

The Top Cat Always



Finds The Cream!

Editor Jack Morrison had been planning a trip to the Moray Firth for a long time, and when he finally got his act together he wasn't disappointed. Jack reckons that Bill Ruck's *Top Cat* is one of the best boat charters in Scotland and that Bill's patch is well worth the visit ...



I FIRST MET Bill Ruck a few years ago at a dive conference in Aberdeen. His raucous laugh and sheer enthusiasm convinced me that I had to go diving with this skipper. At that time he had just taken delivery of his new catamaran *Top Cat*. So a few years later when I received an email from Lesley Anderson of West Lothian Branch saying they had booked *Top Cat* and were short of bodies – would I be interested – I said yes without any hesitation.

So I joined Jim Anderson on the long journey north to Lossiemouth to meet up with the other three from his branch for two days diving in the Moray Firth. While they chose to camp (they're younger than me), Jim and I chose a comfortable B&B. I rather like Jim's criteria for choosing a B&B he looks for those run by a Mrs Mac-something; McGregor, Macintyre - something Scottish. That way he reckons he'll get an old fashioned wifey who will make

a mean breakfast and have a clean and tidy house.

As it happened all the Mrs Macs were booked and we ended up with Brian and Heather Leader who certainly run a clean and tidy house *and* do a mean breakfast; definitely recommended.

Friday night involved a nice walk around Lossiemouth on what was a lovely evening, followed by a pleasant meal in a pavement café watching the holidaymakers playing on the beach and the local lads getting drunk and falling over.

Saturday morning, the sun is shining and the sea is like glass. The ever-healthy Jim went off at eight to find fruit for lunch and came back with a variety worthy of Covent Garden in its heyday. By half past nine we had our gear stowed and Bill was running through the safety briefing while crew member, and all round good guy, Jim was casting off.

Our first dive was to be the wreck of

the *San Tiburcio*, a 5000 tonne tanker sunk in 1940. The sail over to the site gave us ample opportunity to have a look through Bill's wreck book. He has a list of 72 wrecks that he regularly visits; all are good dives, some shallow others strictly technical divers only.

Bill has dived most of them himself so often he has diagrams showing the tidal flow and strength you can expect at any state of the tide. None of them are ever so strong that a competent diver would be unable to dive them.

Time to dive and with plenty of room on the deck, kitting up was easy and we were all ready to go at about the same time. We were a pretty mixed group with four techies, one with a fairly new Inspiration who after 50 dives on it was still treating it as a training dive, a very wise young man.

The shot line on the *San Tiburcio* is attached to the bow at 30m; I always find it exciting following a shot line down and waiting for that first glimpse



The divers enjoy a spot of fishing

of a dark shape looming up from the depths. I was not quite prepared for this though, the water was clear and with the sun shining it was quite bright, and instead of a dark shape what we saw was bright

yellow with patches of orange and red. Narked I thought but no, this wreck is literally covered in dead men's fingers in all its colour variations.

It was clear we were not going to see all of the wreck as it is broken in two with the stern lying about 30m away from the bow section. In fact with limited bottom time and stopping frequently to take photos I only managed about half way along the deck.

Dropping down from the bow the port anchor is still in place but it is well overgrown. Just behind the bow there is an open hatch that I tried dropping into but without a torch I didn't venture too far.

The decks have heavy pipes running along and a flying walkway runs right along to the bridge. Looking back at my pictures I think I must have been narked because I can't remember taking some of them and they are not very good; I am sure this is down to a lack of concentration due to sheer enjoyment of the dive.

Back on *Top Cat* and before you even get your gear off Jim is handing you a piping hot cup of whatever you ordered - perfect. Then Bill tells us we have an hour and a half to the next dive site - the *Unity*, a trawler lying in 26m.

On the way there he produces his



Jim Anderson inspects the Moray

famous curried spuds accompanied by baked beans and one wonders what the effect will be on buoyancy during the second dive and if it will be necessary to keep the mouthpiece in when opening dry suit zips! Once again I can thoroughly recommend this culinary delight and I can imagine how popular they would be on a cold winter's day.

Anyway onward and downward as we reach the next dive site where the *Unity* lies on a sandy bottom with the bows intact and the stern broken up. I was a bit worried that 20 divers on such a small wreck would stir the sand up and spoil the vis which must have been about 10m; however the sand here is pretty heavy and it stayed relatively clear throughout the dive.

