

The first time Mike Clark headed for St.Kilda - there was a big question mark over whether he would get there. Still he was determined to enjoy the ride ...

# Brave The Storm

FLAMING JUNE, and the flaming does not refer to temperature. This trip was not going to be a holiday it was going to be a flaming adventure. Who would have expected a hurricane to interfere with a dive trip in mid June! It's just as well we were diving from a lifeboat.

It had been a long time in the planning and I was certainly looking forward to the scenic wonders that can be experienced when diving St. Kilda. This would not happen for me on this trip however. The weather forecast was grim and although I had decided not to waste the effort worrying about the weather which I could do nothing at all to change, I along with 8 others felt the same disappointment when we heard the forecast.

We would over the course of the week, learn a lot about the barometer and just what it can tell a skipper. George Mair, owner/skipper of the liveboard vessel *Gemini Storm* certainly had his work cut out, especially when his cook failed to turn up for work. In his brochure George advertises fantastic diving no matter what the weather. We would certainly put his promise to the ultimate test. Would it stand up?

The hurricane would not hit until the Monday and Tuesday of our trip, so initially we wanted to put ourselves in a position to make the five hour run to St. Kilda should a break in the weather present itself. The fly in the ointment with this theory was that at present the force 5 winds were south easterly in direction blowing straight into Village Bay, St.Kilda's only safe anchorage. Could it get any worse?

We headed out of Oban and cruised up the Sound Of Mull, toasting the

fantastic wrecks that we sailed past. It was tranquil, the wind had dropped to nothing, the sunlight was reflecting off the glassy surface of the sound and the Mishnish Inn of Tobermory was only a few hours steam away. The adventure had begun.

## Day 1

After a further overnight steam, an early morning breakfast was enjoyed tied up against the pier on the Isle of Canna. Atlantic Grey Seals popped their heads up and inspected us and a family of Eider Ducks dived down through the clear green water. We would soon join them on a boulder slope which turned into a beautiful undercut cliff.

A small gully separates two little islets on the surface at the site 'Sgeir A Phuirt' and underwater it marks the boundary where the wall gets much more interesting at the south east end of the reef. Here the wall is vertical and slightly undercut at points.

Marine life is also a lot denser here, as the tide picks up just a little. At the base of the cliff there are caves giving more shelter for some lobsters and Peacock Worms. The diving had got off to a great start.

The storm was by now being forecast big time and we cancelled the trip over to Harris and diverted for the Kyle of Lochalsh. A splendid dive on the 10,000 ton mine sweeper *HMS Port Napier* ensued and perversely I enjoyed my best ever dive on the wreck. The barometer had not moved from 1000mb. The sea at this sheltered point was flat calm and, as we sipped our pints in the local hotel, we wondered if this storm was just a myth.

## Day 2

By now all hell should have been braking loose, but it wasn't. A calm passage up the sound of Raasay involved a dive on a boulder slope. It was an ok dive but not my favourite, although I did glimpse a gurnard of some type, very small with vivid blue and yellow wings for it's pectoral fins. I don't think it was a Tub Gurnard and I am still trying to identify it.

The second dive of the day was to be awesome if not just a little terrifying. The boat was spinning around on her axis and being pushed all over the place. This was still nothing to do with the fantasy storm, just the crazy tidal streams that powered around this tiny little speck of an island 2 miles off the north coast of Skye.

The little island of An-T-Iasgair would turn out to be my most enjoyable dive of the trip. A kelp topped boulder slope descended down to a depth of 18 metres. A fantastically coloured male Cuckoo Wrasse, all neon blues and gold darted out in front of me. I tried to capture him on film as I think these fish are the most beautiful found in UK waters.

A school of large pollack darting along the cliff edge diverted my attention and I dropped over the edge, immediately feeling the full force of the tide whip me down and along the now vertical face. Fantastic gatherings of Devonshire Cup Corals flew past in a neon blaze of orange and green.

The vertical strata of the basalt columns that made up the cliff face made excellent handholds but I found it very hard work to hang on. I decided to put the brakes on and slow my descent



This octopus (above), the bright coral (main photo) and the images on Page 22 are examples of the varied marine life Mike spotted on his Hebridean sojourn

which I achieved at a little over 46 metres down. Here I let the tide push me along the wall and I savoured the marine delights on offer.

The wall eventually turned into a boulder slope, probably when the other side of the island was reached and here the tide decided to spit me upwards and back in the opposite direction in which I had previously travelled.

