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# SKYE DIVING



The Isle of Skye is rapidly gaining a reputation for being one of the best dive spots in the UK. Ross Coventry was keen to see if it could deliver on this promise – and he wasn't disappointed

Photographs by **ROSS COVENTRY**

Leaving the Skye Bridge behind us, we followed the coast road north amazed at how rugged the coastline had become. Dark brooding clouds lingered above as we searched for a glimpse of the Cuillin mountains in the distance. Now that we were on Skye the excitement built as I had wanted to dive here for many years but never had the opportunity. Skye has a growing reputation for clear water and an abundance of life on its reefs decorated using the colours of the rainbow. Can it live up to its new title of one of the best UK dive areas? Only time will tell.

Knowing how fickle the Scottish weather is, to give ourselves the best chance of getting some good dives in we decided to stay for a week. We booked our weeks diving with Dive and Sea the Hebrides, run by Gordon MacKay and Aileen Robertson. Based in the northwest of Skye in the

picturesque village of Stein, we hoped a week would allow us to explore and see what underwater delights Skye has on offer.

We started the first day with a relaxing morning and briefing from Gordon about the up-coming week and what to expect. He was keen to impress on us that we were on holiday and to relax as much as possible, which is just what we wanted to hear. It takes only a few minutes to load the boat and for Gordon to explain where everything is before the most important part of the day – what everyone takes in their tea!

The first dive of our trip was only a few minutes from Stein, Loch Bay Pinnacle. This was used as a shakedown dive for everyone to make sure their equipment had coped with the long journey up to Skye. The pinnacle rises from the sandy seabed at 23m to within a few metres of the surface, where it has a thick covering of kelp. As there is very little tide to consider on this dive you can choose any direction to descend the reef. We headed off in a westerly direction which had a near sheer drop to the seabed below. As the kelp thinned out the rocky reef and its many cracks and crevices become more evident. The rock is home to large dahlia and plumose anemones, and more colour is provided by a multitude of dead man's fingers. As we headed towards the south end of the reef, large ballan wrasse inquisitively followed us while bright red squat lobster peered out at us as we swam by. Here

we swam off the reef and found juvenile scallops, nudibranchs, seapens and huge bright orange Luidia starfish littering the seabed. It's not long before my buddy grabbed my attention to point out a huge lobster sitting watching us who had no doubt seen it all before. Slowly we ascended circling the reef before playing hide and seek with the hundreds of juvenile pollock that disappeared into the kelp every time someone exhaled through their regulator.

When we were all back on the boat it was a quick trip back to the slip for some running repairs to a cuff seal before heading out for our second dive of the day. As we approached the dive site, Sgeir A'Chuin, Gordon dropped in a shotline for us to descend and told us to head north where we would find the wall. At the bottom of the shotline the seabed was soft sand but it wasn't long before we started to see small boulders then the wall appeared in front of us. We decided to head to the right

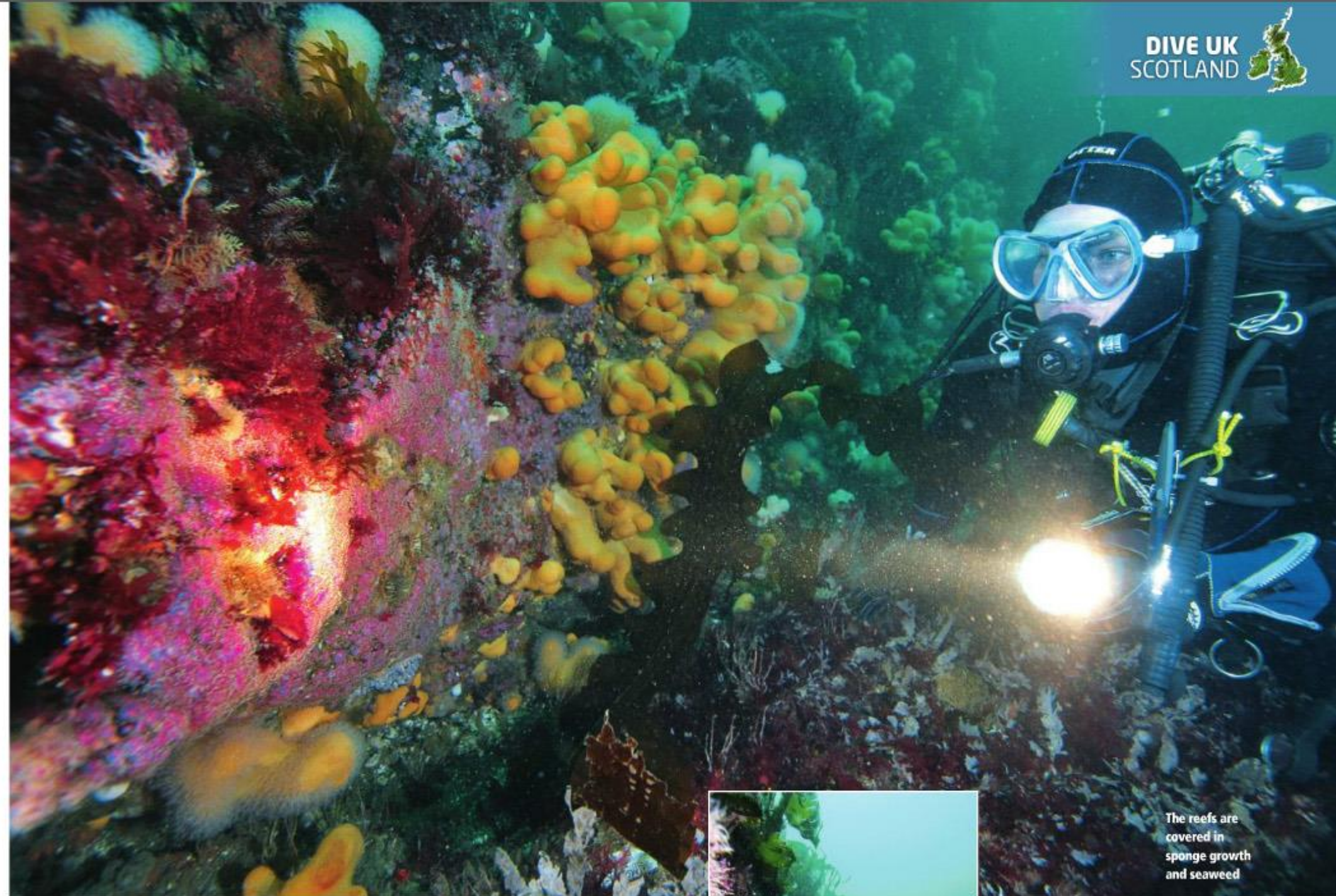
swimming against the slight current looking under the boulders strewn around the base of the wall. Hiding here are juvenile cod, ling and conger eels, as you look up you can see large predatory pollock cruising in and out of the kelp just waiting to pounce. One of the most colourful fish in the UK is the cuckoo wrasse and they are here in abundance. As we neared our turnaround point, one of the cuckoo wrasse took an interest in my buddy and came within a couple of feet of her. This gave a great opportunity for some photos and guaranteed smiles all around at the end of the dive.

