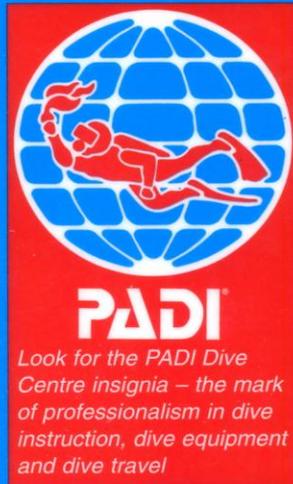


SPORT DIVER

Written by divers for divers



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SKYE is the limit

By Gavin Anderson

Off the west coast of Scotland lies the beautiful Isle of Skye. Here the waters are clear, the marine life abundant and the diving spectacular



Around three hours north of Glasgow lies one of Scotland's most beautiful and enchanting Islands. Known as Eilean a Cheo, the Isle of Mist, Skye is probably the most scenic island in Scotland. It lies off the north west coast of mainland Britain in the Hebrides island chain and is Scotland's second largest island, and at around 48 miles long and 24 miles wide, it dwarfs its tiny neighbours of Rona, Raasay, Soay, and the "small Isles" group. Skye is only a stone's throw away from the Scottish mainland and the famous Skye Bridge now links the island by road, making it easier still for tourists, who come here from all over the world during the summer months.

Skye's scenery is quite breathtaking, the island consists of a series of peninsulas, each with its own sea loch, flanked by spectacular cliffs and pretty

little bays with white beaches. The magnificent Cullin Mountains (reaching over 3000 feet in places) dominate the sky line towards the centre of the island. From here, millions of years ago, great volcanic eruptions spilled lava out over the land. Much of the lava flowed to the north shaping the island's three largest peninsulars – Trotternish, Waternish and Durnish.

THE DIVING

Skye's unusual geology and historic past continues underwater too. There are loads of spectacular caves, pinnacles and sheer drop offs and a number of exciting historic wrecks. And rumours of a Spanish galleon and a German submarine suggest that there are many more just waiting to be found! Its scenery and history on land are well explored and talked about, but its underworld remains largely

undiscovered. There is only really one established dive centre on Skye – Hebridean Dive Services – which is located in the quaint little village of Stein on the north of the island's Waternish peninsula. With stunning views over Loch Dunvegan it's the perfect setting from which to explore some of Skye's best dive sites. What's more, Stein has all that a diver could desire, a warm and cozy pub, a seafood restaurant and its own jetty and moorings close by.

The centre is owned and run by Gordon Mackay and Aileen Robertson who have been diving Skye for many years. Their knowledge and enthusiasm brings divers from throughout Europe and the far reaches of the UK. The centre has recently been modernised and has comfortable bedrooms, a well equipped kitchen, TV lounge, plentiful drying/changing facilities and most



importantly, a reliable compressor. Their dive boat the *Skelkiesong* is fast, reliable and has plenty of space for kitting up. The main launching point is from the slipway at Stein, on the east of Lochbay, which enlarges into Loch Dunvegan itself.

Some of the best diving around Skye is on the north and west coasts, especially down the west side of the Durnish peninsula. It is fairly remote here and, as a result, seldom dived. The area covers 50 to 60 miles and it is impossible to travel it all in one day, therefore, Gordon and Aileen tend to move their boat in stages, mooring it overnight in the many protected sea lochs that surround the coast here. This allows you to cover a dramatic, extensive piece of coast and dive a great variety of brilliant sites. Favourite mooring spots include Meanish pier in Loch Poolteil and Caroy in Loch

Bracadale. By moving over such a wide area many different dive sites can be reached offering a real safari feel to your trip. In just a few days you might find yourself diving spectacular sites such as Conger Crevice, the Macleod Maidens, Dogfish Drift and the wrecks of the *Chadwick*, *Doris* and *Urlana*.

From Caroy, some of the best sites can be reached in under half an hour.

The Macleod Maidens off Idrigill Point is probably the most visible and most scenic dive site in all of Skye. The pinnacles, or Maidens, stretch skywards and can be seen from miles away. They continue down underwater enlarging out into a stepped wall, broken with little gulleys, full of crevices and small caves. It is surrounded by huge boulders encrusted in colourful deadman's fingers, plumose and dehlia anemones. Octopus, shoals of pollack and the odd dogfish are often seen here

as well as all the blennies, gobies and velvet swimming crabs that seek shelter under the crevices and in little holes. When the sun shines through the Maidens and the sea is flat calm, divers can sometimes be spotted from the boat as they explore the bottom some 22m below.

The *SS Urlana* is often coupled with a dive on the Maidens due to their proximity to each other. She was once a large steamship, 148 meters in length, en route to the UK from Buenos Aires on the 5th September 1943. She was carrying a cargo of canned meat when she ran aground, to the west of Idrigill Point. Although she is well broken up, her massive boilers are well worth checking out and if you look closely there are still shells and ammunition lying on the ground. It helps to have someone with you who knows the wreck, as it is spread over a

fair distance and surrounded by tall kelp,

A little further north from the Urlana is one of my favourite spots. Lying off a little island, about a mile out from the cliffs is Conger Crevice, it is a quite stunning dive. It consists of a steep wall down 20m, encrusted in a myriad of static life. The colours are spectacular especially those of the jewel anemones which carpet the rock face here. At the foot of the wall is a narrow crevice that is home to a rich variety of life including huge ballan wrasse and the smaller more colourful cuckoo wrasse. The highlight, however, the number of conger eels which congregate here. The crevice offers them a safe home and the strong current, which runs for two or three hours here brings in plenty of food for them and the species they prey on! The conger eel is not the deadly beast that new divers often fear, it is surprisingly shy and will usually back off when you look in the crevices.

