Arlindo Serrão at the microphone, speaking on camera about the Diving Talks conference in Portugal

Interview With

Arlindo Serrão

Carving a New Path in Dive Conferences & Tourism

Interview and photos by Peter Symes

Arlindo Serrão is the founder of Portugal Dive and Diving Talks, the annual international dive conference in Portugal. Peter Symes interviewed the trail-blazer to learn more about his perspectives and experiences in the dive world.

I clearly remember the day I reached out to Arlindo. I accidentally stumbled across a post or advertisement for the inaugural Diving Talks conference in Portugal, and it caught my attention and made me pause. I immediately, or perhaps instinctively, sensed that here was something fresh, new and out of the ordinary in the making, a project that needed all the support it could get. So, I reached out and offered our assistance, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Arlindo Serrão, founder of Portugal Dive and the Diving Talks conference

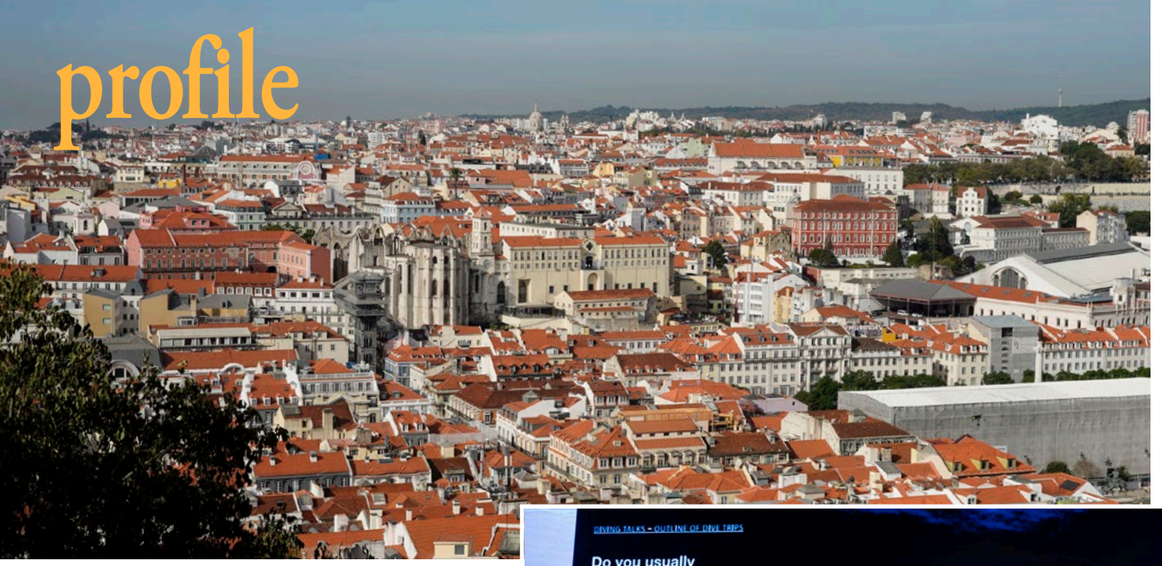
That history is now four successive Diving Talks events long, with many more conversations and time spent at other events we have attended together and a pleasant and memorable road trip through southern Portugal guided by the man himself. A friendship has grown, and shared visions have been cultivated and discussed over the years.

Prior to his move into the dive industry, Arlindo worked in the real estate, FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) and banking sectors. After a final assignment (which also made him an expat), he said he embraced his entrepreneurial side and founded Portugal Dive.

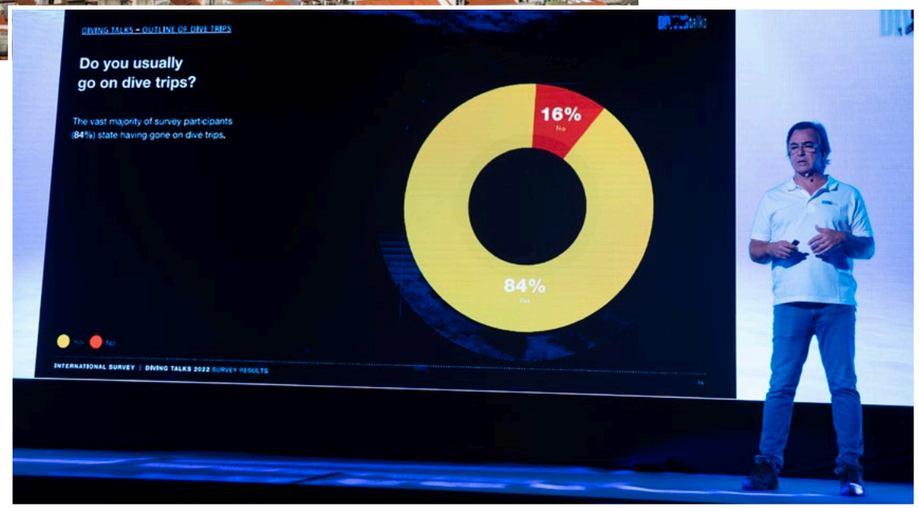
PS: Going back to the very beginning: Where and when did you discover your passion for diving?

