



Long Weekend Scapa Flow Style

ROSEMARY E LUNN

Roz Lunn is an enthusiastic diver and regular contributor to **SCOTTISH DIVER**. Her most recent assignment saw her travelling to that diver's mecca - Scapa Flow. She dived with highly respected skipper John Thornton and reports that the quality of the HM *Karin* experience continues to be of the highest standard.



SCAPA FLOW is arguably one of Britain's most historic and famous stretches of water. Affectionately known as 'The Great Harbour' this natural maritime haven, one of the largest in the world, has been used since prehistory with its sheltered waters playing a key role in travel, trade, tourism and conflict over the centuries.

The Flow's geographical location makes it strategically important, as this refuge allows easy access to both the North Sea and the Atlantic. As a result the Orkneys have had many invaders who have left their mark in more ways than one. For the Vikings who utilised this harbour, also provided its name - 'Bay of the Long Isthmus' or Skälpeid-floi in Old Norse.

From a naval point of view there has been a significant amount of international history here. During both world wars Scapa was the UK's main Royal Navy base. After the Navy left in 1956 the waters were quiet until the late 70s when the Flow enjoyed a renaissance, firstly in the shape of the oil industry, to be followed about five years later by another new invader or should I say

pilgrim? Today about 2,000 sports divers annually cross the Pentland Firth, keen to discover for themselves the depths, myths, legends, history and wrecks of this legendary British dive site, that is Scapa Flow.

Scapa Flow diving has traditionally been a week's event. Now with more demands on divers' leisure time, a number of foresighted skippers are offering four day 'long weekend' charters. This option has always been popular out of Oban, but it's only recently that this choice has been available, courtesy of John Thornton and the *Karin*.

I first dived off the *Karin* in 1996, with further visits in 1999 and 2004. For those of you unfamiliar with her, she was a trawler built in 1968, and used to work out of Hamburg in the North Sea. Being built for the sea she naturally handles inclement weather like water off a duck's back, making her ideal for year round diving. There's a misconception about stability, comfort and safety when it comes to boats. A rolling boat is a safe boat because it's going with the sea and not

fighting it. So although it may be a bit bumpy in the Flow over the winter, you should still be able to get in the water and go diving.

Since Thornton got his hand on the *Karin* in 1995, she has undergone quite a conversion. Currently she has two heads (toilets), one shower, a drying room, one single and seven twin cabins all with proper sized single mattresses, rather than a tatty piece of foam. Hurrah! It's worth bringing your own sleeping bags and towels, but in the event that someone forgets these, John can provide them.

"Food wise", John observed, "there's a galley on board so divers can self cater if they want, and if they don't, then just let us know and Little John will cook. We do like to use fresh local organic produce, such as Orcadian meat where we can, making our Scottish breakfasts very tasty. In the evenings there are so many hotels and pubs that cook fab food, you are spoilt for choice."

Finally there is a snug main day cabin complete with lots of charging points and a DVD and television. Well you
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never know when you will get the urge to watch The Big Blue. Veterans of Stromness will probably recognise the seating in this cabin, for it came from that great watering hole, the Ferry Inn. (Good to see positive recycling in action).

I do say 'currently' because each time I have been on this boat John has made some quite major alterations. "I am always thinking of improvements to make it better for divers, rather than being a floating hotel that divers fall off into the sea. As each project tends to be quite fundamental, we do it when we have the time and the money".

The beauty of the *Karin* is that it is driven by a man who not only dives, but teaches diving. John began diving at Loughborough University. "Clive Woodward (ex England Rugby Coach) and Sebastian Coe were contemporaries, so I was always terribly competitive at sport. But I also wanted to do something non-competitive that would run beyond my teen sport years, and could be taken to any level. For me, this was diving."

John's love of Orkney is obvious, even though he ended up here completely by accident. "One of my friends from university had a farm up here so I spent two summers working for them. And then that fateful night happened when I met some scallop divers. Very quickly the farming stopped and I began scallop diving. After a couple of seasons of this I knew that I wanted to stay on the Orkneys for two very good reasons. I'd married a local girl, Linda, and I wanted to be involved with diving the Flow. I was one of the first skippers to offer dive charters in the area. You know that is over twenty years ago now."

I guess that probably makes John one of the most experienced and qualified skippers to work Scapa, so on the *Karin* divers get all the important things in life. Like big wide benches to kit up on. A range of exotic gases on tap which are blended to a 'T', slack when it should be (more or less), a good Scottish breakfast (when requested), and a skipper who understands what divers need.

