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**'THE DIVE THAT
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MY LIFE...'**

DIVERS' TRUE STORIES

**SKYE
HIGH**

WRECKS, REEFS & NUDIS

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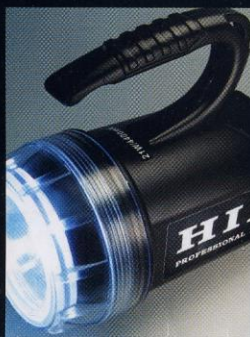
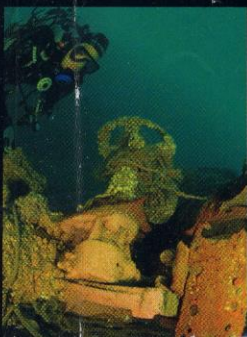
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SOFT CENTRE: diver amid anemones on the mast of the Port Napier

SKYE HIGH

The west coast of Scotland offers famously good diving, but what's with all the nudibranchs? **DIVE's Jane Morgan** took a trip to Skye to concentrate on life below the waterline

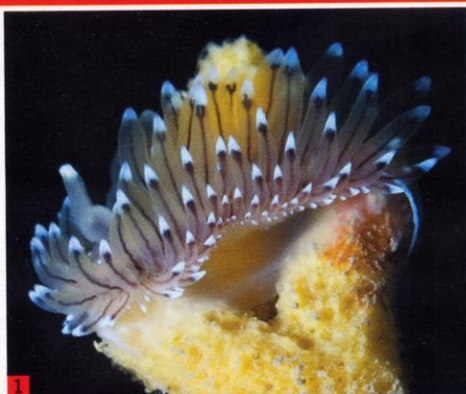
IT WAS one of those surreal moments when you feel as if the world has just stopped. I was completing my safety stop at 5m after an exhilarating drift dive when I realised that things were not as they should be, but I was not sure why. I had lost my buddy at the last minute when she flew away from me, Mary Poppins-style, on the end of her SMB. I looked around and everything

seemed calm – too calm – then I realised that my bubbles were all around me, and even though I was stationary, they were definitely not going upwards at all.

Then the most extraordinary thing happened. My SMB just left the surface of its own accord and momentarily stopped horizontal to me in the water. What on Earth was going on? The SMB had a life

of its own – it appeared to be possessed.

After taunting me for what seemed like minutes, but was probably only a second or two, it stuck its nose down and headed back down to the sea bed that was at 20m, dragging me behind it. It seemed I was in the midst of a downcurrent, and I made a mental note to myself to purchase a self-sealing marker. >>



NUDIBRANCH HEAVEN: having seen more nudibranchs here than anywhere else in the UK, I thought that they were worth a special mention. I don't know whether they are more numerous in the Hebrides, or whether it was the time of year for them, or simply whether diving with a group of critter hunters meant that I saw more than usual. What I do know is that they were beautiful and colourful, and definitely no lame relation to the tropical species.

Janolus cristatus [1]; *Catriona gymnota* [2]; *Coryphella* sp. [3]; *Onchidoris luteocincta* [4]; *Coryphella browni* [5]; *Polycera faeroensis* [6]; *Acanthodoris pilosa* [7]; *Coryphella* sp. [8 and 9]; *Flabellina pedata* [10]; *Doto fragilis* [11]



My reactions were quite fast considering the surprise, and I must have let out most of my line while repeatedly hitting 'inflate'. In fact, I inflated so much that my safety stop was history, but I did get back to the surface. The boat came to pick me up and I stood on the hydraulic lift in a complete tangle, with line wrapped all around me.

The drift dive through Kyle Rhea, which runs at between three and eight knots, was the most exciting dive of the week, and had I been able to stop, I could have taken some pretty good photographs as the sea bed was absolutely heaving with sponges, anemones and sun stars.

Lying off the west coast of Scotland, the Isle of Skye, or An t-Eilean Sgitheanach in Gaelic (please don't ask me to pronounce it), is the largest and northernmost island in the Inner Hebrides. Skye is renowned for its beautiful scenery and wildlife, which includes red deer and otters, and the

main industries are tourism, fishing, agriculture and whisky – it is the home of the Talisker distillery.

The island's most famous feature is the Cuillin, a chain of summits that includes 12 Munros (Scottish mountains that are higher than 3,000ft, or 915m), offering walkers and climbers some dramatic challenges. But I wasn't looking for altitude on this trip. Quite the opposite: I was joining a liveaboard to experience the best diving that the area has to offer.

The water temperatures off Skye are a few degrees lower than in the south of Britain, and after diving in a balmy 12°C in Cornwall the previous week, I was surprised to discover that the water in the Hebrides in May is closer to 8°C. The weather throughout the week was very changeable – we experienced a complete mixture of snow, sleet, hail, rain, wind and sunshine.

Topside, the sights were incredible – one day, we'd be watching blowholes, and the next, we'd be sat on deck watching what could only have been a bait-ball, as dolphins fins cut through the water, gannets dived and seagulls hovered overhead. It made me question why people travel all the way to South Africa when we have our very own mini Sardine Run at home. At times, we saw several dolphins riding the bow wave, a minke whale was spotted by some of the crew, and I finally got to see a puffin.

