



SKYE DIVER

Wrecks, reefs, walls and whales – what more could a diver want? It means a long road journey for most of us, **Gavin Anderson** says, but the Isle of Mist invariably repays the effort



EILEAN A CHEO, THEY CALL IT, OR ISLE OF MIST – SKYE IS Scotland's largest and one of its most enchanting islands. Forty-eight miles long and 24 miles wide, it dwarfs its neighbours in the Hebrides chain off the north-west coast.

Now linked to the mainland by bridge, Skye consists of a series of peninsulas, each with its own sea loch, flanked by spectacular cliffs and little bays, many of which have their own white sandy beaches. The spectacular Cuillin hills, which reach nearly 1000m in places, dominate the skyline towards the centre of the island.

From here, millions of years ago, volcanic eruptions spilled lava over the land. Much of it flowed north to shape the three largest peninsulas, Trotternish, Durnish and Waternish. The latter is where I usually base myself, in the pretty village of Stein.

The village boasts the cosy Stein Inn and an acclaimed seafood restaurant, the Lochbay. And it is from here that Gordon MacKay and Aileen Robertson run Dive & Sea The Hebrides (until recently Hebridean Diving Services), Skye's only dive centre.

Recently modernised, the centre offers comfortable self-catering accommodation for up to 10 divers.

The group I joined was clearly set on adventure, planning to climb the Cuillins as well as tackle the best dive sites. The centre organises dives around Waternish and in sheltered Lochbay, but Gordon and Aileen also like to take divers round to the west side of the Durnish peninsula, which is fairly remote and less frequently dived.

QUAY IN THE LOCH

This wide area is impossible to cover in one day, so Gordon and Aileen tend to move their dive boat, the *Selkiesong*, in stages, mooring overnight in sea lochs around the coast, at places such as Meanish Pier in Loch Pooltiel and Caroy in Loch Bracadale.

Over a few days you can find yourself diving spectacular sites such as Conger Crevice, Macleod's Maidens, Dogfish Drift and the wrecks of the *Chadwick*, *Doris* and *Urlana*.

One of the *Selkiesong*'s engines was down when I arrived, so Gordon chartered a local fishing boat for a trip out to the *Chadwick* from Meanish Pier. It was a perfect summer day. We watched the fishermen sorting boxes





Previous page: The village of Stein, looking out towards Lochbay and Loch Dunvegan, and the wreck of the *Chadwick*, with (inset) cuckoo wrasse
Above: Skye trio of dahlia anemone, dead man's finger and cushion star

of velvet crabs, destined for France, before loading our kit. As we headed for the wreck, two minke whales crossed our path.

The *Chadwick* rests beneath magnificent cliffs at the north end of Oisgill Bay, just north of Neist Point. It is exposed to south and north-west winds, and the weather and sea conditions have to be just right to dive it safely.

Gordon and I seemed to have timed things well on this occasion. As we hit the top of the wreck at 17m there was hardly any water movement at all. But as we reached the stern a fair bit of tide made itself felt, making photography a challenge.

Tucking myself in under part of the wreck, I waited as Gordon inched his way into position between two of the beautifully encrusted blades on the impressive propeller. Visibility was

surprisingly poor. Normal-ly you can expect at least 15m on the *Chadwick*, but there had been a lot of rain the week before.

It was 107 years almost to the day since the *Chadwick* sank, in July 1892, running aground in thick fog on her way from Glasgow to St Petersburg with a cargo of coal. The 19 crew were rescued by a passing mail steamer, but after four days on the rocks, the sea finally got the better of her.

The wreck lies inverted in 15-25m of water. Until recently

you could swim right through the hull but it has now collapsed in on itself. The bow is well twisted and broken up, but the stern remains scenic. This is one of Gordon's favourite sites and although I've dived better British wrecks, I enjoyed meeting the friendly local wrasse. Perhaps in better visibility...

URLANA'S EYE-WITNESS

The *Chadwick* wasn't the only vessel to succumb to the dreaded Skye fog. Seventeen years later the cargo ship *ss Doris* came to grief on the other side of Neist Point. Her 14 crew took to the lifeboats; the ship spent a fortnight jammed on the rocks before sinking into a steep gully, stern in 3m and bow in just 6m.

The wreck is broken up but because of its scenic location still makes an interesting dive – like the *Chadwick*, at slack water.

