

Mad



stunning Icelandic scenery

Iceland's scenery and its array of fine dive sites have left a lasting impression on Lee Brown and here he recounts his adventures. At Silfra's freshwater lakes he reports visibility second to none in dramatic caves and awesome swimthroughs. His conclusion - the impressive underwater landscape has to be experienced first hand.

FEW OF US in Scotland would think about travelling north to dive. But IcelandAir fly four times a week to Iceland from Glasgow in under two hours and there you will find some excellent diving.

The country is a surprise too, with a very varied landscape from volcanic lava plains to green fields, from fjords to large inland lakes and of course, volcanoes (many active), hot springs, geysers, waterfalls and ice sheets! Reykjavik has also gained a well deserved reputation as a great place to spend a weekend. All the locals speak English, are pretty friendly, and are used to shopping in Glasgow, so no communication problems there!

There are a range of possible dive sites, both sea and freshwater and the marine environment is not unlike that of Scotland with the water a few degrees colder. It gets up to about 14°C in the summer and drops down to about 5°C in the winter. I had a shore dive near Keflavik and there was a very familiar feel to it with all the usual things you might expect to see on the west coast of

Scotland on a shore dive, albeit on black basaltic lava which characterises the seabed and lakebeds here.

There are some reasonable walls off the coast here down to 30m and a few wrecks to visit such as the *Sugar Tanker* at 20m out of Reykjavik as well as a few sunken fishing boats. Off the east coast of Iceland lies the *El Grillo*, a large armed Spanish freighter in 15-45m and some even odder wrecks like the *Jamestown*, a wood carrying sailship, which sailed across the Atlantic crewless before colliding with Iceland near Keflavik. I also dived a deep crack in the land near the coast at Bjamargja near Grindavik, half salt water, half fresh and quite impressive.

But I get the impression that it is the fresh water diving that everyone comes for and there are many possibilities, especially around the shores of Lake Thingvellir. Silfra is probably the best known, situated on the north west corner

of the lake about one hours drive up from Reykjavik.

This is part of a National Park and is also a UNESCO World Heritage and Natural Heritage site. It has a special part in Iceland's history as the first

Althing [parliament] was held outdoors in a natural amphitheatre.

The area also has a very special ecosystem with glacier fed springs percolating through from the Langjokull Glacier about 70 miles to the northeast. A visit to the tourist centre near Silfra is well worth it as there are maps and pictures

explaining it all. The lakes at Silfra (meaning silver) are spring fed with water so pure it is quite safe to drink directly from the dive site!

I did a couple of dives at Silfra with David Sigurthorsson from the Keflavik based PADI dive centre. After visiting the tourist centre and having had a look at the maps, we drove up to the Valhalla

"The lakes are spring fed with water so pure it is quite safe to drink directly from the dive site."

About Silfra

words LEE BROWN / images david@dive.is

Hotel (hot drinks and snacks are available) where we changed into our drysuits.

We then drove down to a car park, kitted up and walked down to the lakes where there are some steps leading into the water. Lakes might be too grand a term, they look more like small long ponds and seem very unprepossessing from the surface. These are actually deep cracks in the surface, formed as a result of continental drift as Iceland splits apart in the middle! Tremors are not uncommon, but fortunately the cracks tend to widen, not get narrower! At Silfra the crack is 5 to 10 m wide with at least 40m of water in places, but more frequently 6 to 25m and cave systems off the main channel.

From the steps we dropped down to a boulder strewn floor at 6m. The first thing I noticed was the clarity of the water ... maybe 40 or 50m viz! I was surprised by the odd effect of scattered light which seemed to make it brighter underwater than above the surface. The water was also cold, 3°C, no geothermal heating here! Much of Iceland gets its hot water directly from the rocks below, this area being an exception!

There was a little bit of bright green algae and a few pretty plants above the surface of the pool but I could see nothing in the water - no fish, shrimps or bugs! I was told that an odd moth larvae live in the sediment and fish sometimes swim up from the lake proper.

We progressed through an awesome swimthrough in the rock about 30m long. It was high and narrow and gave glimpses of a floor maybe 30m below us; we were at about 15m in here. My torch easily penetrated the clear water as I studied the blocky black and brown lava walls. Light shone through the ends in a most eerie manner accentuated by the crystal clear water.

On southward through the next part of the system, over a shallow lip to another long lake about 12m deep. We did this a couple of times until we ended up in a larger deeper pool with steep walls on either side and a sediment lip at the end.

We turned back and swam about a third of the way we had come, surfaced and made an easy exit from the water. 33 memorable minutes! Taking our tanks back to the truck we had lunch and chatted about the dive which had really left an impression on me - the incredibly clear water, and the awesome caves and swim throughs.

