

Ghost of Arabia Headlines Tobermory Trip

Tobermory, Canada that is, where Alison Fish and her partner Brian spent part of a Canadian three centre tour in the Dominion's 'Diving Capital'. Despite some chilly wetsuit dives due to lost luggage, the wrecks they saw made a big impression as Alison recalls...

THE BRUCE PENINSULA of southern Ontario, Canada, is a long green finger of land bounded by the deep fresh waters of Lake Huron to the west and the colder, shallower waters of Georgian Bay to the east. The Niagara escarpment runs the length of the peninsula forming rugged undercut cliffs along the lake shore and a string of islands which bisect the great lake.

The beautiful Bruce is a haven for wildlife and an outdoor playground for the commuter classes of Toronto, a four hour drive to the south down highway 6. Black bears live here and the alvars (a flat, rocky habitat) are home to many globally rare plant species. In winter you can snowmobile the length of the peninsula, from Owen Sound in the south to Tobermory in the north, take part in cross-country skiing or try snow shoeing. In summer there are campgrounds, hiking trails, fishing, kayaking, swimming beaches and scuba diving.

Tobermory, Ontario sits at the very end of the peninsula where the green trees

and grey dolomite rocks plunge into the cool blue of Lake Huron. The village is twinned with Tobermory, Isle of Mull and they have much in common. Both perch on the strand line between the water and the land; both are famous for wreck diving and beautiful scenery.

Driving into Tobermory on Highway 6 the sign says, 'Welcome to Tobermory, Scuba Diving Capital of Canada'. Quite a claim, but the waters around Tobermory are home to the Fathom Five National Marine Park – Canada's first national marine conservation area – which boasts 22 shipwrecks and a number of historic light stations. Diving here is big business with a friendly face, the population of 700 plays host to over 8000 diving visitors every year.

An accidental tourist is in part responsible for the huge number of divers who flock to the area during the summer season. Zebra mussels were introduced to the Great Lakes about 20 years ago. The mussels are thought to have hitched a lift in freshwater ballast aboard a ship travelling from the Caspian Sea to Lake St Clair. On arrival in Canada the ship discharged its freshwater ballast, in favour of cargo, and unwittingly instigated an infamous ecological disaster.

Scuba divers, however, have reason to be grateful to the diminutive molluscs. Zebra mussels are filter feeders and over

the years they have improved visibility in the lakes from a murky soup to 20m or more. Due to the efforts of this wee bivalve, diving the wrecks of Tobermory has gone from a Braille experience to a wide-angle extravaganza.

We arrived in Tobermory on Labour Day weekend, the last busy days of the diving season. Our dive kit didn't make the transfer at Heathrow so we hired everything (including wetsuits –brrrrr!) from Divers Den, one of several dive operators which cluster around Little Tub Harbour, at the heart of the village.

Divers Den has a fleet of seven boats, and operate a 'walk-on' service for individuals and small groups, or a charter service for larger groups. We arranged our diving in advance but they say they'll take out a boat for just two 'walk-on' divers, weather permitting.

We dived from *Deep Obsession* a hard boat licensed for 22 divers. Onboard facilities were basic but well laid out with plenty of storage for kit, a spacious kitting up deck, an abundance of benches, a head and heated cabin.

Lake Huron doesn't have tides and most of the operators put in two or three, two-dive trips a day. The up side is you go out early in the morning and have the afternoon free (or vice-versa), but the down side is you only get a short surface interval between dives; we rarely managed much more than an hour.

words & pictures

Alison Fish



Little Tub Harbour



Deep Obsession delivered us efficiently to the excellent wrecks

Our first trip was to the *Philo Scoville*, a three-masted schooner wrecked on Russell Island in 1889. The wreck lies on a rocky slope with her bow in 25m and her stern in 7m of water. As we entered the water we saw broken sections of the stern strewn around the shallows. Massive timbers smashed in pieces by the winter storms and scattered over the limestone reef like a discarded jigsaw puzzle.

The water was crystal clear and we soon identified the larger sections. The starboard side of the *Scoville* is pretty intact and we followed her handrail forward until we came across a toppled mast. Collapsed across the wreck and on to the soft, silty lakebed, it led us away from the wreck but ended in a big silt ball (one of the student groups!), so we turned back and continued our journey towards her bow.

This part of the wreck is beautiful; she lies propped on her starboard side, with the stem post at a 45° angle. The port side of the bow remains intact close to the stem post, but is badly broken further back. 120 years after the *Scoville's* sinking, the impression is of graceful, flowing lines; she presents an elegant profile against the clear blue backdrop of Lake Huron.