On top of all that was the underwater world – and that was pretty special too. We dived a mix of wrecks and reefs, but as most of my buddies were marine biologists, it didn't matter whether we were diving a macro site or a big hulk of metal – they were determined to point out bugs. I have to say, I've never seen as many nudibranchs in my entire life.



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PORT NAPIER

57°15.950' N
005°41.285' W

While under construction in 1940, the Port Napier was taken over by the Admiralty to be converted to a minelayer. On 27 November that year, she dragged her anchor during a gale off Kyle of Lochalsh and a fire broke out in the engine room. As the ship was carrying a cargo of mines, the crew were evacuated and she was towed out into Loch Alsh. A massive explosion blew her apart and she sank onto her starboard side in 20m of water. At low tide, the port side is visible from the surface.

This is a fantastic dive, as much of the structure is now smothered with a variety of marine life, particularly plumose anemones. There are a couple of openings that allow for easy penetration, and there are two anti-aircraft guns still visible on the bow. The most interesting aspect is the

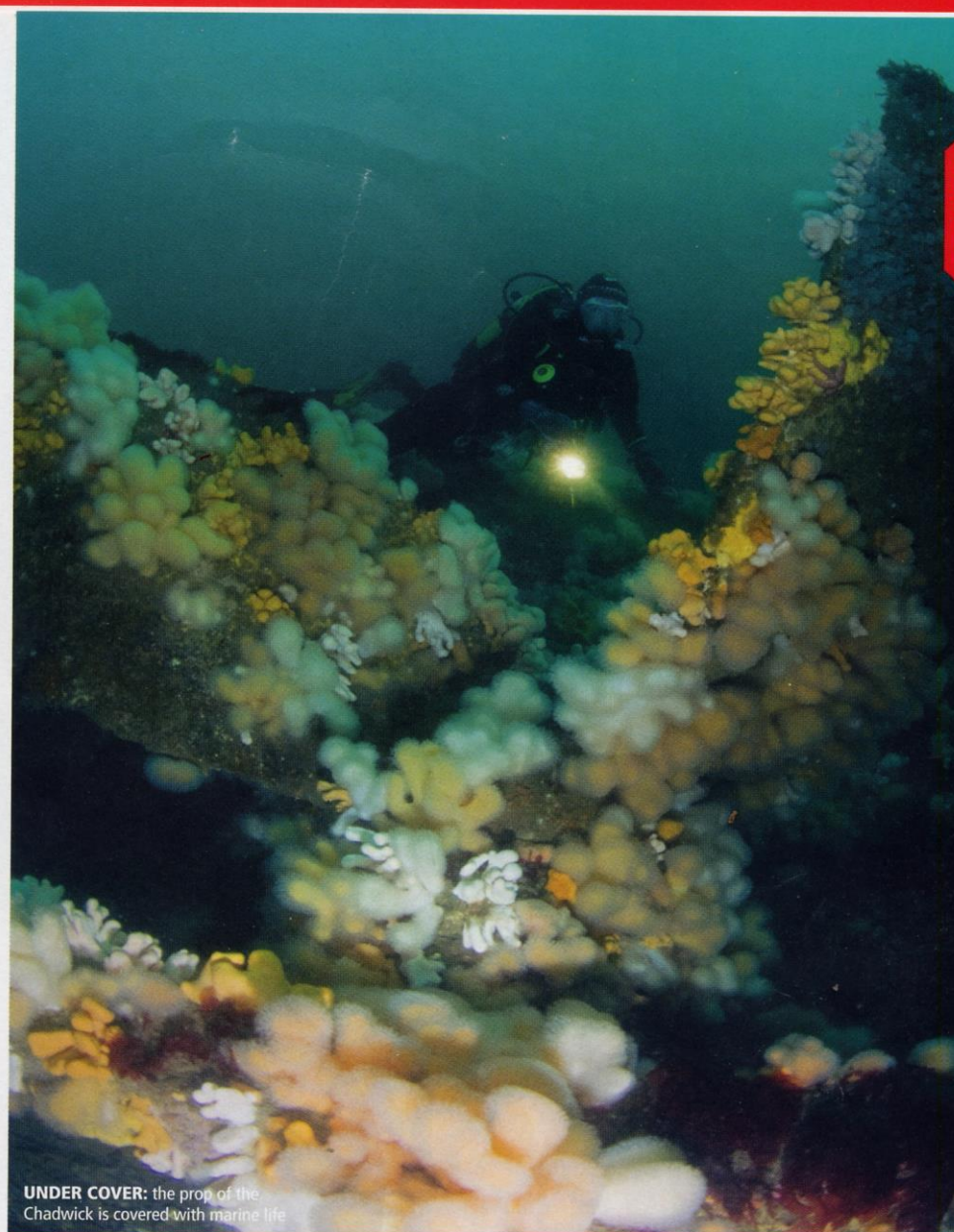
amount of life around the wreckage and under the stern.