AS: It all started as a search for a sport that my wife and I could enjoy together. We wanted to try something new as a couple, so we booked a trip to the Maldives and got our Open Water Diver certifications at Rangali Island in 2005.

PS: Describe the path that led you to become a dive industry professional. What convinced you that running an



View over Lisbon (left); Arlindo giving a presentation about an international survey of divers at the Diving Talks conference (below)



incoming dive travel agency in a European country was a viable business model? Describe your vision and mission.

AS: It all started with what should have been a dream dive trip to Cyprus. Just three friends on a mission to explore the legendary *Zenobia* wreck. We thought we were being efficient, with each of us taking responsibility for a part of the trip. I booked the flights, Pedro sorted out the dive centre and Hugo... well, Hugo proudly booked the hotel. Simple enough, right?

Except when we landed, we discovered that our "well-oiled plan" was more of a logistical puzzle. The dive centre was 20 minutes away from our hotel. The harbour? A casual 90-minute drive in the *opposite* direction. So every morning, we had a scenic, cross-country commute before we even touched the water. By day two, we were less like adventurous divers and more like tired Uber drivers with a wetsuit addiction.

That's when the idea hit me: *What if someone actually took care of all of this properly?* A service that brings everything together—dives, transfers, accommodation—tailored by people who really know the local scene.

And who knows local diving better than local divers? That insight alone, I felt, could add serious value for anyone wanting to dive in Portugal but unsure where to start.

So I started digging into the numbers. There were already plenty of people coming to Portugal on holiday, but few were coming specifically for diving. That gap between casual tourism and purpose-driven dive travel looked like a real opportunity.

And from that chaotic trip to Cyprus... everything started to fall into place. That was the beginning. The rest is (a lot more organised) history.

Portugal Dive is a concept that promotes diving tourism across Portugal—including the mainland, the Azores Archipelago and the Madeira Islands—with a twist: Rather than including the usual dive packages, Portugal Dive books exactly the dives that travellers want to do. Each diving plan is carefully pre-arranged with one or more dive shops, ensuring that guests experience only the dives they choose rather than following a shop's fixed schedule.

PS: There are almost no other incoming dive travel agencies in Europe despite the stunning and attractive locations, particularly around the

Arlindo Serrão in Lisbon (above) and in town for coffee with presenter and technical diving expert Mark Powell (centre). Arlindo speaks to a crowd gathered in a gallery displaying the Underwater Photography Collection at the Diving Talks conference (top right). At a seaside stop on a walking tour of Lisbon, Arlindo speaks to press about diving in Portugal (top left).

Mediterranean. Why do you think this is, and why are you succeeding in this field when others are not?

AS: The main reason? Simple—because no one else was doing it. At least, not that I knew of. Most divers tend to look outwards, to far-off destinations, when planning their next trip. I decided to flip the script and focus inwards. After all, Portugal (and the Azores and Madeira) *is* a foreign country… to everyone who is not from here, right?

PS: At some point, you decided to create the Diving Talks conference. How did that come about, and what inspired you?

AS: Having attended multiple international dive shows and conferences—Eurotek being a personal reference—I identified an opportunity to create a different kind of event. I launched Diving Talks, a unique gathering of divers designed to make presentations more engaging, foster greater attendee involvement and align with the digital era by positioning brands in direct connection with content.

I believe this content-driven approach is key to justifying the industry's ongoing investment in staying close to its audience. People are growing tired of the same old dive shows that have been around for decades. Most attendees go just to hunt for discounted gear or bargain trips, and that is starting to take a toll on the brands that still show up—it is becoming harder for them to justify the cost.

Diving Talks has evolved into a content platform where like-minded individuals share experiences and achievements and network in an environment that actively promotes interaction between speakers and attendees. I believe this creates the perfect environment for brands to connect with their audience in a more meaningful way, going far beyond just technical specs or the kind of information you would typically find on a website.

And when you add a respected diver into the mix—someone who actually uses that piece of equipment—you open up the chance for real conversations. It becomes an opportunity to explore why one brand or piece of equipment might be the right choice over another, guided by someone with genuine experience and practical insights.