Once the boat is unloaded we headed back up to the old Schoolhouse where we were staying for the week. Gordon and Aileen have converted the old Schoolhouse providing self-catering accommodation for up to ten divers. Apart from the accommodation there is a kitchen, living room and an eating area for 12 people,

which is more than adequate to get you through a weeks diving there. At the other end of the building is the compressor room (air to 300bar), drying and changing rooms. If the idea of cooking for yourself every night doesn't appeal, then there is the Stein Inn and the Loch Bay seafood restaurant to choose from.

The next morning Skye greeted us with a beautiful sunrise and there wasn't a ripple as we looked out over Loch Bay. Everyone eagerly loaded their kit on the boat as we were hoping to dive the wreck of the Chadwick. To get to the wreck from Stein involves a one-and-a-half hour steam around Dunvegan Head to Oisgill Bay, where the wreck is lying at the north end of the bay beneath the cliffs at Rubha Ban. The sea was quite calm and the journey passed quickly as you couldn't help but be in awe at the rugged cliffs that towered above; our attention was briefly diverted as a pair of sea eagles circle above.

The wreck had a small buoy permanently attached to it, when we arrived we found it 12 inches under the water, with the tide obviously still running. Everyone relaxed for ten minutes before Gordon manoeuvred the boat back to see if slack water had arrived. When the buoy was spotted this time it was now 18 inches under the water



The reefs are covered in sponge growth and seaweed



The vis can be outstanding



Colourful cuckoo wrasse are common



it full screen mode.



Octopus will often put in an appearance

Sponges and anemones adorn the rocky reefs

in the opposite direction from when we arrived! Our group was of mixed experience, so we decided to move on from the Chadwick and dive the point of Oisgill Bay, where the wreck lies.

Gordon dropped us 20 metres out from shore where we descended surrounded by thick kelp before the rock levelled out on a wide ridge broken up every now and then with bright white patches of sand. Once our buoyancy was fine-tuned, we were gently pushed along by the current, large pollock hanging motionless just above the kelp. There was no rock surface left uncovered, with anemones of all sorts and dead man's fingers providing colour of all shades. These colourful invertebrates were, however, not responsible for all the colour as cuckoo wrasse were everywhere and it was not long before we spotted a few rock cook. These small wrasse have a brilliant iridescent blue strip down their back that would make them look at home on a tropical reef.

We reached the point of the bay just as the current turned, pushing us back in

the direction we had just come. Before long a big school of pollock appeared out of the depths swimming over and around us at such a speed that it was difficult to get a picture before they disappeared. When there were so many fish around, it was easy to spend the whole dive looking out from the reef and miss what was right in front of you. It wasn't long before my

buddy brought my attention back to the reef, where we found an octopus sitting keeping a watch on all that was passing along the reef. We spent a few minutes taking pictures before moving on, pushed by the current, our dive time was up and it was time to send up the DSMBs.