A good few miles further up the west coast of Durnish lie two excellent wrecks. Most accessible from Meanish Pier, the wrecks of SS *Chadwick* and SS *Doris* are favourite spots for divers visiting North West Skye. Both wrecks are tidal and should only be dived at slack water and, to their proximity to rocks, in calm seas.

The SS *Chadwick* lies below the 200 metre cliffs that tower up over Oisgill Bay, just north of Neist Point. A large steamer carrying coal from St Petersburg to Glasgow, she struck rocks at An Cearinaich, in bad weather on the 22nd July 1892. After holding fast on the rocks for four days, she slipped under and now lies on a slope between 15m and 25m below the surface. Although fairly broken up, some of the sections are still complete, and due to her large size and the strong currents that run here, she is covered in plumose anemones and deadman's fingers and therefore admirably scenic.

The SS *Doris* was a Norwegian steamer and was travelling from Liverpool to Setting on July 12th 1909 with a general cargo when she hit rocks at Neist Point, to the north of Moonen Bay. Like the *Chadwick* she didn't sink right away and there was plenty of time for all her crew to escape uninjured. When she did slip off the rocks, she toppled over and sank to 30m. Parts of her, however, reach quite shallow depths of around 6m so she needn't be a deep dive. Although well broken up she's totally covered in life. Her two iron screws can be seen on the bottom 20 metres out on the starboard side of the wreck.

When the wind blows from the south west up a little don't worry because there are numerous protected dive sites, great dives in

themselves, with diving when the weather is good too. Dives are rarely cancelled, and are fully refunded if Hebridean Dive Services feel it's too rough to dive.

Meanish Pier/Reef is an excellent dive. A steep wall down to around 14 meters opens up into a series of small terraces which descend further still to around 20 meters. Although fairly easily dived from the shore it's nice to be able to drop out of a boat and glide gradually down the wall. I have great memories of descending through a great mass of small jellyfish here and looking up from the sea floor through them, to the brilliant sun beyond. The ledges at Meanish are often patrolled by dogfish and pollack, and the Dahlia anemones here are particularly large and colourful. Velvet and edible crab can be found in the many ledges and crevices that run along the wall and octopus are occasionally seen, too.

Another good sheltered dive site can be found towards the north – Ann Ceanich. Here at around 15m are some huge boulders surrounded by sand intermingled with kelp a perfect stage for Dogfish Drift.

Closer to home in Lochbay and Loch Dunvegan are several little Islands which offer excellent sheltered dive sites. At Lampay Islands there is a good wall dive and at Clett the scenery is similar to Conger Crevice though on a much smaller scale. A little more exposed just out from the shelter of Clett lies the submerged pinnacle, known as Sgeir "A" Chuain, which descends from around three meters down to 22m. Just three quarters of a mile off the dive centre lie the Lochbay pinnacles. Descending from 6 to 22m they are fairly large, dropping off almost sheer on two sides and at a

steep angle on the other, resembling a massive sharks tooth! The somewhat silty bottom is easily disturbed here so good buoyancy control is recommended. As well as plenty of fish life there are tunicate anemones encrusting the boulders with many scavenging crustaceans moving up and along the wall.



The dive sites of Skye are just too numerous to mention them all and we have only covered a small area of coastline between Waternish and Durnish. Between Trotternish and Waternish are the Ascribe Islands where sites such as Jewel wall will blow your mind, and closer to the gateway to Skye itself, in the south of the Island lies the famous wreck of *Port Napier*, a Royal Navy minelayer of some 150 metres in length, which caught fire and sunk in fairly shallow water in Loch Alsh at Sron in Tairbh on the 27th November 1940. It is always diveable, even in bad weather!

If you have yet to discover the underwater wonders of Skye then I'd arrange a trip quickly as the rush to explore this great Island is on! The best times to dive Skye are from Easter to October when the weather and conditions are normally at their best, however, Skye can offer some excellent diving over the winter too when visibility can be great after a calm spell of weather. The visibility underwater in summer can occasionally reach 30 metres and never drops that much below 10 metres. As well as the marine life underwater look out for the bird life including eagle, buzzards and puffin. Seals and occasionally whales are often seen, especially in the summer. In fact, a week or two before my visit in September a Killer Whale was seen off the Macleod Maidens in Loch Dunvegan and the nearby seal colony on the off shore Island, were scared off!!

IN SUMMARY

I have very fond memories of visiting this very special island. Eating picnics between dives on uninhabited islands, complete with waterfalls and little lochans. Lying soaking up the sun as if we were in the Caribbean, while watching buzzards soar high above us along the thermals above the impressive cliffs that plummeted straight down in the deep blue water!

Visiting Skye may mean travelling long distances, but a few days here will produce memories that will stay with you forever. Folk that visit Skye once, often come back time and time again.

You can contact Hebridean Diving Services on 01470 592219



If you have yet to discover the underwater wonders of Skye then I'd arrange a trip quickly