

WELL AND TRULY TESTED



NIGEL WADE is cock-a-hoop, as our picture indicates, because when you jump through all the hoops to get a made-to-measure drysuit that's how you're supposed to feel

DRYSUIT O'THREE CUSTOM RI 2-100 & MSF 2-500 HYBRID F/E

I KNOW I'M AN ODD SHAPE; my body profile is classed as "compact", which actually means short and chubby. Consequently I have a constant fight to find clothes that fit straight off the peg, invariably need to have new trousers shortened, and when I actually find a shirt or jacket that fits my chest I have to roll the sleeves up to avoid tripping over them.

Finding exposure suits that fit is even more of a nightmare, although some forward-thinking manufacturers do have ranges that include the words "Short" and "Broad" on their list of standard sizes.

For me, along with many others, there's only one solution, and that's to get stuff that's made to measure.

At the turn of the century I purchased a custom drysuit from UK-based O'Three, and after 15 years of heavy use it's still going strong, but appears to have shrunk as the years have rolled by, and my waistline has gained a few more inches.

It was time for a new version, so I asked the Dorset neoprene gurus to again measure my inside leg and work their magic.

Custom Fitting

O'Three tells me that many factors need to be considered when purchasing a custom made-to-measure drysuit, but that certain build parameters should always be adhered to.

An individual's perception of just how a suit

should fit can vary greatly. The team at O'Three makes recommendations on how its suits should be tailored and customised, but the final choices are always those of the user.

The fitting process involves initial self-measurement and the completion of O'Three's size chart, which can be done at home, at O'Three HQ, or by its team at one of the bi-annual UK Dive Shows.

It will then build the basic body of the suit complete with any optional coloured panels and chosen zip position.

To ensure that a perfect fit is achieved, O'Three insists where possible that a final fitting session is carried out at its Portland HQ before completion. It's at this stage that any further adjustments needed can be made without compromising the integrity of the suit's seams.

At the same time, boot and pocket styles can be chosen and the wrist- and neck-seals sized to fit. The exact positions of all components such as valves, kneepads and pockets are also decided and marked on the suit before it ends



The O'Three Hybrid drysuit is very flexible.

up on the seamstress's table to be glued, blind-stitched, taped and finally pressure-tested.

The Design

I opted for O'Three's latest model, a hybrid front-entry drysuit built from its own robust hyper-compressed resin-impregnated (RI) 2-100 neoprene. This has a snag-resistant outer nylon layer in the chest and leg panels.

The rest of the suit is then married with flexible and supple MSF 2-500 neoprene on the shoulders and arms. This material uses the same compressed neoprene as the RI 2-100 but is coated with a Multi Stretch Fibre (MSF) nylon.

The two materials combined create an incredibly tough but flexible Hybrid drysuit. A front-entry diagonal heavy-duty brass zip is fitted to enable self-donning and doffing, with a Velcro-fastened flap for protection.

I also chose ergonomically shaped boots with strap-down ankles and built-in fin-stops, bulk PU knee-pads, low-profile Apeks inlet and shoulder-mounted auto dump-valves and a single cargo-pocket.

The neck-seal is made from 2.5mm Super Stretch neoprene. The wrist-seals incorporate a Kubi dry-glove ring system but are unique in that O'Three has used its own removable, long, 3mm neoprene contour-hugging Xstend wrist-seals.

This gives the option of diving with either wet- or dry-gloves without compromising the comfort and durability that neoprene wrist-seals provide, and they can be changed quickly and easily by the user at home.

The suit is finished with discreet custom logos on the lower arms and all the features that make an O'Three drysuit, well, an O'Three drysuit.

The Package

The new Hybrid suit soon arrived, along with a bag complete with changing mat, a bottle of Jollop to lubricate the seals, Zipslip and beeswax to ensure that the brass zip slid freely, a 5mm vented semi-dry classic hood and an Apeks low-pressure hose for the inlet valve. A pair of latex dry-gloves fitted with the Kubi ring system and thermal under-gloves completed the bundle.

SPECS

PRICE ▶ £1655

SIZES ▶ Custom made to measure

ZIP ▶ Brass diagonal front-entry

BOOTS ▶ Ergonomic with strap-down ankles and fin-stop.

POCKETS ▶ One, Velcro-fastening flap

NECK-SEAL ▶ 2.5mm Super Stretch neoprene

WRIST-SEALS ▶ Kubi Ring System, 3mm neoprene Xstend.

EXTRAS ▶ Kubi ring system, latex dry-glove and thermal under-gloves.

CONTACT ▶ www.othree.co.uk

DIVER GUIDE ★★★★★★★★

In Use

I initially took the Hybrid to my local inland dive centre to safely assess my weight requirements and to ensure that it was actually watertight. It would have been foolhardy for me to try to sort this out at sea.

