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INSIDE: ALL THE CONTACTS YOU NEED TO SCUBA DIVE

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UK DIVING

WRECKS
BETWEEN
THE KELP ON
SKYE

TRAINING

CUTTING
THROUGH THE
BIAS AND
RHETORIC

34 UK DIVING

The Port Napier off Skye once had a sinister but shortlived career as a minelayer. Now, her huge carcass with easily accessible innards is a divers' delight.





The unique and dramatic Macleods Maidens.



Exploring the rugged coastline.



Peering under kelp on the SS *Urlana*.

SKYE DIVE

Simon Volpe succumbs to the charm of surface peaks and underwater gullies

The island of Skye is divided into six peninsulas by an intricate coastline of sea lochs. One of the largest of the Scottish Isles, Skye covers 672 square miles. For the visiting diver, the underwater scenery offers enormous variety, from caves, pinnacles and spectacular vertical drop-offs to boulder slopes and sandy beaches. The warmer waters of the Gulf Stream currents help nurture a richness and abundance of plant and animal life unrivalled in British waters.

Skye offers interesting seascapes irrespective of climatic conditions. The numerous sea lochs and barrier islands provide plenty of shelter and have the benefit of being largely unexplored. We chose to spend seven days at the Waternish peninsula, staying with Hebridean Diving Services. Over the next few days we were able to work our way around the island, finding dive site after dive site that far exceeded our highest expectations.

Wrecks are certainly not in short

supply, the most well documented probably being the *Port Napier* (see *SCUBA World* August 1993). Although definitely worth a visit, this is by no means the only site that Skye has to offer.

The *SS Urlana* provides a superb dive location for dramatic scenery both above and below the waterline. We launched our boat from Caroi Jetty at Lock Caroi, which took us past the unique coastal feature of Macleods Maidens just west of Ildrigill point. Here, the above water scenery is superb. Underwater, the terrain consists of shallow gullies, interrupted by kelp forests.

The *SS Urlana* was a British steamship of 6,852 tons, built in 1941 by Barclay Curle and Co of Glasgow. Owned by the British Indian Steam Navigation Co. she was a single screw 2 decked cargo ship measuring 140 x 18 x 10 metres. On the night of the 5th September 1943, her dimensions became academic when she ran ashore and broke up due to heavy weather. Luckily, the *Thurland Casele*, an assisting vessel, rescued 108 crew and successfully shipped them to Loch Ewe. The *Urlana's* cargo of canned meat spilled from her holds, was washed ashore and later salvaged by locals.

Our descent took us into a kelp infested region at only 14.3 metres. As we progressed, we were quickly surprised by the occasional clearing



All smiles at the end of the day.



n between dives.

All photos: Simon Volpe.

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revealing many items of interest. We came across heavy engine room steel plates, many smaller objects like electrical cable and even a silver desert fork.

The battered remnants of the ship's bulkheads took the form of metal caves heavily encrusted with life. We used a powerful video light to illuminate their interior, revealing the delicate colours of

sponges and anemones within. Girders littered the floor like corroded scrapyard tubes; plates stood disjointed, poking through their cloak of kelp.

A mere few metres away we found a completely different scene where the seabed stretched out around us like gently rolling fields. Huge tablets of stone stood proudly in occasional imposing clusters, the odd urchin attached to their otherwise seemingly featureless surface.

Kelp stood like giant palm trees swaying in the wind, shafts of sunlight bringing life to their leaves. Startlingly ivory coloured starfish added contrast to the general greenish hue.

Back on the surface for lunch, we sat watching the quite different but equally dramatic sight of the Maidens towering well above sea level.

Scenic diving is another certain example of the attractions of Skye. At Wiay Island in Loch Bracadale, NW Skye, the typical subsea profile consisted of angular walls heaped with fierce fiery colours.

Descending to 31 metres, starfish appeared in every shade, competing with anemones for minute footholds. The whole scene looked like a wild wallpaper pattern.

Patches of sand served to punctuate these fierce colour contrasts, providing space for crayfish, cup corals and sponges. Disturbed by our bubbly exhaust, a shoal of coalfish darted erratically. Closer to the surface the kelp forest reached toward us, leaning at a 45° angle, its leaves rippling in the slight current.

Our dive concluded some 58 minutes later with the sighting of a jelly fish majestically moving through the water. Out of air and camera films expended, we reluctantly climbed the ladder into the charter boat; an incredible dive

CONTACT BOX

Travel by road

Take the A82 from Glasgow to Fort William, and on to Ivergarry where you head for the Kyle of Lochalsh on the A87.

By sea

Ferries at Kyle of Lochalsh run every 15 minutes throughout the day and night, 7 days a week all year round. Contact Caledonian MacBraynes on 0599 4482.

Dive Operators

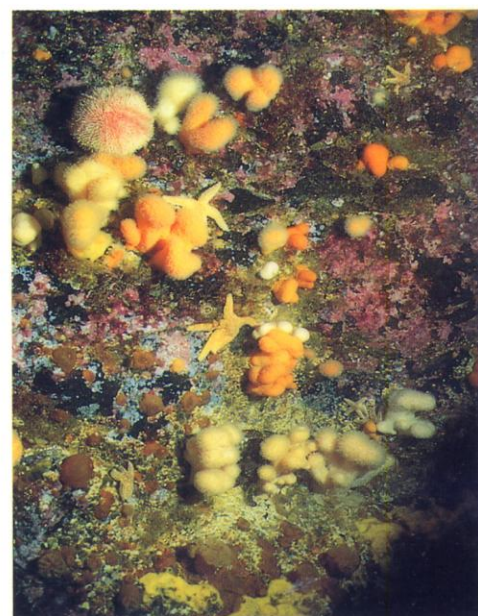
Hebridean Diving Services, tel 047 083 219.

Useful Numbers

Tourist Information Centre, tel 047 821 37.

Colbost Folk Museum, tel 047 022 296

Dunvegan Castle, Dunvegan, tel 047 022 206.



Warm Gulf Stream waters encourage aquatic life.



The undercover view of the Maidens.

indeed. Skye allows you to escape the clamour of everyday life, to find a room with a view of unmatched tranquillity. Motoring along the winding roads, ever changing scenes of the surrounding land and seas are remarkable.

Whatever the time of year, or the weather, Skye offers a kaleidoscope of colour and contrast. Dazzling white beaches found in coral bays offer an extraordinary sight set against sheer grey cliffs rising hundreds of feet from the sea. The local countryside is a paradise for nature lovers. Windswept clifftops and deep coastal inlets are home to a huge variety of animal and plant life. Eagles, otters and orchids are just a few of the things you are likely to spot.

Skye is a remarkable island, and by leaving insufficient time you will be seriously torn between spending your days above or below the waves.