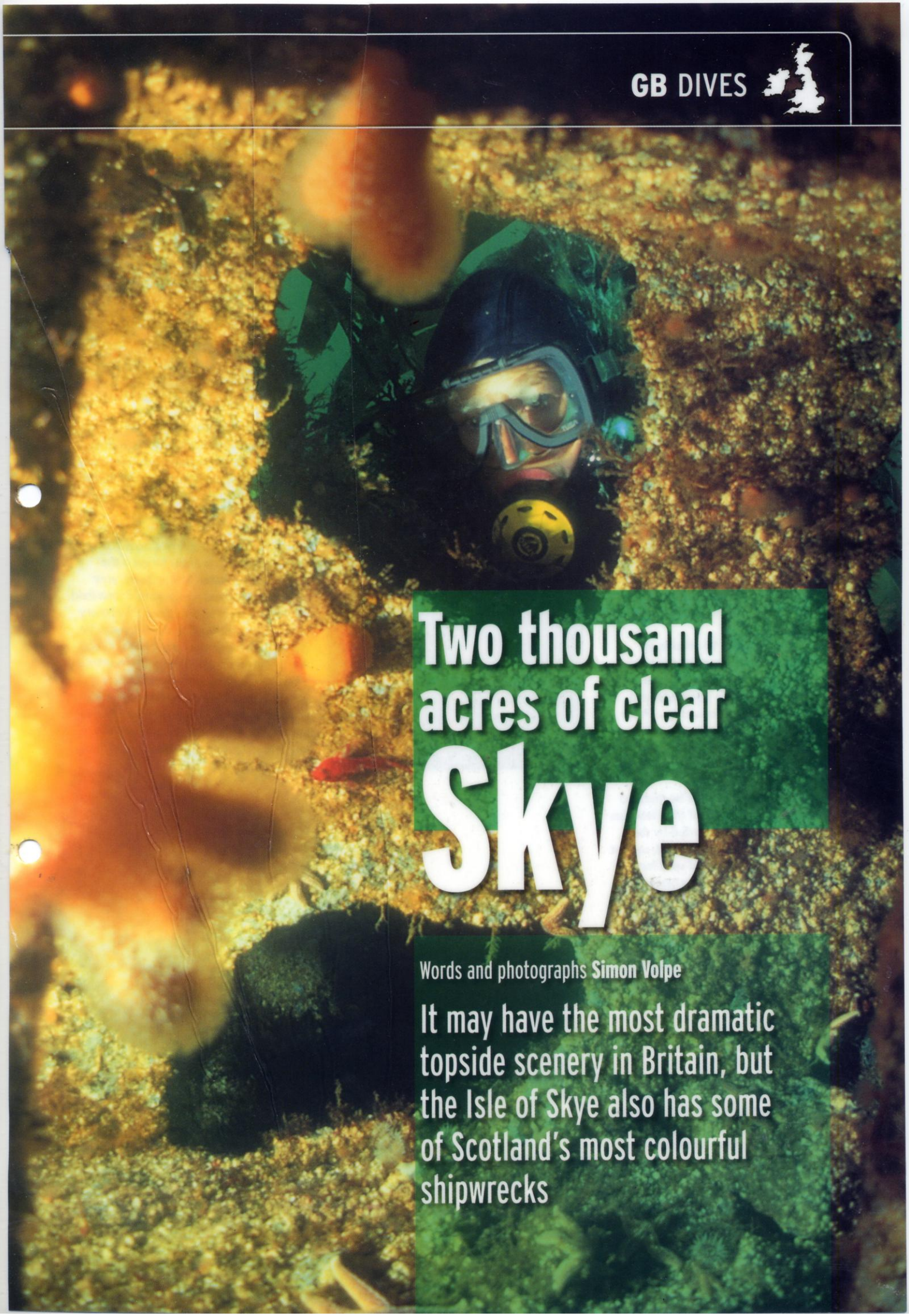


Two thousand acres of clear Skye

Words and photographs **Simon Volpe**

It may have the most dramatic topside scenery in Britain, but the Isle of Skye also has some of Scotland's most colourful shipwrecks

The Isle of Skye has become one of the Hebrides' most popular tourist islands since the completion of the bridge linking it with the Scottish mainland. While the island is now easier to get to (not all the locals approve – there has been a row over the private finance deal which resulted in the bridge's construction), it still has a certain mystical feel. Its Gaelic name means 'Isle of Mist', and the imposing mountains of the Cuillin Ridge to the north are often wreathed in it.

