who are going overboard for scuba diving. The pictures are by Eddie Jim



ROBERT HO has a confession to make. He is a scuba diving junkie. And he is not alone. Diving has become the sport of the moment, not only for the serious athlete, but also — the cynical might say — for the upwardly mobile, interested more in psychedelic equipment and suntans than marine life. If you fancy yourself in a leopard skin wet suit, look no further.

The number of scuba divers world-wide is growing at around 25 per cent a year. In Hongkong, where the waters are known more for pollution than coral reefs, numbers are hard to determine; estimates range from 10,000 to 35,000. Diving has become a



multi-million dollar industry in the territory, and typically, image plays a big part of it.

Ho, general manager of HSBC Life, the life insurance arm of the Hongkong Bank, is one of the old school. He started diving 30 years ago and old habits die hard, so he sticks to predominantly black equipment.

He has taught diving skills to many Chuppies: lawyers, brokers and other professionals. But it's not just a rich man's sport, he says. He knows taxi drivers and bus drivers who have taken up scuba diving.

"I started diving in Australia in the Sixties, when only madmen or those who wanted to get their own abalone dived. It was a very physical sport because there was none of the fancy equipment you can get

Addicted to diving: veteran enthusiast Robert Ho (top); dive shop owner Ming Ko (above); the latest wet suits go psychedelic (main picture).



today. There were archaic breathing systems like the twin hose; you sucked air in one way and blew it out the other."

Ho, a qualified dive instructor, is a past chairman of the South China Dive Club. Like all divers, he has unbridled enthusiasm for his sport. Away from work, he lives, breathes and talks scuba, diving not just in exotic locations and on hot, summer days, but also throughout winter.

When Ho first came here from Australia in 1972, the sport was still in its infancy but an industry had already begun to cater for enthusiasts. "It became a more social sport," says Ho. "It became easier for women because it wasn't quite so physical. Many divers in the early Seventies were diving for the sole purpose of spear fishing, but the South China Dive Club banned spear guns on all its dives, and more people took up diving as a recreational sport."

The mid-Eighties heralded the real beginning of the diving revolution in Hongkong, a revolution aided by a sudden surge of middle-class wealth in the territory and throughout Asia; people had more money, and were beginning to travel more.

The fact that diving is seen as an exotic sport has surely added to its attraction among the young, the mobile and the affluent. Ho has a map which he uses to pinpoint the remote specks in various oceans he has visited or plans to visit.

"I was most recently diving in Kenya," he says, "but I have been to all the popular Asian destinations, such as the Philippines, Thailand, the Maldives, Micronesia, Guam and Indonesia." He reels off the list like a roll of honour: the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, Bali, Borneo, Mexico. The next targets on his list are the Red Sea, the Cayman Islands and Brazil.

"I dive regularly in Hongkong, but the diving holidays abroad are the highlight of my life," Ho adds. And these can get pretty expensive because of the inaccessibility of some locations. "In the old days a diving holiday to the Philippines, for example, would have cost only about \$2,000, but it's a lot more now."

Robert Houston, publisher and editor-in-chief of sports magazine *Action Asia*, is well-placed to observe the scuba craze. "Diving

appeals to a big middle class, the typical yuppie and Chippie, who have disposable money and leisure time," he says.

A diving boom in Japan during the mid-Seventies turned the sport into an industry worth HK\$40 billion, and Houston predicts it will enjoy similar popularity in the territory. There are about 25 clubs affiliated to the Hongkong Underwater Association.

It difficult to determine the actual number of divers in Hongkong, says Houston, because, while there are about 10,000 registered divers in the territory, possibly tens of thousands of others learned to dive while on holiday in Asia and would never think of diving in local waters — not surprising given the level of pollution here.

The Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) claims there are some two million divers worldwide and forecasts there will be a staggering eight million by the year 2000 — a large proportion from Asia.

In a sport still dominated by men, Stella Ng, advertising executive of the Times Publishing Group, turns quite a few heads. Petite and chic, she is one of only a few Chinese women diving instructors in Hongkong. "I started diving in 1980 and was stared at, but it didn't worry me. I dive because I love watching the fish."

She qualified as an instructor two years ago, and her students are nearly all men. "I still sometimes see amazement on their faces, the unspoken question: 'can she manage?'"

Ng laughs and adds: "When they see I'm

like a fish underwater, they soon lose their quizzical expressions."

Like most divers, Ng is addicted to the off-beat, and the unexplored places. She has plumbed the depths of almost every known Asian dive spot, but also in the Red Sea, in the Cayman Islands, in Florida (many, many times, she says) and in the freezing waters off England and Canada.

Her next jaunt is to the CoCo Islands in Puerto Rico. Fortunately, her husband Stephen Yan shares her passion for underwater adventure. In fact, they had met on a diving trip, went diving on their honeymoon and almost every holiday since has been spent in the sea.



The Liu family, who own Bunn's chain of diving equipment stores, were among the first to benefit in a big way from the boom. The company had a turnover of \$36 million in 1990 and expects this to rise to \$75 million over the next few years. Kiddie Liu, executive director of Bunn's, says: "We started with one shop in 1958 and we now have five. In a few years, we will expand to 10."

Bunn's 20 instructors train about 100 divers each year and the company sells an enormous quantity of diving equipment, both locally and internationally — an incredible 12,000 wet suits a month.

The Lius proudly, and perhaps rightly, claim to be the pioneers of the industry and the sport in Hongkong.

Kiddie Liu says: "My brothers had always been interested in

water sports. My eldest brother Bunnie went on a diving expedition with a British team when he was still at school and was told not to touch the diving equipment because 'it wasn't for Chinese'. From that moment he made up his mind never to touch their equipment again, never to buy it from them and to make his own.

"That was the start of Bunn's. We got glass and moulded the inner tube of a tyre around it to make a mask; we welded an aluminium pipe to make a snorkel and experimented in Repulse Bay. In 1955 there were only 10 Chinese guys diving in Hongkong.

"But we saw the potential and started Bunn's in 1958 with one small shop."

The brothers sunk every cent of their collective savings into the business, and the investment has clearly paid off.

Ming Ko is another scuba enthusiast who has gone into the business; he owns Ming's Sports Shop, which supplies diving gear.

And a quick glance round the store shows an array of scuba gear that almost rivals a Versace boutique in its dazzling, showy colours.

Full sets of diving gear, including mask, snorkel, fins, buoyancy device, body-suit and tank, come colour co-ordinated. Depending on the brands chosen, the entire kit could set a diver back between \$10,000 and \$15,000.

"In the old days the suits and equipment were mostly black, but look at this," says Ko, pointing to a couple of shocking pink wet suits with matching flippers, regulator, gloves and knife. Clearly, scuba diving has become a sport for the trend-conscious. Maybe it will inspire a more environmentally conscious group of trendies. ●

Appealing to the trend-conscious: full diving gear, from masks to regulators to knives and fins, now comes in colour co-ordinated sets and even leopard skin prints.

