

All four ore carriers are possibly the best WW II ships I have dived on and that certainly includes all those in Scapa Flow. The water is cold, ranging from 0 degrees C at the seabed to 14 degrees C at the surface, quite a change and certainly a welcome relief as you hang out on the mooring line de-gassing on the way back to the boat.



Eel pout



Wrecked whaling ship, Conception Bay

IT WAS a few years ago when I first heard about a dive centre in Newfoundland where you could dive on icebergs, explore intact WW II wrecks and snorkel with whales! Quite a trio when you think of it, but the details were lost through time, as work commitments inevitably got in the way and although the place was not entirely forgotten, it was certainly on the back burner. Then, earlier this summer I was contacted by Snooba Travel and invited to go to Newfoundland - too late for icebergs I was told, but perfect for whales and of course, there were those tantalising wrecks. Here was a second chance presenting itself, this time I wouldn't miss out!

Newfoundland is the most easterly province of Canada and in fact Cape Spear is the closest point to Europe, so close to the UK in fact, that it is only a 5 hour direct flight from Heathrow Terminal 3 by Air Canada. Now, when we gauge our holidays by the amount of flying time in relation to the cost of the holiday divided by the experience or excitement of said holiday, then Newfoundland comes very high indeed in the score ratio.

For those who know and dive the Oban area off the Scottish west coast, one of the best wrecks of all time is the Swedish registered *Hispania* which struck Sgeir Hor in the Sound of Mull on December 18, 1954. Well, Bell Island in Newfoundland has four '*Hispanias*!' all intact and sitting upright in a maximum depth of 28 - 40 metres. Absolutely incredible!

Bell Island, is the largest of the three islands in Conception Bay, located to the west of St. Johns the provincial capital of Newfoundland. The island was once one of the primary producers of iron ore to the allies during the war. In fact all of her underground mines are now long since flooded (but that is another story, for cave divers much more qualified than I am!). However, it's real claim to notoriety comes from a couple of brief but costly encounters with German U-Boats in 1942 when Newfoundland became the only place in North America where a direct attack on land installations by the Nazis took place. In two separate incidents U-Boats stole into Conception Bay and sank two ore carriers during each attack and also blew up the main pier on Bell Island.

This dive trip supplied exclusively by Snooba Travel is absolutely superb and depending on the time of year you choose

to visit the island, you can not only dive four of the best old wrecks you will ever find in cold waters, but there is a fair chance that you will also have encounters with Humpback and Minke whales as well as icebergs! Although the primary dives are the four WWII ore carriers, there are also superb scenic dives around the other islands and varied coastline of Conception Bay. The wrecks sit upright and intact in waters of less than 40 metres, perfect for sport divers on air. However, for those who prefer it, Nitrox and Trimix is available in St. Johns, as there is a commercial oil field offshore.

The Wrecks

In September of 1942, the U-513 commanded by Rolf Ruggenberg made its way undetected into the massive Conception Bay inlet. On the night of the 5th, he struck with deadly force and sank the SS *Saganaga* and the SS *Lord Strathcona* before escaping into open waters and the safety of the North Atlantic.

The iron ore carrier SS *Saganaga* was 125 metres long and had a gross tonnage of 5454 tonnes and was at anchor in Lance Cove when she was struck. Now lying in 34 metres on an even keel, her main deck is in 23 metres. There is a massive gaping

Newfoundland is Wreck Wonderland

words & pictures: Lawson Wood



hole amidships and this wreck like the other three in this cove have all suffered top damage by the occasional iceberg which drifts through the sound and gets snared on the superstructure. Imagine a dive on a nearly intact ship from the Second World War with an iceberg on its deck stretching to the surface and beyond, incredible!

The *SS Lord Strathcona* was struck that same night and now lies in 36 metres with her main deck at 27 metres. At 140 metres long and weighing 7335 tonnes, this ship takes several dives just to explore the upper deck. Better preserved than the *Saganaga*, the main superstructure is completely open and easily negotiated, except for the time to depth limitation. All of the holds are open and with care, exploration can be undertaken inside the ship. There are some fishing nets snagged onto the structure, so care, as always, should be taken.

Two months later, on November 2, the U-518 entered Conception Bay as a slight detour to Quebec where a spy was to be offloaded. With the knowledge of his partner's previous success, Captain Frederich Wissmann approached Lance Cove and sank two more ore carriers, the *SS Rose Castle* and the *PLM 27*.

The *Rose Castle* is also 140 metres long and weighed 7803 tonnes. The deepest of all the sites, the ship sits in 40 metres.

Again, the ship is upright, making her upper decks in around 28 metres perfect for exploration. Due to her depth, the ship is much more intact than any of the others and is considered the best preserved of all the ore carriers.

The last of the four ships sunk that night off Bell Island is the *PLM 27*. A Free French ore carrier, her name initials stand for 'Paris Lyon Marseilles' and she is by far the most accessible of all the ships. At 123 metres long and weighing 5633 tonnes, Ocean Quest Adventures have placed two safe mooring lines with buoys on her, one at the stern and the other at the bows to allow you the chance to safely explore the ship over a number of dives. With her deck in only 20 metres, she has sustained the most iceberg damage, but she is perfect for extending your time after exploring her intact propeller and rudder. The seabed is littered with debris, amidst a field of scallops, mussels, flounders, ocean pout and burrowing anemones and starfish.

