

## My Sidemount CCR Reflection – Jon Bernot

Sidemount rebreathers, I was very skeptical at first. As a die-hard back-mount diver I already saw sidemount as a mission specific gear configuration. When I looked at most of the sidemount rebreathers out there, there were some common trends that I didn't like. The biggest was most were not that compact. Many were too long and did not lend themselves well to manipulation in small spaces. After all, if I was going to take the leap this is where the thing was going to end up; small confined spaces.



The next big thing I did not like was there were too many exposed fittings and too many hoses that had to be attached in the water.

So how did I get to this point at all? Ever since moving to Florida I had dreamed about exploration. As a cave instructor and rebreather instructor on other units I was still looking for that missing piece. True exploration in virgin cave.

The popular cave dive in my area now happened to be none other than Ginnie Springs. At first I was relatively content to “explore” the areas of the cave that only a few had visited. After all what exploration could be left in this, the most dove cave in the world? I had heard rumors the world's best explorers had deemed the back of this cave “walled out” and why on earth would I doubt them.

I started my dives on open circuit sidemount and quickly moved to a back-mounted rebreather. I went through several, until I found the one that was easiest to flip in front of me and re-don on the other side of the most hardened restrictions. But the solo business of pushing a rebreather in front of me while dragging a scooter behind was getting old.

Then one day I got to see the KISS Sidekick up close. Wow, this is basic. No fittings sticking out from the sides, a basic loop, a bag that housed the scrubber to keep it warm, and short for easy maneuvering.

At this time I owned five rebreathers and had just taken over ownership of one of the leading cave diving shops in the area, and was looking at adding another rebreather to my teaching resume anyway. Let me give this one a shot.

In conjunction with another CCR instructor from Denmark, I took a crossover to become an instructor on this unit. The first thing we both found was that when the unit had a small 2L Oxygen bottle already attached there was only one hose that had to be connected to be ready to dive.

This was a huge plus. 5 minutes in the pool and I was ready to go cave diving. Of course, we finished the training first. It felt good and was not cluttered at all. A couple of dives and I was ready to push the unit to the back of cave and see how it really performed. It was great. It became so comfortable to dive I made it my regular exploration kit.

Well one day during one of my regular evening dives with a friend from work we were back around 6000 feet on our breathers and we go check out a small lead where I had laid line in a year earlier on OC sidemount. I looked at the end and somehow it didn't seem as small as I had remembered. I think I can

make it through there with this. I gave my partner the hold signal, tied in, and managed to wiggle through with a cloud of silt billowing behind me. Holy crap, its low but it goes. I start unspooling and soon realize that I need to go back. I place my reel and go back to signal to my partner to follow me.

We quickly go through my reel and I motion for more line to Kenny. He passes me my Dive Rite explorer reel I had given him as a joking afterthought at the start of the dive. We laid 1200 feet that night and never did get to the new Valhalla room I had discovered a month earlier and had been our initial objective that night.

I have since used the Sidekick to lay an additional 4500 feet of line give or take. No, survey is not complete but that far back and at the given depths, CCR is a huge advantage.

There may be fancier sidemount units. There may be other unit's out with a more robust electronics package. But this one works, is simple, and for its intended purpose I believe is the best on the market in the sidemount CCR category.

How does the scrubber perform? Well look at the ratings, that's all I can really say, but those of you who know me know the dives I do. It works VERY WELL.

How does it perform deep? I used it in Sally Ward exploration to 300 feet and am looking forward to the next push dive when I can take it back.

So how do I feel about sidemount rebreathers now? They are not for everyone. Configuration of the Oxygen and Diluent/Bailout are key for them to work well. A background in OC sidemount is a must and a background in CCR is a plus.

For major exploration, it needs to be simple, and for me this unit allowed me to realize a dream, and hey there is a lot of cave out there just out of reach of yesterday's technology.