Report: Rebreather Forum 4 (RF4)

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In the jungle of dive shows, events and conferences, Rebreathers Forums are rare and exclusive. They bring together technical diving practitioners, explorers, manufacturers, and hyperbaric researchers.

Each forum presents and summarises the state and forefront of technological advances and current research since the previous one and its findings and recommendations formulated in the closing session of the conference set the stage for technological developments, improvements in training and operation, and areas of further research in the upcoming years.

The previous Rebreather Forum (also known as RF3) was held in May 2012 in Orlando, USA, making it close to 11 years since the last one. During this period, technology has evolved significantly, and frontiers of research have taken significant steps forward.

As a nice change from previous events, which were all held in the United States, RF4 took place in Europe—more specifically, at the University of Malta, Valletta Campus, which is right in the old centre of Malta’s capital. The setting was thus classical in nature, and it was a real pleasure making the walks to and from the hotel, down through the cobbled streets between ancient buildings, to the conference.

Placing it in Europe this time surely also attracted a different audience. As a European, I enjoyed not having to contend with long-distance travel and jetlag. Food is also much better on this side of the Atlantic and waking up with a view of Valletta’s old harbour, rather than a nondescript parking lot in Orlando, also made it more pleasurable.

From a delegate’s perspective, the event was very pleasant, well-organised and went without a hitch. So, that’s off to the organisers, and in particular, Michael Menduno, who surely lost some sleep over putting the event together, contending with numerous obstacles, delays and hiccups in the process. In the end, it all paid off.

Preceding the conference, a string of other events was held from 17 April and onwards, including some shipwreck and recreational diving, some try-dives with various manufacturers, and Gareth Lock held some courses that, in conjunction with the core conference, made for more of a rebreather festival. Several presenters and delegates also stayed on to do some diving after the conference.

On the evening before the conference, a “non-caustic cocktail” event was held in the main conference hotel, which was a great opportunity to catch up and socialise with fellow dive-industry professionals and colleagues. The classical quartet, which provided live music during the evening, was a really nice touch.

Highlights

The forum schedule was jam-packed with top-notch presenters. It is impossible to highlight just a few without doing injustice to many others, but I will have to give it a shot. Hyperbaric doctors and tech event regulars Neal Pollock and Simon Mitchell each gave several presentations as well as coordinated the talks, keeping the schedule on track.

They were joined by fellow doctors David Doolittle and Richard Harris. The latter, who is widely known for his role in the Tham Luang cave rescue in 2018, also gave the keynote presentation on hydrogen diving at the banquet dinner, which was a highlight. Various other presenters, such as Dr Frauke Tillmans of DAN, Gareth Lock, and Pete Mesley, spoke about aspects of safety and mitigation through improved training and practices.

Dr Neal Pollock and Dr Simon Mitchell coordinated the talks.
Dr Rachel Lance presents, “Near future of physiological monitoring” (left); Phil Short and Kevin Gurr (centre); Dr Frauke Tillmans, “Rebreather market and training is actually growing;” (centre left); Pete Mesley (far left); Pollock’s mastery of slide composition (far lower left).

Other recommendations were made regarding health checks, dive planning, emergency planning in remote locations, in-water recompression, and collection and analysis of rebreather incident data. What is mentioned here is by no means exhaustive, and the full list of findings, recommendations and observations will be published in the upcoming proceedings. Thanks go to the organisers for a well-executed, informative and pleasant event, and to all the sponsors making it possible.

Dr Neal Pollock actually goes diving (upper right).

Post-event chillin’: Enough said, time to dive! Dr Neal Pollock actually goes diving (upper right).

Dr Neal Pollock fields questions during his talk, “Hazards in rebreather diving” (right).