Underwater photography

The latest addition to the Diving Talks ecosystem is the Underwater Photography Collection, which today showcases 100 stunning works from some of the world's best underwater photographers. The collection is an educational tool that supports the promotion of diving and ocean advocacy, particularly among young students and children, who are invited to explore it during each edition

Arlindo presenting at Diving Talks (left). Delicious snacks and sweets offered to event participants (above and right). Arlindo tastes a recreated liqueur from the *Vasa* ship in Stockholm (far right).

of Diving Talks. Arlindo believes that in one of those groups, there may be a Sylvia Earle or Jacques Cousteau of the future.

PS: What have been Diving Talks' successes and challenges, both existing and future? How would you like to see it develop?

AS: Diving Talks has definitely had its wins—and its challenges. One of the biggest successes has been creating something fresh and different. People call it the "TED Talks of Diving", which really captures the spirit of what we are doing—bringing together top divers, explorers and thinkers for inspiring, meaningful conversations.

The challenge? We are not your typical dive expo. We are not about selling gear—we are about sharing ideas. So shifting expectations, especially with brands used to traditional formats, has taken some work. Convincing brands to look beyond ROI in terms of sales and see the long-term value of being part of a deeper conversation is an ongoing task. But it's happening, and the community is growing stronger each year.

Looking ahead, I would love to see Diving Talks keep growing internationally and continue attracting passionate people from all areas of diving—exploration, science, storytelling and conservation. We want it to stay personal, inspiring and truly community-driven.

PS: There is a lot of talk about the challenges in the dive industry, which has been contracting for many years. Do you see a way forward to make diving popular again, particularly among the younger generations who now seem to be missing?

AS: Yes, the dive industry has been facing real challenges for quite some time, and unfortunately, many of the key stakeholders still seem to be ignoring the reality staring us in the face. The numbers do not lie: Fewer people are getting into diving, and the younger generations are largely missing from the picture.

What is concerning is that instead of addressing the shrinking market, training agencies and equipment manufacturers appear to be locked in a battle for market share, competing over a pie that gets smaller every year. There is very little serious conversation about growing the market itself, about making diving relevant, accessible and exciting to new audiences.

If we want diving to become popular again, especially among younger people, we need a shift in mindset. We need to stop selling courses and gear the same way we did 30 years ago. We have to rethink how we tell the story of diving—not just as a technical sport but as a doorway to adventure, purpose, exploration and even environmental impact. We have to show how diving connects with the things that younger generations care about.

This is part of what we are trying to do with Diving Talks—bring fresh voices, new perspectives and deeper conversations that challenge the status quo. But this has to go beyond one event. The industry as a whole needs to get serious about reinventing itself if we want to have a future that is more than just nostalgia.

Arlindo converses with the chef about the three-course dinner served to participants at the Diving Talks event (centre). Aerial view of Lisbon (far right).

PS: What can the dive industry do to evolve?

AS: Evolve! That is exactly what the dive industry needs to do.

The way we introduce young people to diving has to adapt to the world they live in—an era where they find what they want, how and when they want it. Yet, we are still trying to bring them into diving using outdated methods that simply do not connect.

When was the last time a training agency genuinely asked kids, "What about scuba diving?" I am talking about real focus groups or proper studies to understand what makes them tick. I am pretty sure we would be surprised by what we would learn.

Also—let's be honest—kids today don't read manuals. Most of the things we buy don't even come with one anymore. But diving courses? Still full of manuals (paper or digital) and exams.

Maybe it sounds radical, but… drop the theory. Focus on capabilities. On training real-world skills. Practice, practice, practice.

That is how we make more divers. Better divers. And that is how we make diving relevant again, to a new generation just waiting for something exciting to dive into.

PS: You mentioned the importance of innovation, promoting tech, research and environmental initiatives through diving. What are your thoughts, more specifically?

AS: Absolutely—innovation is key to keeping diving relevant and impactful, especially when it comes to technology, research and environmental initiatives.

Diving is not just a sport. It's a gateway to exploration, science and conservation. And that is exactly where the industry can—and should—lean in. Think about how much diving has contributed to marine biology, archaeology, climate research and even robotics. There is so much untapped potential when we position diving as a platform for discovery and solutions, not just recreation.

Of course, this path is not for everyone. Not every diver wants to be a researcher or explorer—and that is perfectly fine. But as I said earlier, somewhere in those groups of kids we are trying to inspire, there could be a future Sylvia Earle or Jacques Cousteau. That is the kind of possibility we need to keep open and actively support.

And think about this: The divers we train today are the explorers of the future. But if we don't act now—if we don't evolve and make diving more appealing, accessible and purposeful—there may not be many left to continue exploring tomorrow.

