YOUR FELLOW-DIVERS ARE ON THE BOW of a wreck. You join them, having found something interesting. But would you know how to convey clearly to them, without the aid of a slate, that you had just found the mast, or a rudder, or an engine, or a bell? The hand signals for some 20 parts of a shipwreck are shown in the following pages, but these are a mere fraction of the signs catalogued in a new book that aims to get all divers speaking the same language.

Scubasigns: The Guide To All Scuba Diving Hand Signals, is the brainchild of two Dutch divers, Mike Harterink and Dave van Stijn (Mike’s the one on the right in the picture of them above). Mike is a PADI (Platinum) Course Director and a DAN Instructor-Trainer who has trained more than 1000 instructors. Dave is a PADI Instructor and marine-life enthusiast.

“We got into a discussion three years ago about how strange it is that diving hand-signals differ around the world, especially considering that safety is involved,” says Mike.

“We looked for a book containing all hand-signals, but though a few attempts had been made in the past no such book was available. So we decided to do it ourselves.”

Men with two missions, Mike and Dave have also recently set up the Scubasigns Foundation (www.scubasigns.com).

“The goal of the foundation is to help local people in undeveloped parts of the world to
become dive guides or instructors,” says Mike. “In doing this, we help the local economy as well as the local marine-life environment.

“We start our first project this summer in Indonesia, and all the profit from sales of the book will go to the Scubasigns Foundation.”

Scubasigns is the result of several years of research and discussions with divers. The chunky, attractively produced 288-page full-colour book illustrates almost 500 signs, and includes contributions from “some of the world’s best photographers”.

The 13 sections cover surface signalling: the basics we should all know; night-time signals; numerals; signs used by instructors and guides; problem-solving; environment; wreck; tech; fun and “alternative”. The biggest section, covering 100 pages, deals with marine-life recognition, with a marine-life basics introductory chapter.

“Under water we’re all the same, but until now we didn’t speak the same language,” says Mike. “It was time to determine how all of us can communicate with each other in the liquid world we love so much.

“We looked into existing scuba-diving hand-signals, and spoke with hundreds of divers to find out which signals they used. Besides all the divers we met in our professional diving career, we travelled the world to meet and talk to many other divers and diving organisations.” And he means the world – Europe, the Caribbean, New Zealand, the Middle East, Central America, the USA and Asia.

The hand-signal photos were in fact taken mainly on the Caribbean island of St Eustatius, where Mike and Dave were working during 2008.

“Wwew reviewed and tested all this information to achieve a definite standard that any diver will be able to easily learn and share with other divers worldwide,” says Mike.

Had the pair made up some of the signs themselves? “Not that many, really. It was fascinating to see, besides the ones we all learn during training, how many diving signals are used in practice by other divers. We did
develop a few signs, especially in the Marine-life and Fun chapters, but these would come to less than 5%.

Can divers really be expected to learn all these 500 signs? "Some chapters are very specific, like Tech and Night. Others are more general, such as Basics, Problem-solving and Numbers. To make your dive safer, we think every diver should know at least the last three mentioned.

"Just pick up the book and start going through the pages. It looks colourful, and is stacked with beautiful marine-life images. We’ve seen people turning the pages back and forth, using it as a reference book."

"People are also starting to use it in diving clubs, during dive briefings and de-briefings and so on. It covers something we all use a lot, so divers will find it interesting and the learning will go automatically."

We thought that for UK divers, often operating in limited visibility, wreck signals would be particularly interesting. "Sometimes it’s just fun to know whether you and your buddy are looking at the old engine or if it’s the stove in the galley – in some old, rusty wrecks, they can look almost the same," says Mike Hartenink.

"Besides this, reading the Wreck chapter should make the task of navigation in and around wrecks much clearer than before – it becomes easier to signal ‘let’s swim to the bow/stern/mast’ and so on."

Scubasigns (ISBN: 9789090241654) costs 24.95 euros and can be bought from www.scubasigns.com or from dive centres.