It is best to launch from Meanish to dive the *Chadwick* and *Doris*, but many other good sites along the coast are more accessible from Caroy. The Macleod Maidens off Idrigill Point provide what is probably the most scenic dive site in Skye.

These pinnacles stretch skywards for many metres and can be seen from miles away. Underwater they enlarge into a stepped wall broken with little gullies, full of crevices and small caves. Huge boulders surround the site, festooned in dead man's fingers and plumose and dahlia anemones.

Octopus, shoals of pollack and the odd dogfish are often seen here, too, and blennies, gobies and velvet crabs seek shelter in the crevices and 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 down!

The nearby *ss Urlana* is often coupled with a dive on the Maidens. A large steamship, 148m long, she was bringing canned meat to the UK from Buenos Aires when she ran aground west of Idrigill Point in September 1943.

Although well broken-up, her massive boilers are worth checking out. Look closely and you'll see 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 islands of kelp, which make it easy to lose your bearings.

Between recent visits to Skye, a chance encounter with a diver in a pub led to my meeting his 78-year-old father, Norman Dobson, who had been a radio operator on the *Urlana*. "We had sailed from New York to the west coast of Scotland, where we were to meet another convoy," he told me. "The



weather was awful and we were concerned about U-boat attacks. I was called back on duty and we were requested to check our position using the radio direction finder. We could hear the captain and first mate arguing about her position.

"At times we were on course, but drifting. Then there was an almighty crash and tearing sound, the likes I'd never heard before. We had hit and grounded on rocks.

"The ship was deliberately driven further up the rocks to prevent it slipping back into the water and possibly breaking up. It was obvious she had been badly holed.

"A ship soon came to her aid but the weather was really bad and it was very dark, so a rescue couldn't be attempted. Daylight came and the weather was still too bad to launch lifeboats. In the end we had to clamber down the cargo nets and swim to the *Thurland Castle's* lifeboats."

Norman told me he had lost everything except his ship's papers, kept in a survival bag made of watertight barrage

Islands; and just out from the shelter of Clett, in a more exposed position, lies a submerged pinnacle known as Sgeir a Chuain. It descends from around 3 to 22m and makes an interesting dive.

Three-quarters of a mile from the dive centre lie the Lochbay pinnacles. These drop almost sheer on two sides and at a steep angle on the other, from 6 to 22m, and resemble massive shark's teeth! The silty bottom is easily disturbed but it's a favourite spot for night dives.

For a good but challenging shore dive, Meanish Pier/Reef is an excellent choice. A steep wall to around 14m opens into a series of small terraces which descend further still to around 20m. 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 remember descending through a mass of small jellyfish and looking up through them from the seabed to the brilliant sun beyond.



Left and inset: Visibility not as good as it can be of the *Chadwick*, but there were many wrasse to be seen on the wreck

balloon material and hung around his neck. He wonders whether the locals ever found any of his belongings washed up on the shore, but the wreck certainly provided them with a steady supply of corned beef during a time of rationing!

A little north of the *Urlana* is one of my favourite dive sites, just off a little island about a mile out from shore, called Conger Crevice. A steep wall leads to a sandy floor at 20m and the crevice is richly encrusted. The colours are spectacular, especially those of the jewel anemones carpeting the rock face.

Huge ballan wrasse make their home here, along with smaller cuckoo wrasse, but the stars are the conger eels, enjoying the strong current which brings them an endless supply of nutrients, fish and sometimes leftovers from local fishermen.

GIMME SHELTER

The weather isn't always sunny and calm on Skye. I've had my fair share of rainy, windy days, but there is always somewhere sheltered to dive. In Lochbay and Loch Dunvegan several little islands offer good sheltered diving, including Lampay and Clett

The ledges at Meanish are home to some particularly large dahlia anemones, velvet and edible crabs. The area is also patrolled by dogfish and pollack, and octopus are occasionally seen too.

But one of my favourite Skye dives has to be my most recent one. It's a wreck I must have driven past a dozen times. I'd been told it was overrated, dangerous, easily stirred up and breaking up. But then I met some of its fans, and they persuaded me to come for a dive.

Am I glad I did! It's true that it all gets very silty when a few divers descend on the *Port Napier*, and it can be dangerous if penetrated, but there really is no need to enter this impressive minelayer, as it is beautiful viewed from a distance.