All four ore carriers are possibly the best WW II ships I have dived on and that certainly includes all those in Scapa Flow. The water is cold, ranging from 0 degrees C at the seabed to 14 degrees C at the surface, quite a change and certainly a welcome relief as you hang out on the mooring line de-gassing on the way back to the boat.

These northern Atlantic waters are very similar for marine life to the UK, there are familiar species of kelp, bladder wracks, winkles and HUGE scallops. The wrecks are absolutely smothered in large green plumose anemones and soft corals, with every bit of metal space covered.

Lumpsuckers are common and found all year round. Commercially harvested for their roe which is exported to the Baltic States, they are found all over each of the wrecks. The starfish and most nudibranchs are of the same type found in British waters and even the wolf fish are the same species. But the wolf fish in these northern waters compete in the ugly stakes with the Ocean Pout (*Macrozoarces americanus*). This is a type of eelpout which has grown to massive proportions, usually over a metre long, they have a similar sized head to the wolf fish, but with no obvious teeth, only massive fleshy lips! There are hundreds of flounders all over the seabed which is also home to sand dollars (a type of flat sea urchin) and large moon snails. Skate are common in shallow waters and the predominant local species of fish is undoubtedly the local variation of the wrasse family called a 'cunner' (*Tautoglabrus adspersus*). Very similar to corkwing wrasse, these are more spotted and equally as nosy as their British cousins. Cod are everywhere as there is no commercial fishing allowed for

the species without a licence to catch individual fish. The area is so familiar that it is only the odd anomalies which remind you that you are in a foreign country.

There is some shore diving around the entrance to St. Johns Harbour and a few easily accessible sites around the varied shoreline of Conception Bay, including three old whaling ships which were scuttled at the end of the whale hunting in the 1970's. However much of the diving is undertaken by boat. Ocean Quest, operated



This page far left:
Lumpsucker on wreck
left: Cunner wrasse

continued..

by Rick & Debbie Stanley work out from Topsail at Conception Bay South, a twenty minute ride along the freeway from St. Johns (watch out for Moose!). Air, weights and lunch are provided on board. The Ocean Quest dive boat often stays out overnight for barbecues and night dives to explore this massive bay. We came back after overnighing at a folk/rock festival, having dived a spectacular new site with a massive natural arch that you could take the boat's zodiac tender around. The rock walls were a mass of small green sea urchins being grazed on by the cunner wrasse, massive shoals of caiplin, the primary food of the humpback whales, were all around and absolutely huge ocean pout dotted the seabed, the place was simply stunning above and below the surface.

Diving really doesn't get much better than this, the lure of snorkelling with whales, combined with icebergs and pristine WWII wrecks is just spectacular, I can thoroughly recommend this to everyone, this is on my diving map. There are local bed and breakfast establishments within a few minutes of the dock, or you can stay in the Best Western in St. Johns which is ideal for some fantastic nightlife in the Irish style pubs (the best Irish music, dancing and Guinness west of Dublin!).

Ocean Quest Adventures in Newfoundland are available exclusively from Snooba Travel, PO Box 31487, London. W4 2QW. The hottest internet travel company on the net. www.snooba.com. Tel: 02089873111.

Lawson Wood was hosted by Snooba Travel, Air Canada, British Airways, Barnacle Bill Flaherty and Ocean Quest Adventures.

The Bell Island Wrecks, Newfoundland © Lawson Wood



Far left: Diver on wreck
left: The Ocean Quest dive boat

Sea the world our way!

snooba

Let us take you snorkelling and scuba diving to weird and wonderful places around the world, where **King Neptune** rules!
Check out www.snooba.com for our latest deals & destinations!

Caribbean	Americas
· The Bahamas	· Bermuda
· Bonaire	· Newfoundland
· Curaçao	· Vancouver Island
· Cayman Islands	
· Tobago	
· Turks & Caicos	
Asia	Mexico
· Indonesia	· Baja California
· Malaysia	· Cozumel
· Philippines	
· Thailand	Indian Ocean
· Vietnam	· Maldives
	· Seychelles

www.snooba.com

For friendly, expert travel advice, get in touch with us on 0208 987 3111 or via email under info@snooba.com. 7 days a week.

Snooba Travel Ltd
PO Box 31487, London W4 2QW
© Photos: Lawson Wood

This isn't the only thing that does more than one job!

Just because you're into more than one sport shouldn't mean that you have to have more than one insurance policy to cover loss or damage to all your different types of equipment. You shouldn't need to join different Sporting Bodies to take advantage of their schemes either. Well now with the cutting edge **Sports Equipment Insurance** scheme from **Dive Master** – one policy covers you for practically all types of sporting equipment.....

.....Oh – and you don't really think your household insurance cover even comes close, do you? So look sharp and call us now for details!

Kelvin Smith & Co. Insurance Consultants
256 Castlemilk Road, Kings Park, Glasgow, G44 4LB
Tel: 0141 632 8955 Fax: 0141 632 9033
in association with
Dive Master Insurance Consultants Ltd
www.dive-master.net

- Diving Equipment Insurance
- Diver & Instructor Liability
- Travel Insurance
- Boat Insurance
- Diving Medical Insurance

All policies subject to certain conditions, warranties & exclusions