

**5**  
BUDGET FINS  
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REVIEWED

AIMING FOR THE  
SKYE - SCOTTISH  
DIVING AT ITS BEST

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THE WORLD'S DRIFT-  
DIVING HOTSPOTS

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IN BONAIRE - FUN  
FOR ALL THE FAMILY

# Sport Diver

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Dead man's fingers  
adorn the wreckage



Conger eel



# REACH FOR THE SKYE

MIKE CLARK returns to the Isle of Skye for the first time in 25 years, and is left awestruck by the diversity of the diving on offer

Photographs by MIKE CLARK

I had last visited Skye 25 years ago just after a massive storm had hit the UK. The diving was good in the sheltered sites that were available, but I always wished to go back and dive the exposed headlands. Well earlier this year, I managed to do just that! While the summer of 2015 has been poor and it rained for most of my stay, that did not matter to me. What did was that it was calm, and underwater the vis was good, averaging around ten metres.

I stayed with Dive & Sea the Hebrides, based in Stein, in the north of the island. The first morning I jumped aboard their dive boat Elena C with three other pairs of divers. We headed out of Loch Bay and travelled up the Waternish Peninsular until we reached the dive site Waternish Point.

## WATERNISH POINT

Dropping down, the kelp covering the cliff top disappeared as I dropped descended the wall. It drops for around 5-8m before ending in a bright sandy seafloor. This was punctuated by large boulders in slightly deeper water. Maximum depth was around 25m. The first thing I noted was a blue and gold male cuckoo wrasse and his harem of orange females. The

male came right up to my camera and had a good look, allowing me to get a nice picture. For me the dive was made already, but there was a wall to explore. Marine life was plentiful and I found large sunstars, vivid red sea scorpions and, underneath the boulders, just where skipper Gordon MacKay had predicted, was where I found the jewel anemones. It was a good start to the trip and as we were in a great location to see whales, Gordon took the boat out to have a look. No luck this time, but that would change later in the trip. Heading back in we stopped to explore a few seabird colonies before meandering over to Isay Island for dive two.

## ISAY ISLAND SOUTH

Photographers, whatever you do, put on a macro lens for this site. Small decorator crabs roam the sea floor and hermit crabs live in partnership with cloak anemones. Nudibranchs were plentiful and after following a trail of dismembered shellfish pieces, I found an octopus hiding in a crevice. (Gordon's advice again). Max depth is around 21m and a wall falls down onto a sandy/rocky seafloor.

Day one and two cracking dives, but that was only the warm-up act.





Tropical Hooking nudibranchs are common

***"Small fish were darting around and with the beautiful reef, crystal water and bright white sand, this dive was stunning and I would have happily dived it all week!"***

#### CONGER CREVICE

This dive would have to be brilliant to live up to the morning dive at MacLeod's Maidens. Initially I didn't think it could. Vis was down to ten metres, but the site was fantastic and threw up some close encounters. At a depth of around 18m, a horizontal fault in the rock opens up a gap no greater than 50cm tall. This was Conger Crevise and it didn't take me long to find the first conger. I was last diver in the water and I had to wait a long time before the eel moved forward again and stuck its head in a spot where I could photograph it. After 30 minutes I had the shot and I moved along the crevice spotting lobster and conger alternately for over 200 metres before I had to ascend. I also spotted a small wrasse that I was not familiar with. It turned out to be a rock cook, which has some neon blue stripes over its face and body. I took some time to photograph this fish and I was concentrating so hard on this task that it was only later when editing my images that I noticed the background full of luminous green jewel anemones. After all this photography I had built up some deco stops. While I hung about I looked closer at the walls. In spaces between the kelp I found some beautiful anemones and tiny, vivid red sea scorpions. I didn't quite make it around to play in the lagoon with the seals, but I had experienced a great dive.

Back on board, a minke whale chose that time to fin by. Heading back to Stein we saw more cetaceans and another sea eagle. Even the sun came out and we caught a glimpse of it setting in the west. What a day.

Serious rain had returned for the following day and the tops of the big cliffs were shrouded in murk and low cloud. We travelled in the same direction as the day before but we stopped at a deep reef just off of Neist



Dolphin

The morning would see us travelling even further afield. We would head past the turbulent, tidal water around Neist Point Lighthouse. Otherwise the sea was calm and we saw dolphin and porpoise on our trip. The sea cliffs on Skye are spectacular and it was on a rock pinnacle here that we spotted our first white-tailed sea eagle. You may be on board for a dive trip, but expect to see a lot of wildlife above the waves, too. Arriving at our destination MacLeod's Maidens, three large pinnacles of rock form sea stacks, and offshore a reef full of gullies can be explored.

