

SKYE TIME

Mike Clark heads to the Isle of Skye for a photo workshop, and even unseasonably bad weather fails to dampen the spirits of the participants thanks to some epic diving and stunning topside scenery

Photographs by Mike Clark

As soon as you cross over the Skye bridge, time slows down and you relax. I was visiting for six days of diving and running an underwater photography workshop with Aileen and Gordon of Dive and Sea the Hebrides.

Their dive centre is located in Stein on the Waternish peninsular. This lies directly on the foreshore of Loch Bay. The slipway is located only 200 metres from the dive centre and accommodation. It is here that you board the dive boat Elena. C and the diving adventure begins.

I arrived in unseasonably bad weather that would be later described as 'pants'. The forecast was improving for later in the week and hopes were high that we would still dive the more-exposed dive sites. A great thing about being based in Loch Bay is that you are sheltered from all but the very worst storms.

The first dive was at Sgeir A Chuain, which is a small exposed island which lies offshore from the three islands of Isay, Mingay and Clett that guard the entrance to Loch Bay. These also provide superb diving in their own right.

Nudis, dolphins and seals

Sgeir A Chuain barely breaks the surface but below the waves a wall drops down to just shy of 20m. At the base of the wall a white coral sand sea floor slopes away and pink maerl beds form. I spent a lot of time looking for marine life here and was rewarded with a Yarrell's blenny out in the open, on the maerl. Nudibranchs were the stars of the show here and they were found on the walls and the seafloor. Candy stiped flatworm were common, which was a treat for me as I do not see these locally.

Dive 2 was at Leinish Point and I started lucky by encountering an octopus sheltering in a hole in the sand. The seafloor sloped away well past 23m, where I decided to stop and as I finned south, the wall became increasingly steep and exciting but unfortunately, I was running low on gas.

The first day's diving was completed, but the action was far from over as a colony of common seals was found near the dive site and on the journey home we had a fantastic encounter with a pod of common dolphin. What a start to the trip. ▶

Did you know?

The waters around the Isle of Skye are renowned for their clarity and diverse marine habitats, making them ideal for divers who want to explore Scotland. There is potential for strong currents and the remote location of some dive sites will require advanced planning.



Lion's mane jellyfish with fish



Yarrells blenny
on maerl



Conger eel



Edible crab



Dive boat

“ Next there was a battle for survival going on where a large lion’s mane jellyfish had been captured by plumose anemones and its tentacles were slowly being drawn in for consumption ”

Crayfish and poached eggs

We were off to one of the signature dive sites called Heron Wing (I have no idea why). It’s a very tidal site found at the very tip of the Waternish peninsular. It has beautiful walls, covered in orange and white dead man’s fingers, dropping down to a seafloor of coarse white sand at a depth of 24m. Edible crabs and cuckoo wrasse frequented the walls and there were so many sandy gullies to explore. Here I came across large lobster and a very large lion’s mane jellyfish with an attentive school of juvenile fish. The best find was a crayfish, which I found right at the end of the dive, as I was ascending. It was a fairly small individual, but I was happy to see it as I had not seen many before.

Ard Beag was an easy second dive. A 15m deep wall dropping onto a white sand seafloor. Starfish were most common here with massive orange sunstars lying partially buried in the sand. Urchins and soft corals decorated the walls and I noted large amounts of poached egg shell (*Simnia patula*) living on the dead man’s fingers. The steam home was also magnificent as the sun came out and the skies cleared and we could observe the whole length of the Outer Hebrides in stunning conditions. It was so good I returned to the tourist hot spot - Fairy Pools - in the evening to capture landscape photographs of them in tranquil conditions. On my prior visit I had to contend with storm force winds and horizontal rain, but the pictures were much more dramatic.