"Recently I've noticed a couple of new trends. With the *Karin* licensed for 15, including crew, we've found that divers are wanting to shift away from blocking the boat for a group. Some clubs can find filling 12 spaces tough, so the fact that we happily welcome individual divers and couples has proved popular with all our customers.

"And then we have the Aberdeen trend. More of our divers are giving Scabster a miss and driving straight to Aberdeen instead. Having talked to them, it does make sense because of the distance and time saved. We've found the Thursday night sailing at 17:00 from Aberdeen on North Link Ferries (www.northlinkferries.com) is proving to be especially popular for divers, as they are in Kirkwall by 23:00. This means that Fridays Child, who was loving and giving, can also go diving as well".

Having been born on a Friday, why do I like diving from the *Karin*? Well it has to be said that John Thornton is the

Ronseal of Scapa Skippers. You get exactly what it says on the tin. John is quite a character, and in the world of cynicism, refreshingly John is an honest man, so you know where you stand with him. Having lived, breathed and dived these waters for so long, he knows what dive sites will be good and why, and he will tell you this.

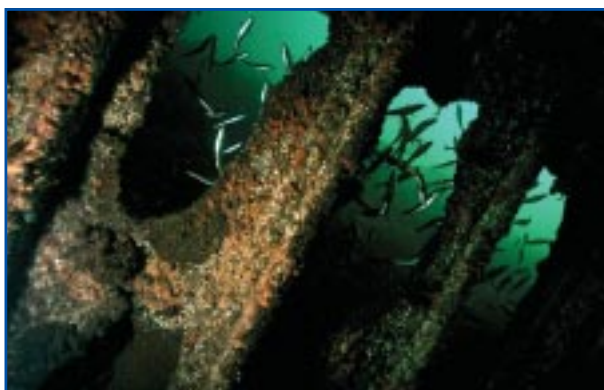
One of the best dives I have ever done since I learnt to dive, was off the *Karin* in June 1996, and I still rave about it now. We dived the *Tabarka*, which is a blockship located in front of the Inverlaine. The *Tabarka* is a shallow dive, which means for nitrox divers, she is just perfect for getting a long bottom time without high decompression penalties.

She's upside down, but pretty much intact, so penetration is easy. Inside she looks a bit like a half timbered house without the plaster infills. That day the atmosphere inside the wreck was magic, strongly reminiscent of a cathedral as the sun streamed through the portholes echoing the effect of stained glass in a church.

So what was the visibility like? Well the viz was mouth-wateringly clear, but the best bit was that a seal had followed me into the *Tabarka*. Every so often I would get a tug on my fins, so I would turn around to see what my buddy wanted, to find him grinning from ear to ear. I couldn't understand what was going on, as the seal was not obvious. This continued as the seal stayed and played. Nine years on, that dive is one that I have always treasured.

"I'm very lucky that I've a consistent, loyal customer base that keeps on coming back because they know what they are going to get, so I still do a lot of day charters and liveboards. Obviously", John grinned, "there is more flexibility with a liveboard, even on the four day charters we can sleep over at Long Hope or Burray. But that is where the beauty of the Flow comes into it's own. Where else can you find blockships, cruisers and battleships right on your door step?"

"Now that I've got a side scan sonar fitted to the *Karin*, it means that divers can also go wreck hunting in the Flow. There's so much stuff down there yet



Ian Potten's brilliant images (above and main photo overpage) illustrate how exciting the diving can be at Scapa Flow

to be discovered, and it doesn't really matter too much what the weather is doing. With it being so protected you can get out diving pretty much all year around up here".

John's experience of leading expeditions as far afield as Singapore has given him a huge insight into trip planning. "We want everyone to have a good time and one of the better ways of ensuring this is prior planning. When divers are not sure of something, the best thing they can do is hop onto the website (www.scapflow.com) and drop me a line. We can organise B&B, tanks, equipment hire, nitrox, trimix, an onboard cook, and of course training. Please get in touch if you have any questions."

The Thursday sailings from Aberdeen now means that a long weekend in Scapa is easily achievable, even for me living one hour north of London. For those of you who have not yet experienced the magic of The Great Harbour, a four day long weekend charter (sailing from Aberdeen) is a perfect way to introduce you to the renowned wrecks and legendary landscapes that is Scapa Flow.