Technology, research and environmental action are not just "nice to have" elements—they are essential to diving's future and to making it matter in the world beyond our community.

PS: What other roles do you play in the dive industry, and what is the importance of engaging in these other roles?

AS: Beyond organising Diving Talks, I play several roles in the dive industry that I believe are deeply connected and mutually reinforcing.

I am the founder of Portugal Dive, a company focused on promoting Portugal as a top diving destination. Through Portugal Dive, I work closely with dive centres, tourism boards and international partners to design and deliver high-quality diving experiences across mainland Portugal, the Azores and Madeira. It is my way of helping to put Portugal on the map for divers while supporting the local diving community and economy.

In addition to this, I am involved in the broader development of dive tourism and ocean-related initiatives. I collaborate with organisations like DEMA and Fórum Oceano and participate in strategic discussions that bring diving into conversations, also around marine conservation, science and innovation.

For me, engaging in these different roles is essential. It gives me a holistic view of the industry, from what divers experience on the ground to the bigger picture of how diving can contribute to sustainability, tourism and education. It also means that Diving Talks is not just an isolated event but part of a much larger effort to elevate diving as a tool for exploration, connection and positive change.

PS: Describe your most memorable dive.

AS: Caves are my favourite places to dive. I am not an explorer, but there is something about the silence, the structure, the mystery—I just love being in caves. Shipwrecks are a close second, especially when there is penetration involved. In a way, it always comes back to caves for me.

But my most memorable dive did not happen in a cave

After the Diving Talks conference, Arlindo hosted visiting media on a tour of Lisbon, where they were served local specialities (below). Arlindo, with scientific technical diver, ichtyonomist and General Director of SubZone Oy Immi Wallin, a presenter at the Scandinavian Dive Show in Gothenburg (right), and speaking with a visitor at the Portugal Dive booth (far right).

or a wreck. It happened in Madeira, at the São Lourenço tip of the island. What started out as a regular dive turned into one of the most touching experiences of my life.

Thirty kilometres from there, in the Desertas Islands, lives the world's rarest marine mammal—the Madeira monk seal. And during that dive, an adult male appeared and swam around me. It was surreal. I was mesmerised.

I felt small (literally, as the monk seal was 2.5 metres long and probably weighed around 300-400 kg), humbled, and honestly, a bit heartbroken. For years, we hunted these creatures to the brink of extinction. And now, there are only about 25 individuals left in this tiny population.

That moment stayed with me. It reminded me of how fragile and precious the underwater world really is—and why we have a responsibility to protect it.

PS: What is the most important piece of advice you would give to your 20-year-old self? Do you have a philosophy or idea that you live by and would like to pass on to others?

AS: If I could give my 20-year-old self one piece of advice, it would be this: Care less about pleasing everyone and learn to let go of dead weight sooner. I have always had ideas, and I have always made them happen—that is just who I am. But I also spent too much time trying to accommodate different personalities and sensitivities along the way. I respected people (and still do), but looking back, I should have focused more on what truly mattered and less on trying to keep everyone happy.

That said… would 20-year-old me actually listen to that advice? Probably not. He would smile, nod politely and then go right back to trying to fix the unfixable. Some lessons you have to learn the hard way and just live through it!

A principle I live by is to act and not wait for permission or perfect conditions. Think it, plan it, do it. The rest tends to fall into place—or teach you something valuable along the way.

PS: Outside of diving, what inspires you?

AS: Outside of diving, what truly inspires me is everything around young people—their energy, how fast they move, how far they go, how easily they adapt. I am constantly impressed by their generosity, their deep sense of justice and the respect they show to others. They have this deep-rooted respect for humanity and for the world that I find both humbling and motivating. But above all, it is their capacity to work hard and sacrifice to get what they need that really moves me. They are not afraid of the effort it takes to build something meaningful, and that is incredibly inspiring.

On a more personal level, I find endless inspiration in my own children. Watching them grow, learning alongside them and realising just how much they teach me—and believe me, it's a lot—has been one of the most rewarding parts of my life. It reminds me every day that we do not just shape the next generation—they shape us, too.

PS: Which philosophies or ideas?

AS: If I had to pick the philosophies or ideas that guide me, I would say: Act on your ideas, stay true to your vision and don't waste energy trying to please everyone. I have learnt that if you believe in something, you need to push it forward—boldly, with intention. Respect others, always, but don't lose momentum trying to adapt to every opinion or sensibility. That kind of dead weight only slows you down.

At the core, it all comes down to this: Have ideas, make them happen and surround yourself with people who bring energy—not excuses. That is what keeps me moving forward. ■