Moving along the port side, and back into shallow water, the structure is broken up into huge strips of wood; remnants of the rigging are attached and metal nails still pin the structure together here and there. It was a glorious day and the sun shining down on the timbers gave the

dive an almost tropical feel – except perhaps for the water temperature!

We passed through a thermocline at around 10m on our descent, and another at 20m, the temperature in 25m barely reached 7°C and felt very chilly in a 5mm steamer and shorty. Nevertheless, the sheer thrill of seeing a wooden wreck so intact, and that beautiful bow, was enough to keep us in the water for almost an hour despite the cold, and earned us a reputation as ‘hardy Scottish divers’.

Built in England in 1930 the *Niagara II*, a redundant sand dredger, was deliberately sunk in 1999 by the Tobermory Maritime Association. The 55m long metal hulk was introduced to relieve

pressure on Fathom Five’s wooden wrecks and provide a sheltered dive site in poor weather. Even though the weather was superb this was to be our second dive.

Niagara II was placed on the lake bed at a depth of 28m with the same pomp and fanfare that accompanied the sinking of *HMS Scylla* in the UK. The problem with Lake Huron is that there is little wildlife, other than Zebra mussels, to colonise the wreck once it’s down there. As a result, five years after sinking the wreck looks just as it did on the surface.

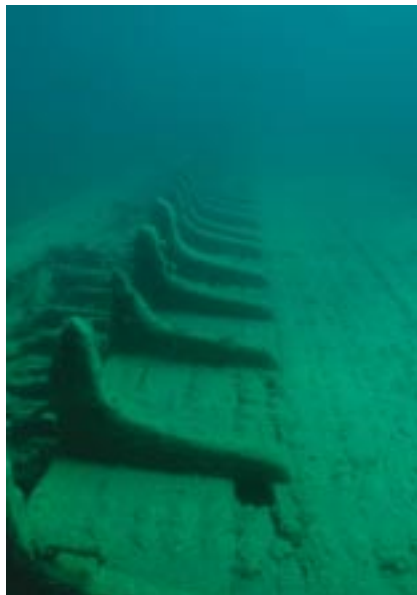
We dropped down the stern shotline and onto the deck at 18m. The second thermocline hit like a slap in the face just as we reached the deck. *Niagara II* lies in the colder waters of Georgian Bay on the east-side of Bruce peninsula; my gauge showed 5°C - way too cold for a wetsuit.

Handrails and winches appeared out of the gloom. The wreck has a bare and sinister look in the poor light. A Canadian flag hung from the stern flagpole, eerily extended in midwater. With teeth chattering we circumnavigated the hull, swimming quickly to keep warm, and just managed a cursory inspection before heading back to the shot. Of all the dives at Tobermory this is the only one I wouldn’t repeat, so much for hardy Scottish divers!

By the time we were ready to dive on the second day, half of our luggage had arrived. Good news for me, both my drysuit and Weezle won through on the BA luggage carousel lottery. Brian wasn’t so lucky, his suit was still holidaying at Heathrow and he ended up in a wetsuit all week.

We were offered a variety of dives during our stay. With the exception of *Niagara II* all were wooden wrecks which sank in the late 19th or early 20th centuries. Depths varied from 6m to 40m and each site had its own memorable features. Shallow wrecks, including the *W.L. Wetmore* and the *Newaygo*, tended to be well broken up but particularly beautiful with the sun tracing dappled patterns across the timbers through clear aquamarine water. Deeper wrecks, such as the *Forest City*, were more intact, often spookily so and once or twice we felt like we’d fallen onto a set for Pirates of the Caribbean.

By the third day there were just three divers on the boat and the skipper decided to take us to the *Arabia*. I’d never heard of the *Arabia* before we got to Tobermory. So far as I’m aware she doesn’t feature in any of the dive mag’s top 10 wrecks, or lists of must do dive sites. Perhaps the *Arabia* is less well known because she’s a petite 40m long (slightly smaller than the *SS Thesis* in the Sound of Mull) and met her end in a huge inland sea, just one of many immense inland seas in the centre of a massive continent. Or perhaps it’s because she is only one of hundreds of wooden wrecks, named and unnamed,



line of knees on the *Newaygo*

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Left: anchor on the Wetmore;
above: Brian on the Wetmore

that lie all around the rocky shores of the Great Lakes. Whatever the reason for her anonymity, my money's firmly on the *Arabia*, this little wreck is a jewel, a gem to rival and outshine any of the dive rags' world famous top 10 tin cans.