Some 150m long, it rests on its side in only 17m – in fact at low tide its port side is just visible on the surface. The masts are festooned in life: one in particular, with steel rope dangling to the seafloor, is covered in plumose anemones and sea squirts and when the sun shines through them it's a magnificent sight. Watch out for the *Port Napier* on the **DIVER** Wreck Tour soon! 🐠





There is a cloud over the Port Napier, however – last year the Navy commissioned removal of some of the steel-plate hull-cladding sections to test their purity.

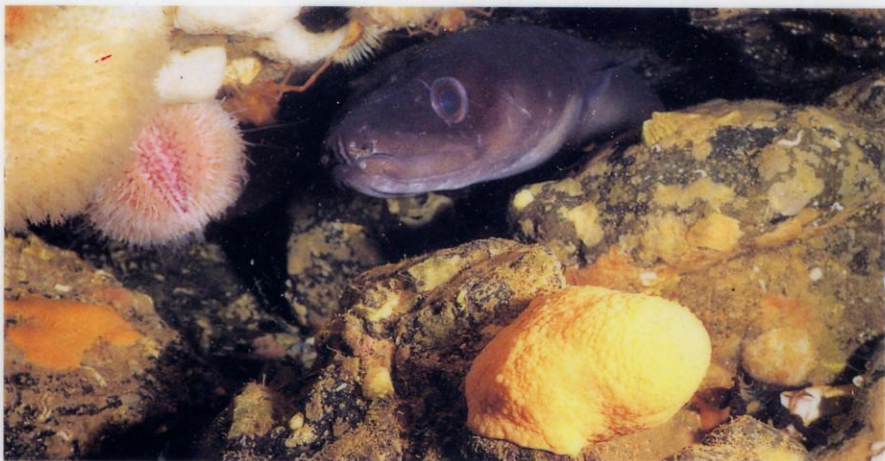
Having been sunk pre-Hiroshima, the steel is radiation-free. If it is found suitable, there are plans to remove up to 5000 tonnes of it, which would be sad not only for sports divers but for the public – a glass-bottomed boat, the *Atlantis*, has recently been taking non-divers out to see the wreck at low tide!



OLD BONES

Skye is big and well spread-out, so when it comes to sightseeing you need to get up early. Trotternish is the place for fossils; only recently a massive dinosaur bone was found here. Kilmuir is where Flora Macdonald is buried – she's the local hero who helped Bonnie Prince Charlie evade the pursuing English army, dressed as a maid, when he fled to Skye in 1745.

Closer to Stein is Dunvegan Castle, seat of the clan Macleod since 1200. No other Scottish castle has been inhabited for so long. On the east coast, at the base of Trotternish, is the only real town, Portree, with its woollen mill and the Aros Heritage Centre. Other attractions include the Talisker Malt Whisky Distillery at Carbost, complete




From top: Unforgettable above and below water, Macleod's Maidens; one of the inhabitants of Conger Crevice; and, highly recommended, the wreck of the Port Napier

with obligatory sampling; the Reptile Centre, popular with the kids; and, on the Sleat peninsula, the award-winning Clan Donald Centre.

But nature provides most of the spectacles – apart from the mountains and the sea views, killer whales have been spotted just off the Maidens, there is always a chance of diving with seals, and birds like eagles, buzzards and puffins are regular sights.

Visiting this mysterious island of rich contrasts might mean travelling long distances, but a few days there produce lasting memories. Diving apart, my favourite recollections are of picnicking during surface intervals on uninhabited islands, complete with waterfalls and little lochans, and soaking up the sun as if we were in the Caribbean, as buzzards soared high above the cliffs.

I've been to Skye when it's been blowing a gale, too, but then that's Scotland – if the weather was good all the time, everyone in the world would want to go there! 



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE: From Fort William take the A82 and A87, from Inverness take the A82, A887 and A87 to Kyle of Lochalsh for the Skye Bridge. The toll is £5.70 each way. The alternative is to drive from Fort William to Mallaig on the A830, but the ferry from there to Armadale costs £14.85 per car each way and £2.20 per person.

DIVING: Dive & Sea The Hebrides overlooks Lochbay and Loch Dunvegan. Diving costs £18-25 a day depending on location (tel: 01470 592219. e-mail: gordon07@globalnet.co.uk).

ACCOMMODATION: Self-catering at the dive centre costs £12.50 a night.

WHEN TO GO: Weather permitting, you can dive on Skye all year round. In winter the visibility can be excellent after calm spells of weather.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Highlands of Scotland Tourist Board 01997 421160, www.host.co.uk/skye/index.html