My initial thoughts were how flexible the suit was and how warm and toasty I felt, especially with the dry-gloves fitted. That was until I dunked my head under water without a hood, and realised how cold the early spring water

actually was, as an ice-cream headache ensued.

I know, but I'm only human and still learning from my stupid mistakes.

The suit was extremely easy to get on and off without assistance. The flexible MSF panels stretched enough to make this a breeze without needing a telescoping torso and crotch strap.

Internally fitted brace-type suspenders hold the lower section of the suit up when it's all on, which is a must if you don't want the crotch to droop around your knees.

They are held in place with double Velcro fixings and are removable if required.

The dry-gloves slid easily into the wrist-mounted Kubi ring system and were secured with twin O-rings, making them completely waterproof. Thermal gloves worn underneath kept my hands warm without creating the bulk of neoprene wet-gloves.

The following week I took the suit to Dorset, and boarded Weymouth's *Tango* to get in some early-season dives and collect a few scallops.

I'm glad I had completed the weight-checks beforehand, as it meant I could get on with the tasks in hand instead of faffing about on the surface swapping lead blocks.

While at the surface the position of the Apeks dump-valve proved ideal, allowing air to migrate and vent easily and getting me under water fast.

On the dives the suit performed brilliantly. Equalising pressure and using it for buoyancy, I found that it held me in my preferred orientation and left me to concentrate on my task, filling my goody bags with tasty molluscs.

During the ascent phase of the dives the expanding air, again, was easy to dump, giving me full control of my buoyancy.

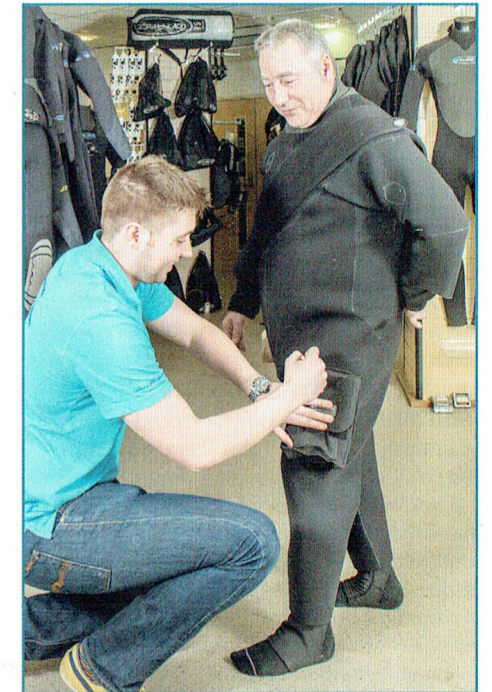
On our safety stop I had time to practise shutdown drills, and the Hybrid's flexibility meant that reaching behind to locate tank valves was a simple, unrestricted operation. I could easily reach my fin-straps too, something I normally have problems with in other drysuits as they restrict waist and knee movement.

Thanks to the double O-ring seals the dry-gloves remained watertight, but on my first dive I had provided no means of equalising the pressure within them, so they compressed around the under-gloves at depth. The latex used is so elastic that this wasn't a problem, however, leaving me with total dexterity.



The unique combination of Kubi ring system and O'Three's Xstend neoprene wrist-seals.

I did however place a small length of bungee under the neoprene to break the wrist-seals on the second dive. This helped to equalise the pressure, preventing compression and actually keeping my hands warmer.



Josh Baker during the final fitting at the O'Three HQ.

Back on *Tango*, and without any assistance, it was a quick and easy task to strip the suit down to my waist for an urgent visit to the head. There's nothing worse than relying on someone else to unzip a back-entry drysuit when you need to relieve a full bladder after a dive.

Conclusion

O'Three is celebrating its 25th anniversary, and in its time it has gained an unrivalled reputation for producing some of the best drysuits money can buy. It's no surprise to see them maintaining their popularity in the UK diving community.

The company always seem to be looking to develop new products using innovative designs and hi-tec materials, the Hybrid suit being an example of this strategy.

There's something special about diving in a made-to-measure drysuit, because its many subtle variances should add up to make it feel supremely comfortable and functional.

You also get the features and accessories you want, and the most important bits such as valves are placed in the exact positions to provide ideal individual performance.

The fit and flexibility of this new Hybrid is where it really scored. I could easily perform any movements needed without constriction, and under water the excellent distribution of air inside the suit enabled me to maintain perfect buoyancy and trim.

The team at O'Three know their stuff and expertly handled the fitting process in an informal, friendly manner. The result is a suit that should not only last for years but complement rather than compromise my diving.

There isn't another Hybrid suit like this on the market; its unique combination of Kubi ring and neoprene wrist-seals and the partnership of materials make this one of the best drysuits I've seen, and it will be a constant partner on all my UK and colder-clime dives. ■



O'Three boot choice or socks and Rockboots.

Kubi dry-gloves fitted to the Hybrid suit.