Although the island is 48 miles long, its geography is tortuous to say the least, combining ancient (even in geological terms) mountain ranges with six peninsulas and an elaborate coastline of sea lochs. There are many excellent scenic dives within and outside the lochs, and there's plenty of impressive sea life, but the wrecks are the biggest draw.

Your diving here will always be dictated by the weather, but the joy of the Hebrides is the amount of shelter afforded by the lochs. Always have a Plan B in mind, so that you can retreat to a sheltered spot for a scenic dive if your wreck site is blown out. As with most UK diving, a delayed surface marker buoy is essential, as is thorough dive planning with regard to wind and tide. There's lots of brightly coloured marine life, but you'll need a good torch to bring out the colour in the jade-green Hebridean waters.

Snap shot: a photographer on the wreck of the Urlana

The Urlana

N 57°20.00' W 006°34.00'

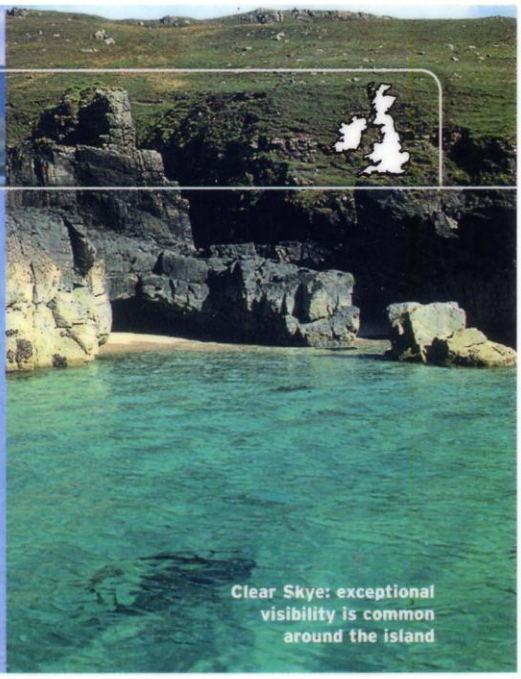
HISTORY This single-screw steamship sank at the west end of Loch Bracadale in 1943, while on a voyage from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to London. At the time of sinking her cargo was declared as 'unspecified general merchandise'.

THE DIVE

Today, the remains of the Urlana rest 100m west of a rock pinnacle at Idrigill Point, against the backdrop of Skye's most spectacular topside scenery. High cliffs, waterfalls and caves dominate the scenery. Launching your boat from nearby Harlosh is a fine way to take in the majestic views from sea.

The wreck site itself is dispersed over a fairly wide area, but there's no mistaking the boiler, which is easily found in the shallow clear water. Using that as your point of reference, explore the debris field for 15m or so in all directions. Machinery parts, pipes and small ammunition can be glimpsed through the kelp. Small artifacts are hardier than you'd imagine – we found a silver dining fork here, which was in excellent condition despite spending 60 years underwater. Our visit took place in September, when underwater visibility was about 7m and the water temperature was 13°C.

Over the ocean: the quiet beauty of Skye



Clear Skye: exceptional visibility is common around the island

The Rhodesia

N 57° 41.20' W 006°20.40'

HISTORY Built in 1899, this fishing vessel was serving as a Royal Navy armed trawler when she ran aground on a reef just south of Tulm Island in April 1915. Prior to the First World War the Rhodesia had been owned by the Fishing and Ice Co Ltd, registered to Hull. The Rhodesia is 32m long and makes for a very compact dive.