I noted some lovely Jewel anemones in every colour of the spectrum. Nudi-branches were common in the shallower 20 metre deep water, where kelp still flourished.

In the boulders here a big conger was pointed out to me. It was just sticking its snout out of a hole and I completely missed it. When I went in for the photo he certainly had no inhibitions about showing off his tonsils. This dive was later to be christened the washing machine dive. What an exciting dive, would I dive it again tomorrow? You bet!

As I bobbed up and down on the surface in the gentle swell after the dive, I savoured the gorgeous conditions and the antics of the guillimots and razorbills flying above the surface each carrying a fat sand eel in it's beak. The little evening dive which we had planned on the wreck of the *Rhodesia* sounded just a great way to spend a beautiful evening.

How surprised everybody was when George confirmed that this plan was scrapped and we were running for cover. It would appear our big storm had eventually arrived, if some 24 hours late.

Loch Diubaig on the north coast of Skye would be our sheltered anchorage for the night and as we dropped anchor a seal could be seen to form ripples on the far side of the loch. Heron were also noted at the water side.

It may have been a muddy sea floor

but I had a brilliant night dive here with gurnards and octopus making appearances. Let's face it, how long would it be before we could dive again? Back on the bridge of *Gemini Storm*, George and I watched as the digital wind gauge increased from 0 to 14 kts and noted the 10 point drop in barometer pressure, now down to 990.5mb. It was finally happening.

#### Day 3

I slept like a log it has to be said. Our sheltered little loch certainly saved us from the worst of the winds, even though we did drag our anchor through the mud for quite some distance as it failed to find a secure holding point. It was therefore all action this morning and I was quickly tasked AGAIN with the enviable job of stowing the anchor chain in its locker as it was winched up through all that glorious mud. Lovely! We bimbled up the coast (skipper's favourite saying) into the lee of some big cliffs that would shelter us and there we stayed put for the rest of the day. The strongest gust we experienced in our sheltered location was 72kts with an average speed of 45.5knts. Life on board was most comfortable, as the sea was mainly unaffected in our location.

Off shore another 200 metres though, things were very different with confused white horses everywhere. When we could see the small offshore islands it did not take long to note the huge seas breaking around their bases. Confirmation of how bad it was, was

given when a fishing trawler came in to find shelter.

This was certainly the low point of the trip and George's stock library of videos took a pounding; some hit their bunks but as the monotony bit in by the afternoon it became apparent that we would not move for the day. Some of us needed our fixes, hurricane or not. The drysuit was donned again and an hour of underwater relief was experienced in which I viewed mating sea hares and some masked crabs.

#### Day 4

It was now make or break time and we decided to go for it. The plan was to steam to the next sea loch, Loch Bay which was known to some on board to produce some good diving. The wind had dropped to 35.5 kts on average with gusts of 56kts recorded so, as you can imagine, the journey would be interesting.

It was with waves crashing over the bows, that the *Gemini Storm* showed her class. After all she is an ex-RNLI lifeboat. This makes her an ideal choice for a liveaboard vessel for charters to St Kilda as she boasts a double hull and 2 completely independent 8 cylinder gardner engines, both in their own watertight compartments.

There are also 2 compressors and 2 generators and basically everything that is essential is doubled up. George has made some alterations, to the original spec of the boat, adding a galley forward of the bridge and a comfortable lounge to the rear. This is where you will enjoy your meals should you visit.

Even though the original chef did not turn up, George did a fantastic job and the quality of food was excellent. Curries, beef and ale pie and pasta dishes formed part of the varied diet and the sweets included cream caramel and banoffee pie all made on board.

We tried our best to finish off the banoffee pie but even the most glutinous amongst us failed. George confirmed that to date no party of divers has ever successfully polished off a whole serving of this dish.

