

# SCOTTISH DIVER

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2015



**Skye  
Diving**

**End  
To End  
Iceland**

## **A Diamond In The Blue**

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# Skye Diving

Mike Clark recalls a return trip to Skye - and he wasn't disappointed ...

I 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 wanted to return and dive the exposed headlands. And earlier this year I managed to do just that! The summer of 2015 has been poor and it rained for most of my stay, but that didn't matter to me. What did, was that it was calm and underwater the vis was good, averaging around 10 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

As I dropped down the wall, the kelp covering the clifftop disappeared. It drops for around 5-8 metres before ending in a bright sandy seafloor. This was punctuated by large boulders in slightly deeper water. Max depth was around 25 metres. 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 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.

We stopped to explore some seabird colonies before meandering over to Isay Island.

## 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. The max depth is around 21 metres and a wall falls down onto a sandy / rocky seafloor.

Day one and two cracking dives already, but that was just the warm up. We then travelled even further afield, heading past the turbulent, tidal water around Neist Point Lighthouse. Otherwise the sea was calm and we saw dolphin and porpoise. 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.

We finally arrived at our destination MacLeod's Maidens - three large pinnacles of rock form sea stacs and offshore a reef full of gullies can be explored.

## MacLeod's Maidens

This was a descent through clear blue water to just over 24 metres. 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 explore the gullies which I had mainly ignored on my nudibranch hunt.

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



Lesser spotted dogfish



Rock cook wrasse and green jewel anemones

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## Conger Crevise

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 10 metres, but the site was fantastic and threw up some close encounters. At a depth of around 18 metres a horizontal fault in the rock opens up a gap no greater than 50cm tall. This is 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 previous day but stopped at a deep reef just off of Neist Point Lighthouse, where

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

## The Washing Machine

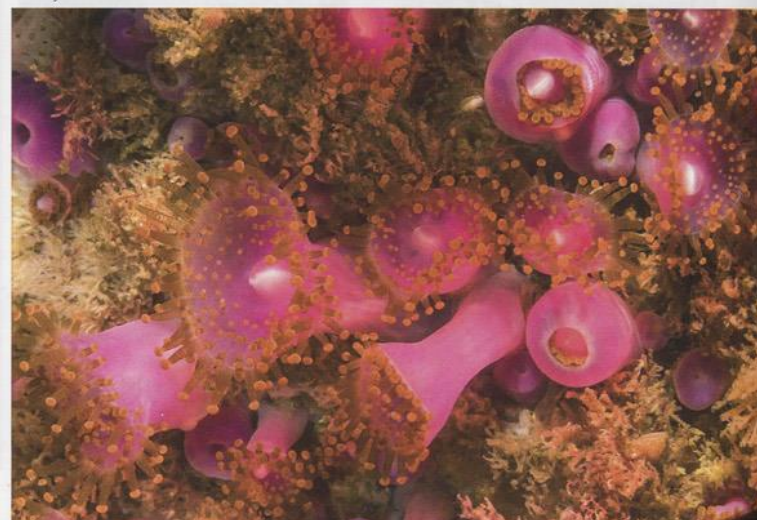
This is a deeper site and a steep boulder slope drops away well below safe diving limits. I stopped my descent just under 30 metres as most of the life was above this depth. Vis was around 12 metres. On my descent I saw squid eggs attached to an old piece of rope. Very big pollack came into view and 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*.



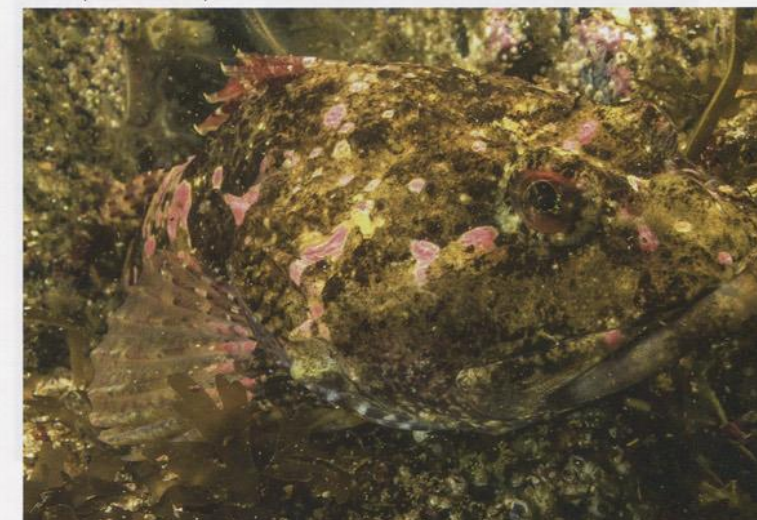
Conger eel



Pink jewel anemones



Male Cuckoo wrasse



Short spined sea scorpion



## The Chadwick

There was much more of the *Chadwick* left to explore than I anticipated. 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 Waternish Peninsular again. We went further around than on day one and arrived at the site

christened by skipper Gordon as the Tumble Dryer.

## The Tumble Dryer

Nothing was visible above the surface at this site, we were a good bit offshore 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 10 metres. The wall fell down from this to a max depth of around 25 metres. I liked this dive and I was soon finding nice large nudibranchs.

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.

I finned across the rocky bottom and found it gives way to sandy gullies at either end of the wall. There is lots to see on the ascent but the top of the pinnacle runs out at around 10 metres which means you decompress looking at the kelp and nudibranchs from a distance.

Back on board the boat we traveled around the headland to a site where we could view golden eagles. We found the nest but the chicks had fledged already. 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 8 metres and we all felt that the water temperature dropped here a little. The top of the pinnacle was at 6 metres and the seafloor was at 18 metres. There was a lot of small stuff to be seen here Sea Scorpions, Starfish, Crabs and nudibranchs to keep the diver 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 and Sea the Hebrides. It certainly won't be 25 years till I see you again.

Chadwick boiler



Charging nudibranch



Chadwick screw



Nudibranch



Octopus



Painted top shell



## FACT FILE

● Gordon MacKay and Aileen Robertson Dive & Sea the Hebrides, t/a Hebridean Diving Services, Shorepark, Lochbay, Waternish, Isle of Skye, IV55 8GD

● T: 01470 592 219

● E: diveskye@dive-and-sea-the-hebrides.co.uk

● Wifi is almost non-existent in the area and the Stein Inn does not let you use theirs even if you are eating there.

● Portree is the capital of Skye and it's here you will find supermarkets and restaurants. Dunvegan is the next biggest town and has a couple of restaurants but much less choice than Portree. You can get wifi in both towns.



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