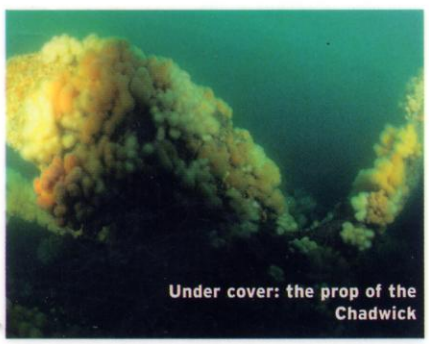
THE DIVE This is a shallow one. The Rhodesia sits more or less intact at a maximum depth of just 8m, overlooked by Duntulm Castle. She sits with a 60-degree list to port, next to a steep slope at the southern end of Tulm Island. The wreck is surrounded by kelp, so if you want to see as much of the Rhodesia as possible, my advice is to time your visit for as early in the season as you dare, well before the summer growth shrouds it in green fronds.

With the shallow depth and decent light penetration, this is a good dive for photographers. The wreck's most interesting features are the boiler, the triple-expansion engine and deck plating. A superb second dive, with virtually no hazards.

The Chadwick

N 57°27.05' W 006°47.00'

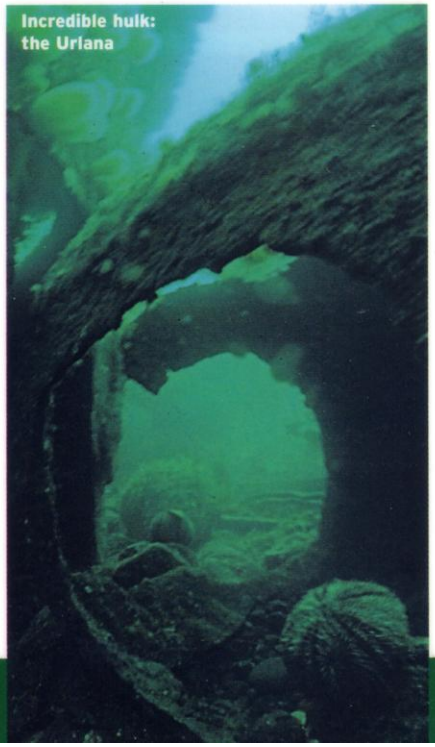
HISTORY This iron steamship was on a voyage from Glasgow to St Petersburg, Russia, in July 1892 when she was driven ashore under the cliff at Rubha Ban at the north end of Oisgill Bay. The 76m-long ship was carrying a cargo of anthracite coal when she went down.



Under cover: the prop of the Chadwick

THE DIVE The Chadwick lies upside down on a sloping sea bed and is broken into six main slabs of wreckage. Underwater visibility in the 20–30m range affords relatively easy navigation but care must be taken with the tides (slack being two hours before and four hours after high water Dover), which can be strong. My ideal wreck tour starts at the stern, which is the deepest part of the dive, at 25m. Here, you will find a natural archway under the hull, encasing an anemone-strewn iron propeller. You will find a great deal of marine life on this site, particularly dead men's fingers, urchins and starfish.

Move up the slope and you should find the mast and the midships area. Watch out for small lumps of the anthracite, which are scattered around the reef. This is a very attractive dive, aided by the excellent visibility of these waters. In the absence of a plankton bloom, you can often get 20–30m visibility here. At about 15m you should find the twisted remains of the bow, then you can complete the dive with a safety stop in the kelp forest, where there are lots of rather shy octopus. Most divers prefer to visit this wreck on slack tide, though it is occasionally possible (with the help of a knowledgeable skipper) to do it as a drift, incorporating the reef.



Incredible hulk: the Urlana

The Doris

N 57°25.15' W 006°47.25'

HISTORY Another single-screw steamship, the Doris sank on a voyage from Liverpool to Stettin, Poland, in July 1909. Records are incomplete, but it seems the 77m-long ship hit a reef at Neist Point in Moonen Bay. A Norwegian-registered vessel, she carried a crew of 18 at the time of her demise.

THE DIVE Diving the Doris necessitates a short boat journey from Meanish Pier. Slack water here is generally two hours before and four hours after high water Dover. Begin your dive in the shallows, where the remains of the bow are wedged in a gully. By following what appears as a ravine of steel along a sloping gully, you will eventually make your way to the sea bed.

