



Divers swimming through the Hispania. Image courtesy of Mike Clark

# The Perfect Wreck?

Lochaline Dive Centre's Dougal Crawford tells **SCOTTISH DIVER** why he believes the *Hispania* is one of the UK's best wrecks ...

CONSIDERED ONE of the best wrecks in Scotland and the UK, the *Hispania* always leaves an impression on divers visiting the Sound of Mull. Renowned for its tidal nature, strong currents restrict diving the *Hispania* to slack water only, however patience is always well rewarded with an exceptional diving experience.

## The History

The *Hispania* was a Swedish steamship, built in Belgium at the turn of the century, in 1912. She had an eventful life, attacked and seized several times over her career, however it was on Saturday, 18 December 1954 that she would leave port for the last time, when she departed from Liverpool with a cargo of steel, asbestos and rubber sheeting.

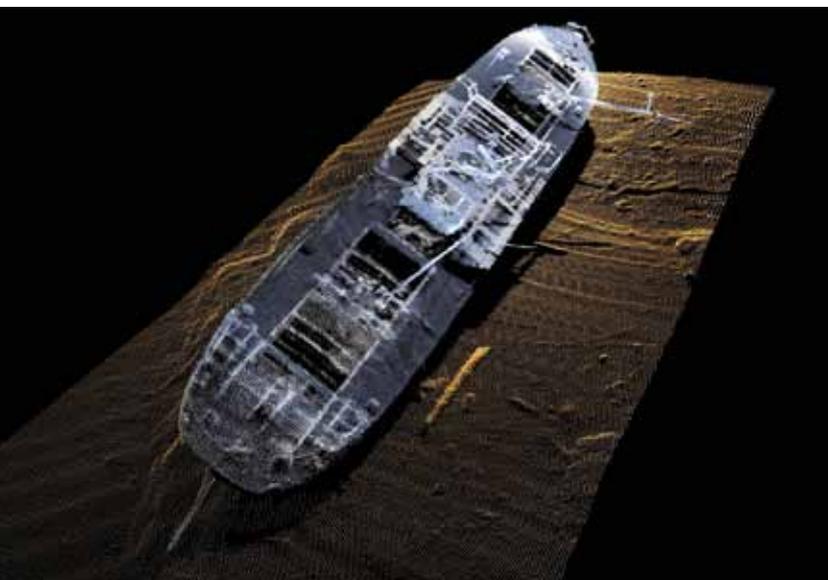
Headed for Varberg, Captain Ivan Dahn was steaming up the west coast of Scotland when he found himself in the midst of a storm. He steered the *Hispania* into the Sound of Mull for shelter and relief from the wind, rain and sleet, however the storm had rendered visibility in the Sound to almost nil. Persevering, the captain brought the steamer almost all the way up the Sound of Mull, before striking Sgeir More (the Big Rock) half a mile off the western shore of Mull at 9pm.

Attempting to save the ship, her engines were immediately put full astern, dragging her backwards off the rocks. Unfortunately it was clear her hull was badly damaged, and she was listing quite drastically to port. The crew of 21 had plenty of time to launch their lifeboats, but Captain Dahn refused to join them. During a lull in the storm the crew rowed around the ship pleading with him but he insisted. While rowing away a bulkhead must have given way, and she started sinking fast. Some of the survivors maintained they saw their captain on the bridge, hand to forehead salute as he went down with his ship.

## The Wreck

The *Hispania* has stayed remarkably intact, lying on a slight slope with her stern in at 32m and bows at 24m. She sits upright for the most part, with a slight list to starboard that seems to be increasing over time.

Due to the tidal nature of the site, the amount of marine life on the hull is nothing short of exceptional. The strong currents that restrict divers so much are the same that feed some of the densest colonies of anemones, tunicates and



A multi beam sonar scan showing the wreck in its entirety



Alternate steering covered in Plumose anemones. Image courtesy of Mike Clark

hydroids that can be seen in the British Isles. The almost constant, strong currents bring a huge amount of water-borne nutrients, encouraging the growth of a great diversity of marine life on the wreck, and attract a lot of fish life to take shelter from the currents in the wreck's structure.

The wreck is covered in deadmen's fingers, sponges and divers will see plenty of plumose anemones, allowing for amazing colourful visuals in fantastic visibility. Fish use the structure as a nursery and haven from the raging currents outside the wreck, and the holds and captain's cabin are now occupied by shoals of wrasse and pollack. Colourful nudibranchs are a common sight and you might even catch sight of a conger eel hiding in one of the many nooks and crannies.

The *Hispania* offers so much for divers to explore. Her bow points towards the Isle of Mull, and a buoy is usually attached to the stern. After descending to the wreck, you will be able to examine the auxiliary steering gear before dropping below to the propshaft and rudder. On deck level, the roofs have all rotted away, allowing the stern accommodation to be lit from above for some spectacular visuals

Moving forward divers can have a good look at the ship's spare propeller. Both below and above the deck offer a lot to explore, with the stern holds,

midship's superstructure, masts, spars and winches all colonised by amazingly colourful marine life. Forward of the bridge there are three holds, and more masts, winches and spars.

Experienced divers can penetrate the wreck down to the engine and boiler rooms and see the workings of the intact triple expansion engine

It's recommended that divers drop over the side and swim back out to view the ship if time allows. It's an amazing site in stellar visibility. Divers will also see the anchor on the seabed.

Lizzie Heaver of Reading BSAC who dived the *Hispania* with us quite recently said: "For me, she is more a reef rather than a wreck and you are hard pushed to find any metal as it is so covered with life. It is as if the wreck has been painted with plumose anemones and no patch has been left bare. When they are in full bloom (or at least that is how I like to think of it – as they do look like flowers) they are just spectacular making something that is rather industrial become a very delicate, soft, living reef.

"The plumose anemones look like they are made of suede to me and I always have an overwhelming desire to stroke them! Being upright and relatively intact she makes for an interesting dive and is easy to navigate around and understand! There are plenty of swim throughs and places to explore but, for me, I think the outside of her is the best part.

Plumose anemones are the take away thing for me and a 'chocolate box' wreck."

The *Hispania* is a fantastic wreck dive which has something for divers of all experience levels. Shallow enough for a good, long exploratory dive, sheltered from all but the worst weather, great visibility and amazing visuals, the *Hispania* well and truly earns its reputation as one of the UK's best wrecks.

#### Getting There

The *Hispania* is extremely tidal and divers are recommended to charter a dive boat with an experienced skipper to dive the wreck. The site is 16km from Lochaline Dive Centre, with the boat journey taking around 1 hour. An experienced skipper will ensure divers make the best of their time and arrive at the right tide to get a good, long dive. Arriving at the wrong time can mean waiting for the tide to turn on the surface, or misjudging the tide and not getting on the wreck at all!

One of the only criticisms of the *Hispania* is that it is such a long journey by boat from Oban, departing from Lochaline solves this problem. Multibeam sonar images provided by ADUS Deep Ocean (pictured) allow us at Lochaline Dive Centre to give divers amazingly detailed dive briefs on interactive Wreck Sight software, so divers can plan their route on this amazing wreck, and many others, before departing.