The most notable feature was the shoals of poor cod swimming freely around the wreckage. It's a long time since I saw shoals of fish but apparently it is quite common in the Moray Firth. There were the usual suspects you find lurking around a wreck; conger, edible crabs and squat lobsters. Hiding in the bryozoans and hydroids were butterfish and colourful nudibranchs grazing, unaware that they were being watched.

As we motored back to harbour in the afternoon sun chatting idly about the day's diving and what we saw I said to Bill: "This is about as good as it gets."

"Wait till you see what I've got lined up for tomorrow before you say that," he replied.

Next day dawned as next day will, to find conditions unchanged, the sun still shone from a cloudless sky and the sea was like a millpond. A slightly later meet,

ten o'clock, was most welcome as the older I get the slower I start.

Today's dives were to include another wreck - the *Moray*, which Bill had found just last year and has not been dived that much. To say I enjoyed this dive is an understatement, I don't do decompression dives, apart from safety stops, however I was so carried away with the fish-life on this dive that when I left the bottom I had an ascent time of 21 minutes.

Jim went down first to make sure the shot was in the right place, they really



Photographer Jack did catch some interesting underwater life

do go to extraordinary lengths to get things right for their divers. This is not really a wreck - all that stands proud of the seabed are the boilers, winches, prop shaft and a few plates and pipes. At about 15m from the bottom you can make out the outline of the ship another 15m below.

I could also see quite clearly the other divers exploring different parts of the wreck and coming off the shot the first thing I saw was a large conger hiding under a plate. About a metre away a rather shy wolfish lurked in a pipe, as I approached he slid back too far for a picture. Meandering behind them watching me was a large ling that again made itself scarce when I pointed my camera at him.

I spent the next 43 minutes trying without any great success to photo-



The camera-shy ling finally captured

graph fish: ballan wrasse, cuckoo wrasse, bib, ling, and shoals of poor cod. I gave up in the end and settled for divers who don't move quite so fast! For me this was one of those dives where I felt completely relaxed and at home in the sea. I rarely feel uncomfortable in the water, but just now and again I have a dive where everything feels perfect and this was definitely one of them.

For his last trick Bill pulled the veritable rabbit out of the hat and took

Saithe cruised above the kelp and the most colourful corkwing wrasse darted in and out of the base of the seaweed. Small walls dropped into sand filled gullies with scorpion fish hiding on ledges and in cracks. Finally I managed to get an acceptable picture of a ling but it was difficult to concentrate, as there was so much life to see. Edible crabs and lobsters of varying sizes - everything from three-inch babies to monsters you would not like to meet on a night dive. Calum

us to one of the only scenic dives in the area, Queen Street reef. A rambling shallow - 14m max. - set of rocky ledges, surrounded by white sand and covered in every kind of seaweed you can think of. I could write an article about this reef itself, and probably will one day - there was so much going on here.

Duncan is leading a Seasearch expedition here later on this year so I expect to see a more detailed report from him.

This was the best weekend's diving I have had for a long time, leaving me wondering why it has taken me so long to get up to the Moray Firth.

My thanks to Martin, Douglas, Russell and Jim for inviting and putting up with me, but thanks mostly to Bill and Jim for taking us to some fabulous dives and being a great skipper and crew. I'll most certainly be back to enjoy the cream of Scottish diving with the *Top Cat*.



not even 'one for the pot'

Every dive you depend on your regulator...
 ...Make sure it's up to the mark, professional servicing by the experts

You can entrust your servicing needs to our highly qualified & competent technicians, who have at their disposal specialised test rigs.

Technicians are on hand to answer your specific questions regarding your particular regulator.

We service the following:-
 'Aqualung', 'Spiro', 'US Divers', 'Apeks', 'Mares', 'Scubapro' & 'Sherwood'.

BS EN ISO 9001:2000 Certificate No. FM 27508

Midland Diving Equipment Ltd
 57 Sparkenhoe Street, Leicester LE2 0TD
 Tel: 0116 212 4262 Fax: 0116 212 4263
 www.midlanddiving.com

Scotland's Largest Undercover Boat Showroom & One Stop Dive Shop

WWW.FYM.CO.UK

R.I.B's - Mariner Outboards - Technical Diving Equipment
 Air Fills - Nitrox - Trimix - Mixed Gas Snorkles
 Everything from the smallest 'o' ring to the largest R.I.B

Forth Yacht Marina Ltd.
 4-6 South Lumley Street, Grangemouth, FK3 8BT
 t: 01324 685071 f: 01324 483635 e: alan@fym.co.uk