This wreck is exposed to strong tides, which explains the obvious profusion of marine life associated with high-energy sites. It also accounts for the extremely mangled wreckage – it is one of those shipwrecks that doesn't look remotely like a ship. That said, it can be quite rewarding to survey the debris field in search of recognizable features. A four-blade propeller complete with a section of prop shaft awaits you, but it takes a very keen eye to make out the steering gear. The boiler rests at 24m and is comprehensively broken up.

If rust-spotting isn't your game, don't fret – the rocks are covered in dead men's fingers, hydroids and urchins, while

inquisitive cuckoo wrasse abound. Closer to the surface, there is a dense kelp forest, as well as patches of reef covered with plumose anemones. Summer months often see the arrival of basking sharks, so keep those cameras ready!

The Port Napier

N 57°15.59' W 005°41.12'

HISTORY This twin-screw steamship sank in Loch Alsh in November 1940, the year which also saw her construction. The vessel was working as a mine layer and was loaded with explosives when she caught fire. Efforts to put out the fire proved futile, and the crew were understandably quick to abandon their stations. The ship was towed into Loch Alsh where she subsequently exploded, showing a wide area with debris.

THE DIVE Today, the Port Napier lies where it settled on its starboard side, 300m from the shore at Sron na Tairbh. At low water, the port side appears above the waterline, the wreckage resembling the ribs of a carcass. On sunny days, the wreck benefits from shafts of sunlight which penetrate the shallows.

Head for the stern, where you can still see mine-laying chutes with rails running forward into what remains of the superstructure. Follow the rails, and you should find yourself in the main storage area, where mines would have sat on trolleys, ready to be deployed.

The remains of the mast can be found in the midships area at a depth of about 20m, and are well worth a look as they are encrusted with life. From the main deck, it is possible to penetrate the wreck through several hatchways. It's a relatively easy penetration as the hull is open and there's heaps of light. You will still find a 4in gun at the bow; as far as anyone knows, it was never fired in hostility.

If you have time, I recommend a fin along the length of the exposed keel. It's quite featureless, but it does give you an idea of the length of the ship. Given its explosive demise, it is remarkable that the Port Napier is still sufficiently interesting to rank as one of Scotland's favourite wreck dives. ■