The pinnacle of diving

Normal weather had resumed with strong winds and heavy rain, and diving today would be limited. This is not a problem for Dive and Sea the Hebrides, as their house dive is just across the loch and not to be missed. Every time I have visited here, the Loch Bay Pinnacle has always provided excellent diving. The top of the pinnacle rises to 6m and is approximately the size of a tennis court. The walls drop down to around 25m, with the eastern wall being the most vertical. On the southern side of the pinnacle, large boulders are found and these form a reef extending away from the main pinnacle.

I found luminous green jewel anemones here. I didn’t expect to find them in a sea loch. Next there was a battle for survival going on where a large lion’s mane jellyfish had been captured by plumose anemones and its tentacles were slowly being drawn in for consumption. The schools of small fish in the jellyfish tentacles made for great photographic subjects.

I also saw my first male cuckoo wrasse of the trip. They are always a joy to see with their vivid colouration. In the shallows on top of the pinnacle, sea hares were numerous and made brilliant photographic subjects.

The weather for dive two was the same and the only thing that changed was other divers joined us for a dive on the pinnacle, inspired after listening to our ravings about how good dive one was. Now surely the weather would improve and we could get to the more-exposed dive sites, fingers crossed. ▶



Fairy pools around the mountains



Common dolphin



Crayfish

Puffins and sea eagles

Thankfully, the wind had dropped and the sun looked as if it may make an appearance today. The Ascrib Islands were our destination. This was the day we were going to be diving with the puffins. Unfortunately, when we arrived at the site a tour boat was sitting right under the colony and the rafts of puffins had all but dispersed - so plan B. We had a couple of wall dives here, but we felt somewhat disappointed. This didn't last long though as we enjoyed some fantastic puffin fly-bys, then a white-tailed sea eagle flew past and then bow-riding common dolphin on the way home. So, two good dives and amazing topside wildlife encounters made the day. Puffins and dolphins always make you smile.

Do the conger

This would be a special day's diving and we reaped the reward of Skipper Gordon's hard work. He had sailed the boat around Neist Point lighthouse to an anchorage the previous night. While Gordon enjoyed a fantastic sunset and more bow-riding dolphins, I was out making the most of the conditions, capturing some landscape photographs. In the morning, we woke up to a pristine clear blue-sky day. A 25-minute drive reacquainted us with the boat again.

MacLeod's Maidens looked stunning in glorious conditions. Underwater was fantastic too, with improved vis of around ten metres, which was still far less than normal. This site was a sloping wall that dropped down into sandy gullies. These form a maze and I just followed the path that looked best.

The scenery was stunning and plastered with marine life. Sunstars and dahlia anemones were found in the coarse white sand, nudibranchs where everywhere and jewel anemones in every colour covered the walls. With the sunlight shining down through the water it made for a stunning sight.

Dive & Sea The Hebrides

For more information and to book your Hebrides dive adventure, visit:

www.dive-and-sea-the-hebrides.co.uk

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Making my ascent I arrived in the jellyfish zone. Moon jellyfish and small blue jellyfish with their small fish lodgers - photographing these made deco stops fly by.

The second dive of the day is in my opinion the best in the area. It's called Conger Crevice. It's a small islet with a wall dropping down to 20m. One metre from the base of the wall a fissure opens up and runs along the length of the wall. This is where you will find the conger eels. I found over half a dozen looking out of their hiding places. Other fish are prolific here and female cuckoo wrasse and rock cook were seen amongst the soft corals and jewel anemones.

Ascending and photographing more jellyfish, I noted that the blue skies had started to darken. Another storm front was coming in and while we were driving back to base, Gordon was sailing the boat back around to Stein before the storm hit. Thankfully, he made it with time to spare as when it hit, it was severe enough to cancel the diving on our last day and that is something that does not happen very often up here.

Summary

Our last day was utilised with some photography editing demonstrations and looking at the images captured by the participants and noting the improvements. Fun Awards were given for the photographers and, as said, the weather secured the Pants award. A great time with spectacular diving, even in the atrocious conditions we experienced. ■