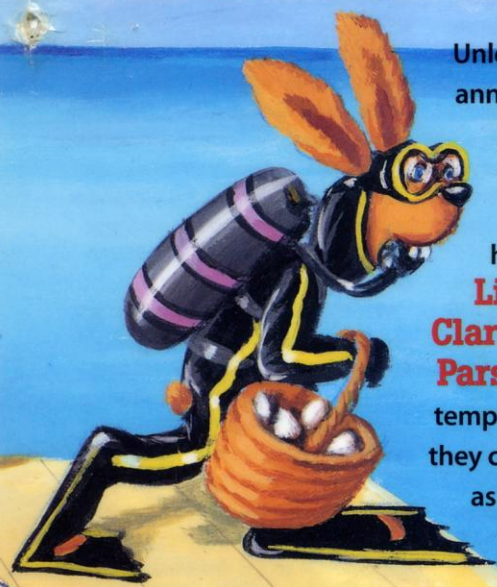


IT'S A SPRING THING!

Unless you're a hardy annual UK diver, you're probably just coming to life after your winter hibernation. **John Liddiard, Mike Clark and Gavin Parsons** are here to tempt you with five dives they can recommend as a warm-up for the balmy months ahead



MEANISH PIER, Skye

by John Liddiard

Standing at the end of the pier, waiting for the dive boat to arrive, I am less than optimistic. At the head of Loch Pooltiel there are some serious waves with universal white caps.

The boat comes bouncing round the headland and zooms up the loch to meet us. I am not surprised when skipper Gordon MacKay confirms that our original plan to dive the wreck of the *Doris* will have to wait for another day.

Funny thing is, if it hadn't been for the boat dive being cancelled, we would never even have considered looking for an alternative.

We are standing on it.

A rocky outcrop runs 100m seawards from the pier, descending to give a submerged wall further out towards the head of the loch, then cutting back behind us across a shingle bay.

With a high tide we have a choice of entries, across the shingle and out through the bay or from the pier and along. The point looks closer to the shingle beach, and divers are mostly lazy animals, so the beach is our choice.

Scrawny sheep amble aside as we pick our way over large, smooth granite stones. In the water we surface-swim to the point over a shallow kelp bed. I had anticipated a scrappy little shore dive; a poor alternative to the originally planned boat dive. Descending the rocks to the wall, I soon change my mind.

Jagged outcrops of rock plucked by an ancient glacier lead down to a silty-sand seabed. Protected from erosion in the lough, the jagged rocks make it almost like diving a quarry rock face.

Initially the wall stretches from 5 to 10m. Further out, the seabed is lower and the wall becomes a respectable 15m high, rising from 25 to 10m.

The most obvious marine life consist of long and delicate plumose anemones. Sheltered from heavy seas, these have not grown the heavy stems I would expect to see if they were living on a more exposed site. Scattered brown sea cucumbers stand on the rocks, waving their arms in the barely noticeable current and licking their fingers to consume the trapped plankton.



H LOHLEIN/J LIDDIARD/M CLARK/G PARSONS



Previous page: Diver under Meanish Pier, Skye. Above: Small fish hide among the tentacles of a lion's mane jellyfish under the pier. Above right: Long, delicate plumose anemones at the same site.



The usual dahlia anemones are also spotted about the rock face. I am always amazed by the variety of colours they display, everything from red and orange through to blue and violet – a complete spectrum of base colours with an infinite variety of specks and stripes.

A puff of fine silt draws my attention to a squat lobster darting back into a crack in the rocks. Now switched on to squat lobsters, I sneak up while holding my breath to catch them in the open.

Once used to me, they maintain a wary vigilance, only to be spooked later by a movement of my camera or a puff of exhaust bubbles.

A movement caught from the corner of my eye turns out to be a scallop fluttering away. I had been hovering over its resting place on the silty slope at the base of the wall. It must have closed as I arrived, but later decided it didn't like being in my shadow.

Drawn away from the wall, I settle onto the seabed in front of this particularly fine specimen. After a minute or two it opens, notices that I am still there and snaps shut again. A similar wait and it opens again, this time stretching as wide as possible to display a beautifully striped mantle, before snapping shut and jetting away. The open/shut cycle is repeated a half-dozen times until the scallop comes to rest a couple of metres away.

Also on the slope are some fine burrowing anemones. Sensitive to movement and light, my camera flash startles them into a sudden retraction into their holes. I effectively get one opportunity to photograph each specimen. Back on the wall, we turn and head for home. Rather than heading into the bay and the shingle beach, we continue towards the pier.

Discarded scraps of fishing line and weights are scattered on the slope – the rocks above are popular with local

anglers. Now there is just a short, steep slope of angular rocks. The delicate plumose anemones have been replaced in the shallows by long strands of sugar kelp.

Spotted about the rocks and slope is a fairly full selection of UK starfish – common and spiny, biscuit-coloured seven-armed and brightly coloured sunstars. Nudibranchs graze on isolated clumps of hydroids.

Peering in the cracks between rocks, I find that the squat lobsters are still there. Large speckled ballan wrasse meander through the seascape, pecking away at their breakfast.

Away from the reef, the occasional lion's mane jellyfish pulsates in the blue water. Looking closely, I can see colonies of small fish hiding among the tentacles, always moving to the opposite side to peer out at me. Watching their antics is fascinating, but I am wary of the stinging tentacles and extremely careful about approaching.

I can tell we are getting close to the pier by the trail of junk – old lobster pots, a boot, bits of wood and steel, even the rotting remains of a small fridge. Then we are beneath the pier.

There is excellent visibility, as shafts of sunlight punctuate the scene. Once in the shade of the pier there is not enough light for kelp to survive and deeper-water life is displayed close to the surface.

The thick rotting timbers are host to more anemones and dead men's fingers. It is the overall impression that is so memorable – just incredibly pretty.

To get to Meanish pier, head for Dunvegan and before entering it turn onto an unclassified road passing through Glendale.

Dive-and-See-the-Hebrides at Lochbay near Dunvegan can cater for any diving needs and arrange accommodation and boat diving (01470 592219, www.dive-and-sea-the-hebrides.co.uk).

BABBACOMBE, Devon

by Gavin Parsons

It's often harder to get to and from Babbacombe Bay than it is to dive it. The small cove is at the bottom of a very steep cliff road that is slippery when wet, and a car, heavily laden with dive equipment, can find getting up or down a struggle. Even without any gear on board it can be a first-gear job.

However, don't let that small fact put you off, because Babbacombe Beach in Torquay is an outstanding South Coast shore-dive. Where else can you find anglerfish, dogfish, giant cuttlefish and lumpsuckers? It is sheltered from all but a south-westerly wind, it is shallow, has plenty of marine life, is blessed with generally clear water and there are facilities right on the shoreline.

The beach front opposite the car-park is a favourite entry point, although the water here is only about 4m deep, and