We reached Loch Bay safely and with 40knt winds whipping across the bow of



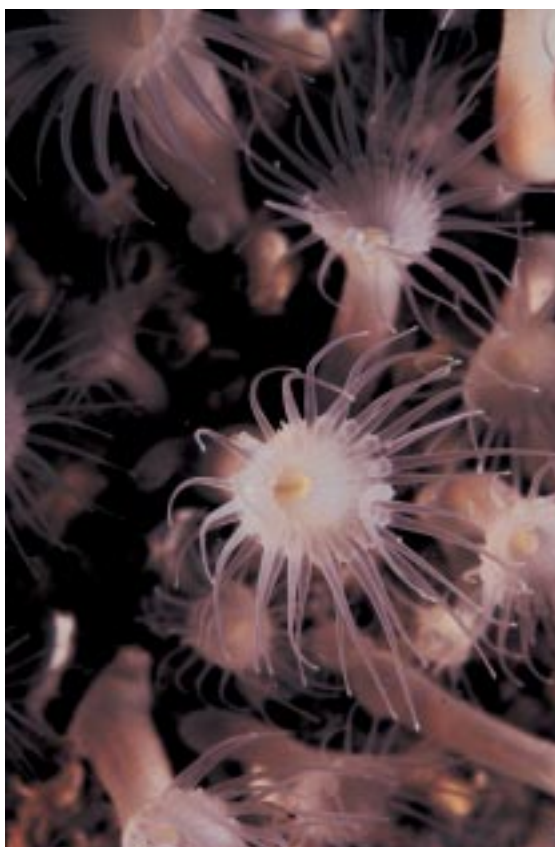
Lesser spotted dogfish



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All images courtesy Mike Clark - [www.underwaterphotography.com](http://www.underwaterphotography.com)



the boat we had three dives. Two dives on the leeward side of the offshore islands of Loch Bay and the Loch Bay pinnacle itself all of which were excellent dives. Three top quality dives in some very unfavourable conditions. Fantastic!

## Day 5

With the winds decreasing and conditions improving all the time, we left Loch Bay and retraced our route around the north of Skye. An excellent dive was completed at the majestic setting of the isle of Eilean Trodday and the wreck of the *Nordhuk*. It was the planned second dive of the day that was producing most conversation however.

This was Bonnie Prince Charlie's cave just north of Portree and 1.7 miles south of Holm Island. George was adamant that he had dropped divers here before and quite frankly the opinion of these divers was that it was a very poor dive.

Matt, a marine biologist on board however had a mate who stated that this site was the best dive he had ever experienced and this included St Kilda. We were all certainly intrigued but I must admit I was siding with the skipper and fearing the worst, at this point in time.

The chart showed a mud slope. The sounder showed a steep slope but it was only Matt's faith in his friend's statement that forced most of us into the water.

It was clear water with possibly the best viz of the trip. Landing on an 8 metre deep mud sea floor made me think the worst, so in a bid to get things over with as quickly as possible I swam off shore where a sand ridge formed. This fell away on one side and a terraced affect took shape eventually turning into a marine life encrusted vertical cliff.

WOW! When you don't expect it I think a good dive feels twice as good and the old coraline structure of Bonnie Prince Charlie's reef was fantastic. Anemones covered the reef and the Cuckoo Wrasse were back with some splendid individuals. Bright red Scorpion fish nestled in the cover on the underside of the overhangs. The light and colour of the reef was fantastic.

Back onto the sandy ridge for some deco I noted vast schools of sand eels above me. Soon I saw them darting in and out of the sand as well. Small flatties also proved entertaining and

when a small reef was found I noted a 15 spined stickleback in some weed.

This site is now firmly fixed in George's GPS. Let's face it though, hopefully if you join George for a trip on the *Gemini Storm* you will experience much better weather.

So had the skippers claims of supplying great diving no matter what the weather proved true? Well in hurricane force winds from possibly the worst direction possible, we experienced world class diving. Suffice to say that excellent dives on Bo Fasadale pinnacle and a majestic cliff in Loch Sunart just sounded too good to be included in this storm battered article. In truth though, these dives could not live up to the washing machine and Bonnie Prince Charlie's cave in my estimation.

So if you are thinking of making the considerable investment in planning a trip to St. Kilda but are quite frankly scared stiff of the consequences of bad weather, all I



Since Mike Clark made this trip George Mair replaced the *Gemini Storm* with the dive boat *Loyal Mediator*. However this proved to be temporary and in early 2007 George put a new *Gemini Storm* into operation. This liveaboard is once again a refitted RNLI vessel.

You can contact George on 07774 422448 or 01855 821548.

can say is 'don't worry'. On *Gemini Storm* you'll get top quality diving no matter what the weather and remember we copped the hurricane; it's probably going to be another 100 years before a storm like that hits again.

The only advice I can give is choose your boat and skipper well. The *Gemini Storm* is the best liveaboard I have set a fin on to date and if you pay your dosh to go to the exposed site of St. Kilda, the redundant compressor and independent engine systems of the *Gemini Storm* will increase your chances of getting there and afford you certain safety margins whilst you are there enjoying yourself. Accommodation on board is also excellent.