Thanks to:
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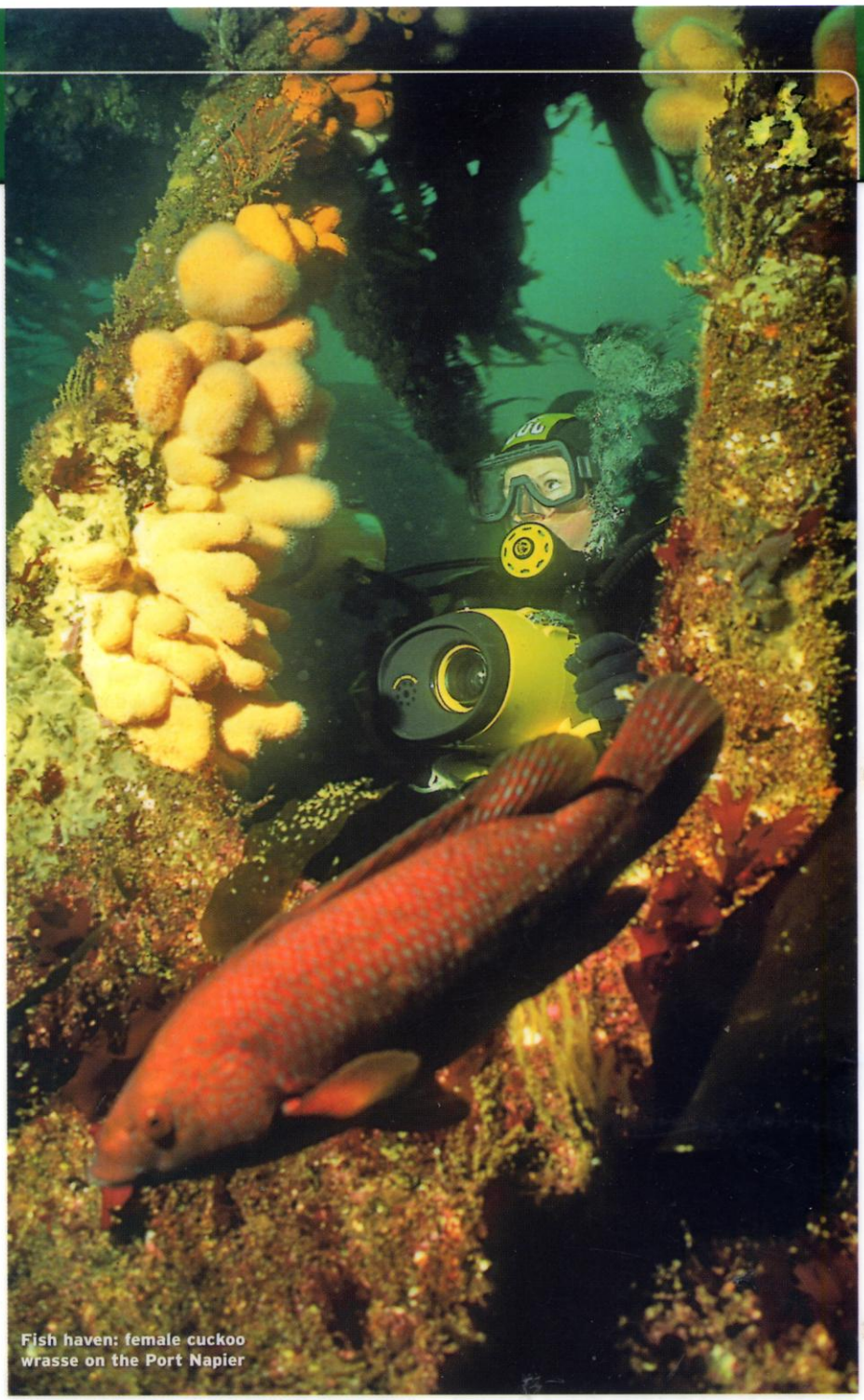
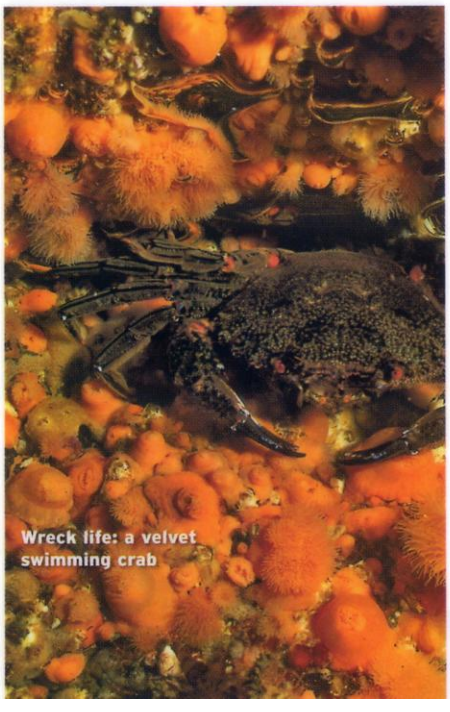
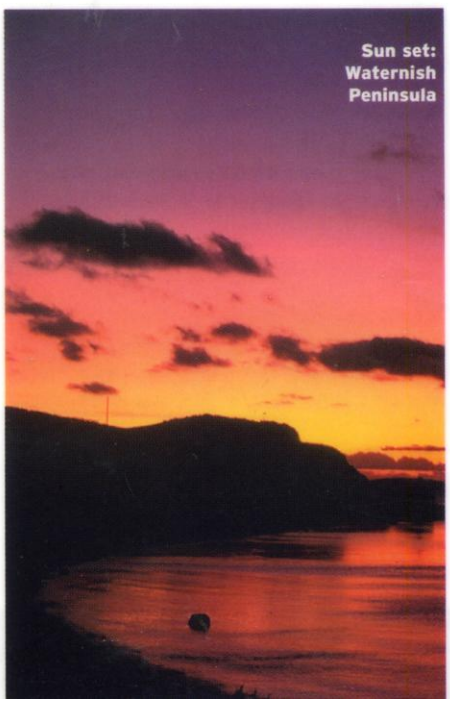


Fish haven: female cuckoo wrasse on the Port Napier



Wreck life: a velvet swimming crab



Sun set: Waternish Peninsula