

Diving the Atlantic North West

Gordon MacSkimming tells us about the diving on offer as far north and west as you can go without leaving Scottish waters ...

BY VENTURING further west and north away from Scotland's population centres it is pretty much a given that diving conditions will improve, better visibility, greater diversity of marine life, rarely visited wrecks and so on. There is a down side, go beyond the Sound of Mull and the availability of air, charter boats and other diver support facilities declines rapidly. There are however a few people out there who can assist you not only with the obvious tangible trappings required of diving but also with that most crucial aspect of any dive trip - local knowledge. One such person is Niall Johnson who runs the Uist Outdoor Centre based at Lochmaddy on North Uist.

My own interest in this part of the world goes back to a time when there were no diving facilities whatever for visitors. I lived on the island of Benbecula for two years and I learned to dive in the seas around North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist. Only after moving away did I realise that I had been surrounded by, and finning around, in premium dive space, some of the best that the Atlantic coast of Europe has to offer.

Scenic Diving
For the most part shore diving in the Uists and Benbecula is limited to locations on the east

coast where easy roadside access can be found. This is typical sea loch diving but you can expect to see a slightly different mix of marine life from that found on the west facing mainland sea lochs. On North Uist the road running along the south side of Loch Eport provides easy shore access at a few places. The old pier at Peter's Port on Benbecula gives a rather silty shallow dive but there is a small wreck about 250m to the east of the pier.

Jewel anemones (Corynactis viridis) at Holm Island, Harris.



Yellow edged polycera (Polycera faeroensis) at Holm Island, Harris.



Looking east along the Sound of Eriskay, five easily dived wrecks including the SS Politician lie beneath these waters.

On South Uist the pier and slip at Loch Carnan and the derelict pier in Loch Skiport both provide access to good shore diving. This is only a sample, I am sure that there are many other accessible rarely visited sites. Commercial boat traffic is present in most of the sea lochs and should be taken into account when carrying out shore dives.

As usual, boat diving massively expands your choice of good dive sites. To the north we have Holm Island near Renish Point in Harris, this has a small easily dived wall covered in encrusting marine life. At the entrance to Loch Maddy a dive at either of the two jagged rocks Madadh Mor or Madadh Gruamach is well worth the effort.

On the east coast of South Uist the entrance to Loch Carnan has many rocky islets worthy of exploration and further on the area under the Ushenish light delivers exceptional scenic diving. There are many more boat diving options and almost certainly there will be a number of good dive sites waiting to be discovered in this wild and remote region.

Wrecks

For the wreck enthusiast there is a significant hit list. The *SS Stassa* is relatively intact and lies on the seabed at the head of Loch Rodel in Harris. Just around the corner in the Leverburgh Channel the remains of the armed trawler *HMT Brora* lie scattered below a rocky shoreline. Close to the pier at Lochmaddy on North Uist the remains of the *SS Burnside* sit upright in fairly shallow water, an easy dive suitable for every experience level.

Further down the coast the *MV Eilean Roisin Dubh* ran aground on a rocky islet on the south side of Wiay island, what's left of her lies below the point of impact. At the mouth of Loch Carnan in South Uist the broken up remains of a steamship (possibly a paddle steamer) are dispersed down the submerged slopes of Glas-Eileanan. Much further south as we approach the entrance to the Sound of Eriskay near Ru Melvick the remains of the fleet oiler *RFA Birchol* are to be found.

Just over half a nautical mile away lies the rocky islet of Hartamul final resting place of the *SS Thala*, now broken up and widely dispersed. Moving into the

Sound of Eriskay the remains of Norwegian steam tug *Henrietta Moller* lie parallel to the shore at Rubha Dubh. A short distance to the east lies a submerged WW2 Mulberry Harbour unit, under tow by the *Henrietta Moller* when she ran aground.

Finally further into the Sound of Eriskay the best known wreck in Scotland the *SS Politician* (its stern section) lies on a sandy seabed close to Calvay Rock. With a cargo that included 22,000 cases of whisky the *SS Politician* did not fail to attract some considerable degree of attention from the local population. The wreck and subsequent goings on provided the basis of Sir Compton Mackenzie's book *Whisky Galore* and the comedy film of the same name.

Further Afield

The diving options outlined above are suitable for all grades but there is much more. For experienced groups this area provides a jumping off point for some really remote west coast locations that will deliver the very best of Scottish diving. Ultimately the 38 nautical mile 'hop' from North Uist to St Kilda can be achieved in under two hours using a suitably equipped RIB, this of course assumes favourable weather and sea conditions.