I could hardly touch the sea bed for something moving, as hermit crabs fought over shells, squat lobsters peered out of crevices, butterfish wriggled over the bottom, blennies peeped out of oyster shells and nudibranchs were absolutely everywhere. Unfortunately, as they lived around the wreckage, they were all tinged a rusty orange colour so were not the most photogenic creatures in the world.

CHADWICK

57°27.071' N
006°47.175' W

On 5 July 1892, the Chadwick was en route to St Petersburg from the River Clyde with a cargo of coal when she hit rocks near Neist Point in fog. The crew were rescued but the Chadwick sank, and today, parts of the wreckage are spread out between depths



UNDER COVER: the prop of the Chadwick is covered with marine life

of 10m and 28m. Some parts are still recognisable, and there is a particularly photogenic propeller at 25m. We found a couple of prominent parts of the wreck where you can enter for a rummage, and it is beautifully decorated with anemones. In the shallower depths, plates are strewn all across the sea floor. This must be dived at slack, as strong currents are the norm.

STASSA

57°44.378' N
006°58.207' W

En route from Archangel to Limerick in July 1966, this Panamanian steel steamship was making her way down the Minch, between Skye and the Outer Hebrides, when she managed to run ashore. She was towed to shelter but the captain refused any further assistance. The ship slowly filled with water and sank four days later at a depth of 20m. >>

The sea bed is made up of soft mud so you need to be careful not to kick up the visibility. The wreck lies on its starboard side, and the port side rises to just 10m below the surface. There are some decent swim-throughs, but the most interesting part for me is the amount of life clinging to the framework. The usual plumose anemones were in abundance, but also all sorts of tunicates, crinoids and an abundance of beautiful cup corals standing proud in all their glory. I also found a multitude of nudibranchs on the sea bed and lots of little sea hares clambering over the wreckage itself. In fact, I had to do this dive again with a macro lens.

SCALP ROCK

57°34.612'N

006°30.990'W

Scalp Rock is in the Ascrib Islands and appeared to be a firm favourite with a large colony of sea hares, which were enjoying themselves in twos, threes and more. At the 20m line was an incredible amount of nudibranchs, which became sparser as we moved into shallower water.

Hilarious little decorator crabs were visible among the seaweed, with all manner of leaves stuck to them to improve their disguises, and on the sea bed were countless edible crabs – some tucking into a lunch of oysters and others just sitting around in holes that they had dug in the sand. There were so many of them that it reminded me of a busy British beach scene. Perhaps this is where they go on holiday?

Scallops were also strewn across the sea floor, and scorpionfish added some colour to the rocky outcrops along with tubby little cushion stars, which looked as though they were struggling to stay in position.

AN-T-LASGAIR

57°41.108'N,

006°25.903'W

This dive site was almost as picturesque above the surface as it was below. Guillemots and razorbills covered the rocks, and some of our group were lucky enough to see them diving into the water and swimming around them. One buddy pair also had a grey seal escorting them to the



MOVING HOME: hermit crabs under the stern of the Port Napier

PINK POWER: sea scorpion at An-t-lasgaire

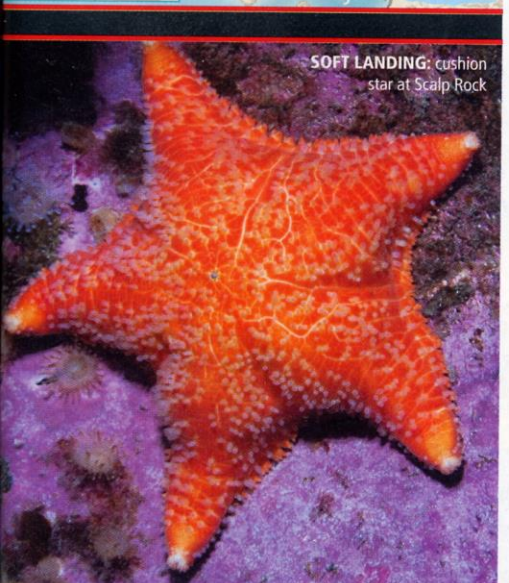




SHELL SPOT: scallop at Scalp Rock



GEM TIME: jewel anemones at An-t-lasgair



SOFT LANDING: cushion star at Scalp Rock

surface at the end of the dive. I don't think I would have noticed a diving guillemot unless it had landed on my head, as my eyes were glued to the sheer rock face that dropped down to 30m or more and was covered with my favourite jewel anemones.

Much of the surface was a beautiful pink colour, and a mixture of cup corals, starfish and anemones in an array of colours contrasted brilliantly with the background. There was so much to see that I don't think I moved more than 5m the entire dive.

• Thanks to Bob Anderson of MV Halton for his help with this article

NEED TO KNOW

DIVE's reporter dived from the MV Halton liveaboard, which departs from Uig on Skye. There is also a land-based dive

centre on Skye: Dive and Sea the Hebrides, based at Lochbay near Dunvegan on Skye, can offer accommodation and charters and also has a compressor on site.

GETTING THERE

Skye is on the west coast of Scotland, 237 miles north of Glasgow. The island is joined to the mainland by the Skye Bridge at Kyle of Lochalsh. There are also two mainland ferry connections from Mallaig and Glenelg.

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