We were now midway through our trip and steamed in the opposite direction from previous days leaving Stein and heading north towards Waternish Point. As we arrived Gordon gave us our brief of the dive site before dropping in a shotline for reference. Before we hit the water we could see the thick covering of kelp below through the clear Atlantic water, a quick check of the compass and we headed off in a northerly direction in search of the wall. We noticed that there was a fair amount of current

running so it was over the edge descending quickly to 16m where there was refuge behind some large boulders. Straight away we realised we were being watched, a large scorpionfish was sitting atop one of the boulders and he didn't seem to appreciate us noisy divers. It was not long before the current started to slacken and we moved out from the protection of the boulders. With the 15-metre visibility, you get a good idea of the site - the wall drops from 6-16m with white sand at the bottom, as you move away from the wall it becomes rocky once again, then drops away into much deeper water.

Where the kelp doesn't have a hold, the rocks are covered in colour made even more apparent with the sun shining through the clear water. Before long my buddy spotted an octopus sitting motionless a metre up the wall, we moved in slowly and took a few pictures. We then continued down the reef until we came across a small swim-through decorated on all sides with bright, vivid colours.

When heading to Skye if there is one dive site that everyone has heard of, it's Conger Crevice and as we approached, we all hoped that it would live up to its reputation. From the boat we could see the rocky reef disappear in the clear visibility and we knew this was going to be a good

**“ When the buoy was spotted this time it was now 18 inches under the water in the opposite direction from when we arrived! ”**



# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

## Isle of Skye, Scotland



### Where is it?

The Isle of Skye lies in the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland.

### How to get there

Take the A82 and A87 North through Fort William to Invergarry and onto the Kyle of Lochalsh, cross the Skye Bridge. Follow the A850 to Portree and on to towards Dunvegan. Three miles past Edinbane is a turning on the right marked B886 to Waternish, Loch Bay and Stein.

### When to go

May to September is the best time to visit. If you are looking for an encounter with basking sharks, the best time to see them is August/September.

### Dive centre

Dive and Sea the Hebrides, run by Gordon and Aileen ([www.dive-and-sea-the-hebrides.co.uk](http://www.dive-and-sea-the-hebrides.co.uk)).

**“Bring the camera and the midge repellent”**



### Where to eat

The Stein Inn has good pub food, with the Loch Bay seafood restaurant another 50 metres down the road.

### Where to meet

The Stein Inn has a comfortable bar area.

**SPORT DIVER VERDICT**

This was a great adventure that divers of any level could appreciate with an abundance of life and colour in the shallows to keep everyone happy

A diver awaits pick up from the dive boat



dive. Having arrived early gave Gordon more than enough time to go over the dive plan and let us get kitted up. This dive can be done as a drift or at slack; we chose the easier option and went for slack.

A quick backward roll and we were heading down passing the kelp before coming to a horizontal crevice that runs along the reef at 18m. This crevice is no ordinary crevice as it is festooned with colour and life, the rainbow of colours provided by dahlia,

plumose and jewel anemones separated from the kelp by dead man's fingers standing out in the tide. It was difficult to take our eyes off all this colour, but slowly we managed and looked deep into the crevice, where we found edible crabs, lobster and the species that gives this site its name, the conger eel. On this day the eels seemed rather shy and stayed back in the crevice as we slowly made our way along the reef. The contrast of the thick kelp and the amazing colour of the crevice was just stunning. By now my finger was getting tired taking pictures and I just hoped that some of the pictures would do this dive site justice and show the abundance of colour.

Macleod's Maiden's was to be our afternoon dive and as we arrived on site we could only hope that the rugged topography of the land above the water was replicated under the water. Descending through the clear water to 15m, we could see the white sandy gullies below, seemingly fenced in by the rugged fingers of reef. Thick kelp abounds except for the exposed points of the reef that are covered by the ever-present dead man's fingers. Swimming through the gullies we were often accompanied by the

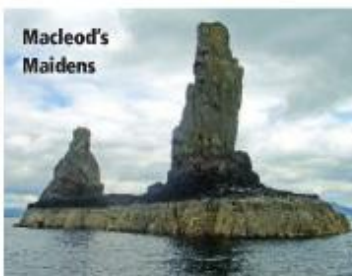
ever-inquisitive ballan wrasse, before a huge school of coalfish swept in and around us before disappearing. However, not for long, as they reappeared on numerous occasions throughout the dive.

Swimming out of a gully on to a large patch of flat sand, a lone dogfish came into view. As we watched the dogfish, it cruised just above the sand in ever-tightening circles before digging a small crab out of the sand. We hovered watching this amazing behaviour as the dogfish continued to hunt for its next course.

As a finale, the school of coalfish came in for one brief flying visit before disappearing for the last time.

In no time at all our week of diving was up and we took the chance to reminisce over the week that had just been

as we drove home. At no time did my buddy or I get deeper than 24m, and there was no need to, with the concentration of life and colour all within the top 20m. Without doubt Skye has some of the best UK diving available, and before we had even left the island the decision to come back next year had already been made - can't say better than that! ■



Macleod's Maidens



Fish life is plentiful