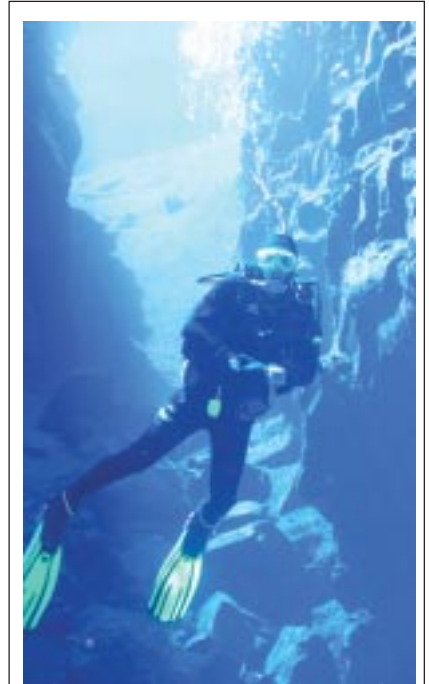
After lunch carrying fresh tanks we went back to our exit point and continued to explore the system. We swam over the sediment dam and turned left in very shallow water, me being picked up a bit by the current here and nearly taken down into Lake Thingvellir about 500m away.

We swam into a lagoon, no deeper than 4m but certainly very pretty with a white jelly like sediment floor that has springs coming out. The water had an odd blue sheen that even got to be deep blue in places and very beautiful. Best not to stir up the sediment! No life here either other than bits of bright green algae.

Turning left again we swam westwards into another crack, quite narrow this time, about 3 to 4 m wide but very deep with some impressive swim throughs, one at 45 degrees down was particularly impressive. The swim throughs were huge

cathedral-like chasms, so high and deep. Here over 40m and tending to draw you down.

There are also lots of horizontal caves too and despite the temptation to explore we resisted - proper cave diving procedures would be needed. Certainly you need a little nerve with the swimthroughs, but they are so big and there is always plenty of light from the ends. A torch certainly helps to see the magnificence of the place and the size of it all too. You also need to watch out for banging your head as there are overhangs and boulders sticking out! On the whole it is pretty easy and relaxing to dive, but at the same time exciting and adventurous!



crystal clear waters with amazing visibility is the norm



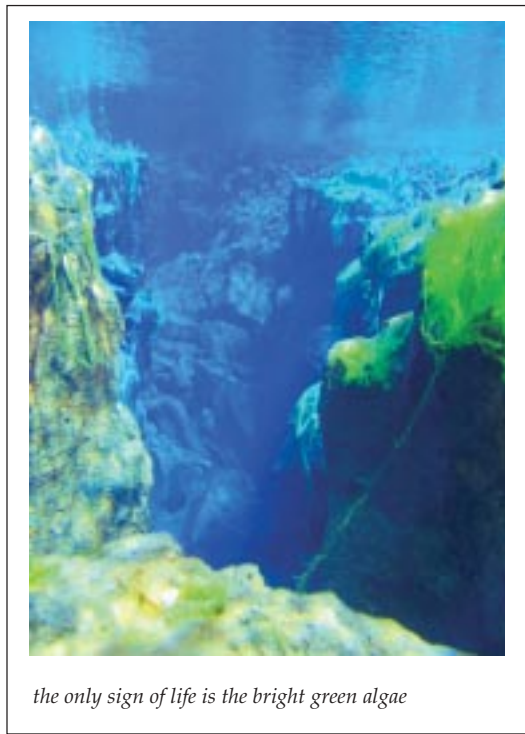
the 'cathedral like chasm' of a swim through

"The first thing I noticed was the clarity of the water ... maybe 40 or 50m viz."

continued overpage

continued from previous page

Mad About Silfra



Again, an easy exit from the water onto the grass and a walk back to the car park kitted up, but not too arduous on the footpath.

Neither of the dives was particularly deep, 19.7m for the first and 14.5m for the second but we could have easily doubled these. The cold water does begin to penetrate after a while, even my dry gloves were limited in effectiveness, but I noticed in the second dive my hands were warmer! A party of German divers arrived recently with heated suits and 'warm pads' and they probably had the right idea! I dive with a full face mask a lot of the time and was grateful for the Agas protection and faultless performance, however the cold did make my camera batteries a bit sluggish!

The end impression was of an excellent dive site, safe yet adventurous with incredible visibility and a really impressive underwater landscape that I will never forget. I certainly want to do it again and I am told there are other cracks nearby that are worth visiting.

A guide is needed to dive Silfra if it's your first time, as Icelandic divers worry that accidents might lead to a diving ban. This would be a tragedy as Silfra is a world class dive site, and definitely worth a trip to Iceland.

Iceland is not a cheap place to visit; you can generally estimate many prices being double that of the UK.

There is a 40% reduction in room rates at the excellent Hotel Keflavik and Guesthouse Keflavik for divers with the diveshop I used, giving a single room from about £40 B&B a night including airport transfers.

Dive tour costs vary depending on numbers.

There is more information about the site and dive tours on www.dive.is.

Make a difference when you dive

Marine Conservation Expeditions to Mexico and the Indian Ocean

- Be an active member of a research team
- Coral reef research
- Marine mammal and turtle surveys
- Marine education

Dive and science training provided.

for further information call **0870 608 8898**

GVI.CO.UK

RED SEA DIVERS

At last Scottish divers can dive the wonderful Red Sea without travelling to London first! Now with direct flights from Glasgow to Sham every Sunday and Monday, Red Sea Divers Ltd specialise in placing individuals, couples and groups on all the Red Sea liveaboards with flights, transfers, diving, meals, tanks and weights all included.

- Choose from over 20 liveaboards on our website at www.redseadivers.com
- We can also offer very competitive packages for hotel based holiday for divers (and non divers) Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and Gatwick flights also available
- Tel/fax : 01334 656577 or
- e mail : redseadivers@btinternet.com