

The Power Of The Dark Side

Andy Parks

Andy Parks and friend recently found themselves gatecrashers on a 'rebreather only' trip aboard the Hjalmar Bjorge. Heading to the west coast of Lewis, there were numerable dive sites en route and plenty of friendly banter onboard. But did Andy fall for the dark side and is he now the proud owner of a KISS unit, read on ...

IN 2004 a group, comprising mostly of KISS Rebreather divers travelled to St Kilda, a report of the trip (written by Alejandro 'A;ex' Gallego of the Grampian Branch) then appeared in **SCOTTISH DIVER**. In July 2007 another trip was planned to the west coast of Lewis and again it was to be a rebreather trip with many of the same divers and the majority on KISS units. Myself, along with Emily Gamble, both members of Grampian SAC, managed to get an invitation despite our open circuit background; I think Alejandro felt that we would be seduced by the dark-side, and it turned out to be a real cracker.

We met the *Hjalmar Bjorge* in Oban on a glorious summer's day (we have had one or two this year) and spent a while loading prodigious amounts of dive kit on to the boat. There were mostly Classic and Sport KISS units but a few Inspirations and Steve Millard, who organised it, put everyone to shame by turning up with a Sport KISS and an Evolution. Showing off perhaps but it did make my twins and stage cylinders look a bit out of place.

I have dived with Alejandro for a long time with him using his Classic KISS and

was quite used to its performance and I was looking forward to seeing a group of very experienced CCR divers in action for a whole week. Introductions made we sailed for Tobermory where we spent the night on a mooring before setting out the next day.

Shake down dives at NW Canna and the wreck of the *Doris* near Neist Point on Skye took care of the first day and everyone seemed happy with the diving conditions, their kit and the weather, which was verging on stunning. We crossed the Minch in hot sunshine and absolutely flat calm seas. The Hebrides loomed large ahead and things were looking good for the rest of the week. The night was spent moored behind Taransay and we indulged in the *Hjalmar's* outrageously good food and a few drinks. Steve had said that this was not to be a booze cruise but ...

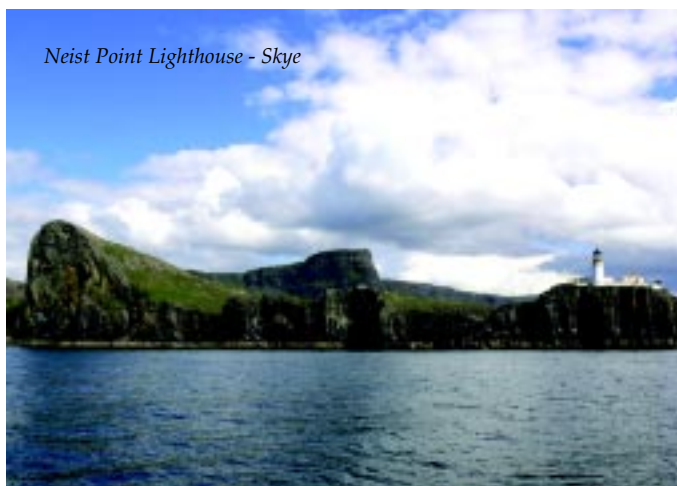
The next morning saw us at Gasker Island, which lies well out, NW of the sound of Harris. The swell put paid to our idea of diving the north side so we went in on the more sheltered and unknown south side. We were not disappointed. Deep narrow gullies provided shelter and walls of anemones

and sponges created a colourful backdrop. With a few biggish lobster and crawfish there was plenty for everyone and the photographers got off to a good start.

With the wind picking up we headed north along the coast of Lewis toward Loch Roag. This was the target for the trip, as it was new diving for everyone and has not been dived too often because it is a long way from the usual dive routes. Rounding Gallan Head with its cliffs and arches was quite spectacular and we sailed into East Loch Roag to dive at Crairgeam. Another system of walls and gullies was a delight and with jewel anemones and lots of nudibranchs, the macro stuff was good fun.

The experience of the guys on the trip was starting to tell; it is not often on a liveaboard that ALL the divers were ready to go in the water at the same time. CCR did not seem to be the fiddle that people talk about. Everyone seemed pretty efficient and free from fuss. Because of the remote location, we were asked not to be too silly with depths and times so I found that, with twin 12's and a 50% deco stage, I could stay with the rebreathers in the water for the profiles

Neist Point Lighthouse - Skye



The Hjalmar Bjorge



we were diving.