The *Arabia* is a three-masted barque; she sank in heavy seas off Echo Island in 1884. Oddly enough she sailed for Glasgow in 1854, a year after she was built, and spent some time working the west-coast of Scotland. According to reports, she visited Tobermory (Isle of Mull) regularly until she returned to meet her doom in Lake Huron.

Fathom Five rate this as an advanced dive. The brief was short and to the point, we were to follow the mooring line down to the lakebed at 30m then follow a second line from the mooring block to the wreck. Strong currents sweep the *Arabia* and we were advised to stay in her lee and not get dragged off. We had already done a 40m dive that day so we were short on bottom time before we got in the water. The plan was to sink like a stone, fin like beggary over to the wreck, stay in the bow area for as long as possible then back to the mooring buoy to ascend.

We dropped down through the first thermocline and immediately noticed the vis wasn't so good, just about 10m rather than the 15-20m we'd been getting on the other wrecks. As expected the mooring block came into view at 30m and we struck out toward the wreck. About 10m from the block I came to a sudden and complete halt – she appeared out of the blue and completely took my breath away. It was several minutes before I remembered Brian, the plan, the camera or anything. I just stopped and looked.

She emerged as a shadowy outline; the bow with chains looping from the jib boom back to the deck. Details filled in the picture as we approached; the deck handrails were in place and a series of six rigging blocks, or dead-eyes, hung from their outer edge.

One of the imposing masts lay to her starboard side, another had fallen forward and to port. Up toward the bow we floated over a windlass with hefty chains draped around it. Three anchors, each six-foot tall with wooden stock and metal flukes, neatly stowed for the voyage. The jib boom proudly raised above the bow leading off in to the distance.

Fifteen minutes of bottom time disappeared in an instant and we reluctantly finned back to the mooring block, constantly looking back toward the wreck for one more glimpse before she disappeared from sight. Even before we surfaced I realised it would take something very special to knock this one out my personal top 10 wreck dives!

Back on deck it took approximately two seconds to decide we wanted to visit the *Arabia* again, this time as a first dive and on nitrox to give us maximum bottom time! How could anyone prefer a 1980's roll-on roll-off ferry?

We spent six days in Tobermory and dived four days, managing to fit in that second nitrox dive on the *Arabia*, which was longer and just as captivating as the first. Sadly, the huge variety of wildlife on shore doesn't follow through to the underwater world; I can count the number of fish I saw on one hand. If you visit Tobermory to dive it's definitely for the wrecks and the amazing visibility. That said it was an experience I wouldn't have missed and one I'd like to repeat at some time in the future.



The ghostly Arabia is an incredibly impressive wreck

ABOUT THE TRIP

The village of Tobermory is small and apart from Labour Day weekend we met very few tourists, but we visited at the beginning of September, the end of their season. During the height of summer Tobermory is much busier so accommodation and diving should be booked in advance.

There's plenty to do on and around the peninsula for non-divers who enjoy the outdoors. The scenery is outstanding and the weather was excellent during our stay, hot and sunny every day. Poor weather usually starts in late September; many of the wrecks we visited were sunk during gales in October and November. Lake Huron is often frozen during the winter months.

We used Divers Den (pictured below/ www.diversden.ca) where the staff were helpful and friendly, we arranged everything in advance via email and I would certainly dive with them again. Two walk on dives cost in the region of \$65 a day (with taxes it worked out at approximately £35 a day).



Fathom Five National Marine Park (www.pc.gc.ca/amnc-nmca/on/fathomfive/index_e.asp) charges a small fee for diver registration, this is compulsory if you wish to dive. When we visited, the fees per diver were \$5 (approx £2.50) per day or \$20 (approx £10) per year.

The whole area is protected, removing any item from the wrecks is illegal and likely to land you in hot water with diver operators and fellow divers. Shore divers are welcome and there are a number of areas around Tobermory's twin harbours cordoned off for shore diving (and swimming) – even in the harbours the water is extremely clear.

Accommodation is plentiful and varies from bunkhouses and campgrounds to motels, inns and hotels. We stayed in a B&B booked online through BBCanada.com – the quality was excellent, we had a suite rather than a single room and this was true of other B&Bs we used elsewhere in Canada. Food and drink was generally of a high standard and cost in Canadian dollars what we would expect to pay in sterling (so pretty cheap!).

Black Bears and snakes live on the Bruce, the local information office has advice for tourists on how to behave around the wildlife. The mosquitos are vicious and bites are best avoided.

Brian's dive kit finally arrived just as we left Tobermory for Vancouver Island – but that's another story!