#### MACLEOD'S MAIDENS

This was a descent through clear blue water to just over 24m. Vis was superb at 15 metres. Clean sand ran into the mouth of a large gully. I finned along the reef at the edge of the sand and soon spotted sea hares and nudibranchs. This was nudibranch heaven. Then I saw a huge pair of eyes and noted a father lasher (short-spined sea scorpion). I had not seen one of those for a while. Small fish were darting around and with the beautiful reef, crystal water and bright white sand, this dive was stunning and I would have happily dived it all week! I could then venture into the gullies, which I had mainly ignored on my nudibranch hunt.

In the interval we explored the stacks and sea caves full of sea birds and seals. All eyes were on the next site though. A small island in the distance, An Tùphsgeir. At the rear of the island, a lagoon has formed and this is full of common and grey seals. Our dive site was on the other side of the island and it's renowned as the top dive in the area. It's called Conger Crevise.

***"I took some time to photograph this fish and I was concentrating so hard on this task that it was only later when editing my images that I noticed the background full of luminous green jewel anemones"***



Octopus





Seals eye the dive boat



Soft sponge and coral growth is impressive



Colourful snail

Point Lighthouse, where we had experienced the turbulent water the day before. Today it was quieter and the state of the tide enabled us to dive the site christened the Washing Machine by the skipper.

#### THE WASHING MACHINE

This is a deeper site and a steep boulder slope drops away well below safe diving limits. I stopped my descent just under 30m as most of the life was above this depth. Vis was around 12 metres. On my descent I saw squid eggs attached to an old piece of rope. Very big pollack darted into view and large schools of smaller specimens darted past on the edge of the vis. Next up was a large lesser-spotted dogfish. This launched into the tide to land a few metres away on the reef. Ascending the wall slightly the wall becomes more vertical with huge slabs of rock sticking out at right angles into the tide. Soft corals covered everything here and there were more cuckoo wrasse to be seen. Gullies now cut back into the kelp-covered cliffs and edible crabs and lobster were common sights. A high-energy site with the chance of seeing some big fish.

The scenic diving had been fantastic, but for the next dive we would drop down on the wreck of the Chadwick.

#### THE CHADWICK

There was much more of the Chadwick left to explore than I had hoped for. I expected a completely broken, flattened wreck but this was not the case. An upturned section of the hull partly covers a small boiler and the remains of the engine. My favourite section of the wreck was the stern and its large prop. This is a very tidal area and slack water is required to dive the site. Slack water occurs two hours after high water and two hours after low water Ullapool. Due to the high energy, soft corals cover the wreck. Add to that the large pollack and ballan wrasse that are found on the wreck and the Chadwick makes a very nice scenic wreck dive. Other divers on the trip finned into a shallow gully at the end of the dive and were treated to a fantastic display of jewel anemones in every colour imaginable. Next time I will make sure I find that.

Back on the deck of the Elena C, the rain pelted down and we passed a sodden and glum-looking sea eagle on the way back to Stein.

The last day of the trip dawned and we headed off out up the Water-nish Peninsular again. We headed further around than on day one and we arrived at the site christened by skipper Gordon as the Tumble Dryer.

#### TUMBLE DRYER

Nothing was visible above the surface at this site, we were a good bit off-shore and no rocks broke the surface. Below us was a nice pinnacle with a wall that fell onto a rock sea floor. Kelp covered the top of the pinnacle at around 10m. The wall fell down from this to a max depth of around 25m. I liked this dive and I was soon finding nice large nudibranchs and this is an excellent site for them. What made the dive for me though was when an octopus moved in front of me. I don't think I would have seen it

otherwise. I let it settle down for a while and moved closer, managing to get a few nice shots. Finning across the rocky bottom, I found that it gave way to sandy gullies at either end of the wall. There is plenty to see on the ascent, but the top of the pinnacle runs out at around 10m, which means you decompress looking at the kelp and nudibranchs from a distance.

Back on board the boat we headed around the headland to a site where we could view golden eagles. We found the nest but the chicks had fledged already and we didn't see them. We had to make do with porpoise for company as we headed for the final dive of the trip. Just outside Loch Bay, the dive site Ardbeg was found.

#### ARDBEG

This was another pinnacle sticking up in the tide and we were able to dive its leeward side. Vis dropped a little to eight metres and we all felt that the water temperature went down too. The top of the pinnacle was at 6m and the seafloor was at 18m. There was a lot of small stuff to be seen here - sea scorpions, starfish, crabs and nudibranchs kept us interested. The sandy seafloor, however, is home to a good few scallops and some divers were thinking more of their tummies and filled a bag for the evening meal. That was it then, the last ascent of the Elena C's ladder was over and the final steam back into Stein gave a couple of nature lovers who had joined the trip nice views of dolphin and porpoise. Gordon took the boat past the small islands at the mouth of Loch Bay and we saw the colony of common seals, which was a great experience in itself.

My thanks to Gordon and Aileen of Dive & Sea the Hebrides - it won't be 25 years till I see you again. ■

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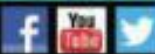
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