We moored in Breascleite that evening but drizzle and a five mile walk to the pub kept us on board. The evenings showed one of the advantages of CCR as our OC cylinders were being filled the much smaller rebreather cylinders took only a minute to fill. I have always regarded rebreathers as heavy (probably based on the experience of Alejandro's, who uses 4 litre 300 bar gas cylinders on his) but the Sport KISS with 2 l aluminium cylinders certainly makes it lighter than a twinset.

Next day we planned to dive two adjacent islands called Old Hill and Bearasay at the mouth of West Loch Roag. We knew that Bearasay had been dived but knew nothing about Old Hill, our first dive of the day. We dived the SW corner onto a shelf at 20 m in 20m plus vis. There must be a good current here at times because every wall was plastered with life, and with a huge number of fish and crawfish in some of the cracks things were looking good.

We circled round into a maze of 30m deep gullies about 10 feet wide and these merged and split in little bays and amphitheatres that proved to be a delight to swim through. Getting back to the start point was a real disappointment because this is, without doubt, one of the most enjoyable sites I have dived in Scotland. The afternoon in Bearasay proved to be similar, after a quiet start on a kelp ledge. On this dive, plenty of seals could be seen in the clear water. These dives alone justified the time and distance needed to get here.

We moored in Loch Tealasavay where we were entertained in the evening by Lyndsey, one of the crew, playing her fiddle. The usual *Hjalmar* hospitality floored me that night; there is only so much that one person can eat but you keep coming back for more. A good night's sleep and we were ready for more.

The diving the next day took in an underwater arch and short caves with some lovely swim-throughs and a scalloping session at the end, a lovely little fishing boat wreck in Hushinish Bay as a second dive, and a great little dive

along the bottom of a rock band at the Taransay Glorigs in West Loch Tarbet. Good dives in good vis and plenty to see. It was proving to be a very good week but our time in Lewis was over and we had to start heading back.

I had been impressed with the reliability of the KISS CCRs, the Inspiration/ Evolution were also good but one seemed to beep incessantly underwater throughout a dive. The KISS is fully manual and has no alarms so the diver must monitor it throughout the dive as there is no computer control of the unit (see insert). There were some very persuasive arguments made about the safety of manual control and while I was convinced of this before I went, the week near the dark-side reinforced this feeling.

Being a simple piece of kit, and many of the owners having an engineering or electronic background, many of the KISS units had been customised. The most common add on being Head-Up-Displays, supplying a variety of information. Everyone seemed to have a different system and they operated with a varying degree of success and reliability. Alejandro seemed to have the system that everyone agreed was the best and if you need to find out more you should read Alex's technical points on page 23.

A bouncy trip back across to the shelter of Skye saw us diving at An Dubh-Sgeir. I had dived it years ago on the way to St Kilda and it did not disappoint. It is a high energy site and the encrusting life on the walls totally obscures the rocks. The highlight of the dive was a possible sighting (the photos are not perfect) of a rare Red Blenny. We then headed down to a pinnacle west of Muck where we dropped into a big shoal of mackerel. We



finally headed back to Tobermory, having enjoyed an excellent week of diving.

Early morning saw a bonus dive on the wall at Calve Island and we finished with a relaxing cruise down the sound of Mull and back to Oban.

Throughout the week Mark and the crew of the *Hjalmar* were fabulous. We could not have been looked after any better and I reckon that everyone must have put on weight on the trip with the quality and quantity of food.

What was it like being the only open circuit divers on the boat? These guys are definitely into their rebreathers and they certainly understand them right down to the most minute detail; some have done thousands of CCR dives. It is always good to watch very good divers in action and I was impressed with the kit and with its reliability and ease of operation when used properly. The quality of the bolt-on extras seem to be a bit variable but there is enough knowledge around to discover what is good and what is less so.

Was I seduced by the dark side? I have no doubt that for many of the dives I do it would be a wonderful thing to have. If I were to buy a CCR it would probably be a KISS, but all rebreathers are expensive and I still have lots of toys to spend my diving money on. One day I may have one but not quite yet.