Marine Life

There is simply not enough space to cover the marine life of this area in any great detail. Larger creatures such as seals, dolphins and porpoise are regularly seen. In the summer months basking sharks, minke whales and if you are really lucky sunfish may oc-

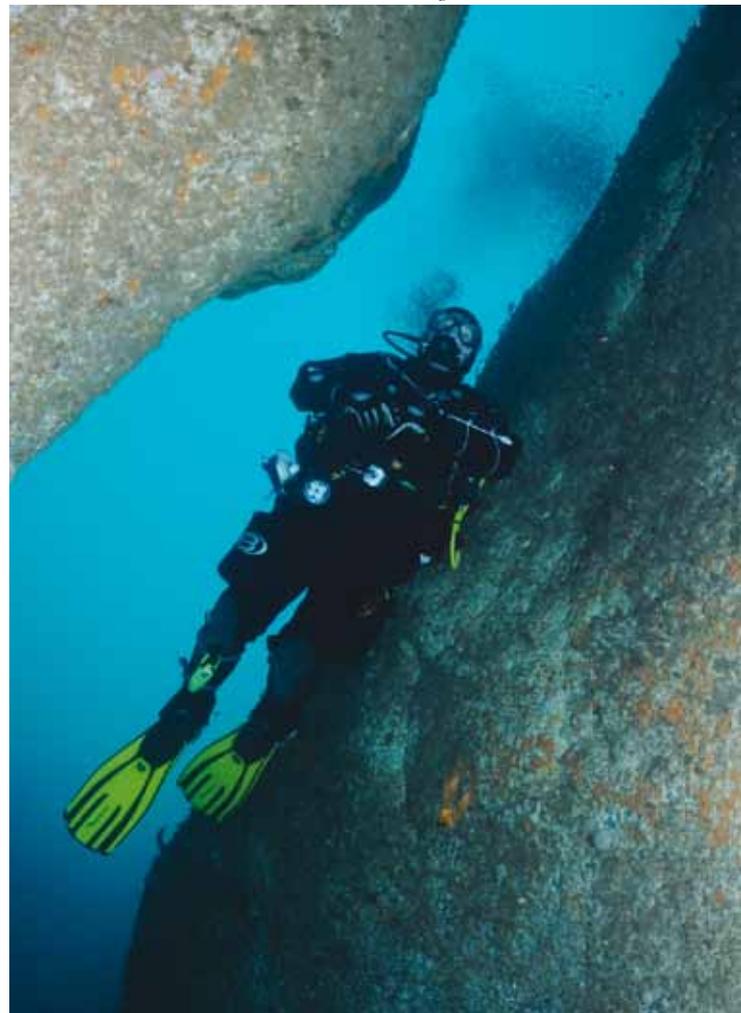
asionally be seen. To be honest apart from the seals these are most likely to be surface encounters, seeing any of them underwater would be something special.

The amazing diversity of smaller creatures can best be sampled by downloading the PDF file from the following link: www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/marine/LochMaddy.pdf This Scottish Natural Heritage leaflet describes an area around Lochmaddy that has been designated as a Special Area of Conservation under the EC Habitats Directive and gives a very good overview of the local underwater fauna and flora.

The Uist Outdoor Centre

The Uist Outdoor Centre is situated a short distance from the ferry terminal at Lochmaddy in North Uist. As the name

Diving in a cut at Dun, St Kilda.



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Planning a trip, Uist Outdoor Centre



The accommodation block



The lounge area at the Uist Outdoor Centre

suggests they organise and support a number of outdoor activities including kayaking, walking and climbing. They have purpose-built self catering accommodation for up to 20 that is organised into five bunk rooms surrounding a lounge and fully equipped kitchen. If you are not inclined to self cater then

it is possible to organise meals locally. Alternative full board accommodation can also be arranged.

The centre has an 8.5m RIB powered by twin 150 hp engines available for charter, it can carry up to ten divers. Air to 250 bar can be supplied to visiting divers who stay at the centre or charter the

RIB. Personal diving equipment is not provided by the centre.

The Uist Outdoor Centre is open from May through to September and by advanced booking during the remaining months except for January when it is closed. Further information can be obtained by contacting Astrid or Niall.

NORTH WEST NEED TO KNOW

Where We Stayed

Uist Outdoor Centre
Cearn Dugaidh, Lochmaddy,
Isle Of North, Uist HS6 5AE
T: 01876 500480
info@uistoutdoorcentre.co.uk
www.uistoutdoorcentre.co.uk

2014 Accommodation Rates

£20 pppn bedding supplied
£16 pppn if you bring your own
sleeping bag

2014 Boat Charter Rates

(2 Dives, minimum 8 divers)
Up to 10 miles £65 pp
Up to 20 miles £80 pp
Up to 30 miles £110 pp
Skippered boat hire £700 plus fuel
cost per day.

Getting There

Caledonian MacBrayne ferries
www.calmac.co.uk
T: 0800 0665000

enquiries@calmac.co.uk

Summer 2014 rate from Uig in Skye to
Lochmaddy for car, driver and
1 passenger £82 return.

Final Words of Caution

This really is a remote place by UK
standards, arrange as much back-up
and equipment redundancy as you
possibly can, spare parts are unlikely
to be available locally or at short
notice.

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