



Limerick's French Invasion

The University of
Limerick SAC decided
on a special trip for their
big summer expedition
and found themselves
fish out of water amid
the heady glamour of
St Tropez ...

RIDING FAST across the waves in the bay of St Tropez with the spray lashing my face and the sun burning my back, I couldn't help but wonder if this was heaven on earth or at the very least some sort of a dream. Seriously though, this certainly was a fabulous location for the annual University of Limerick Sub Aqua Club (ULSAC) expedition to 'somewhere nice' and I was more than honoured to be invited to join the trip.

ULSAC has been a growing university club, now affiliated to ScotSAC, for more than ten years and there have been a number of overseas trips to regular haunts such as the Red Sea and Cyprus, but this was the first time the club had mounted such a large expedition to somewhere as unlikely as St Tropez.

Late in 2006, when I heard that a small group had just returned from a 'recce' to the south of France to check out suitable

locations for a summer trip with the club, I wondered why they didn't go a bit further into the Med in search of warmer water and cheaper accommodation. When they told me they'd found a really good dive centre in St Tropez I assumed they meant 'near' rather than 'in' because we all know the place has a reputation for being a millionaire's playground and we didn't seem to fit the bill at any level.

As the time drew closer we all paid up our instalments and slowly the picture began to emerge – we were to be camping in a very large wooded site less than 10km from St Tropez, overlooking the sea but a few kilometres inland. About 8 club members would be taking a people carrier and a van with all the diving gear and driving via Cherbourg across France. The rest of us would converge during the weekend via

various flights and hire cars. In all there were 12 of us and as we arrived our glorious leader assigned us each to a chalet strategically separated from the facilities by a good walk.

The diving was to take place almost exclusively in the St Tropez Bay, located on the beautiful Mediterranean coast between Nice and Monaco. The club did a deal with Claude, owner of the excellent local dive centre, for two dives a day and we duly wound our way to the small French fishing village.

We headed into the large car park on the harbour and parked up between an Aston Martin and a Ferrari – you hadn't any choice really because there were very few ordinary cars to be seen (except for the odd Smart car). The views all around are breathtaking with literally billions of dollars worth of yachts and boats arranged in pristine, shining rows.



Everything from luxury cruisers with helicopters on the roof right through to ocean going racing yachts it seemed strange to wander along the side of the harbour with all these James Bond sets lined up like a film star's parking lot. Suddenly there was a break in the ranks when we came across a boat worth about \$10m less than the ones each side of it. Ah, this must be it! *Octopussy II* – a RHIB named after the James Bond film surely has to mean we're on the trail of a dive school by the same name ...

Claude welcomed us and showed us round his fine waterside empire comprising a small shop and store with a spacious verandah cum changing / shower room. In the space of about 30sq metres is everything you need for a perfect diving holiday base – places to park, change, fill the bottles, wash the gear, eye the sights and drink coffee - all within three metres of the smartest reinforced hull inflatable boat (RHIB) I've ever jumped the waves in.

The Limerick troupe made themselves at home after a few introductions and settled down to the business of getting

changed and checking the dive gear thoroughly. Before long, the boat was loaded with bottles and all the trappings of a group of divers heading out for their first dip.

The water in the north-west Med is quite cool in June but still a good bit warmer than Irish waters at any time of the year. Most people were wearing 5 or 6mm wetsuits and some were also wearing the balaclava style neoprene hood which is essential in Ireland.

With Claude at the helm and 10 keen divers on board, the RHIB headed out past the millionaires' playground, then the harbour lighthouse and finally into the huge east facing bay of St Tropez. The water was calm with just the waves of passing boats and the sun warming our backs.

Approaching the first dive site near the mouth of the bay we passed a small lighthouse perched on a rock and marking the entry to the bay. The water around this pinnacle of rock drops away to about 40m deep at one side and about 25m on the landward side. For our novice and recently qualified sport

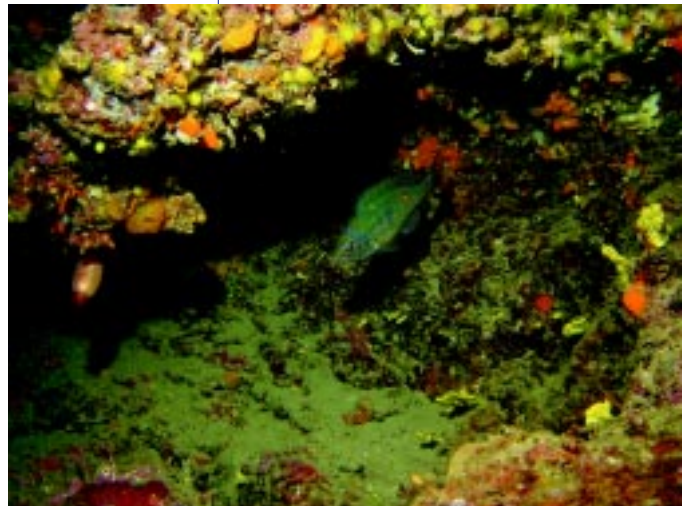
divers there is a depth limit of 30m so this proved to be an ideal dive site for all the members of the group.

Preparing for the dive, Claude used his high tech echo sounder to get us right over the reef we planned to dive that day and dropped an anchor to hold the boat steady for us.

All the divers were going into the water in buddy pairs and the tension rose as they ran through their safety routine, checking each others kit. Buoyancy – yes; weights – yes; releases – yes; air – yes; fiddly bits – yes; ready to go – ok; wait for the signal from Claude – go!

Hold your reg in your mouth, mask on your face, dropping backwards into the water, fins in the air, bubbles, cold chill down your spine, head pops up to the surface again. Quick 'ok' signal to the boat and your buddy and 'lets get on with it then'. Thumbs down signal to each other and dump some air from your

Images from top left: the Limerick party admire their RHIB; a view of St Tropez; three cheers for the good life; a Gallic grouper; more life at night; and another night shot.





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This is what we paid for, dropping smoothly, cruising down like a flying angel, clearing ears regularly then starting to drop more rapidly through the hazy water. Keep an eye out for the buddy, keep together, watch you don't drop too fast and hit the bottom or pass your limit.

Near the surface the water was quite hazy but below 10m it improved and the

visibility was over 20m with the sun shafting down and lighting up a lovely sea floor landscape.

During the week there were about 15 dives altogether, including an exceptionally well preserved WWII submarine wreck at about 42m depth. At that depth you only get about 7 minutes on the wreck and you have to be heading up again or you soak up so much N that you'll be all day decompressing.

One of the other highlights of the week was a fabulous night dive in 10-15m of water right out in the middle of the St Tropez bay. Divers use air far

more rapidly at greater depth and as this was such a shallow dive we stayed down for about an hour, emerging at 10pm to a starlit sky and a fabulous view of the entire coast lit with sparkling street and house lights.

Night dives are a whole different ball game because many sea animals, crabs and fish are much more active at night – octopus and squid being good examples. Fish are fascinated by our dive lights and curiosity draws them nearer. We came

across one really fascinating example of an anemone living on the back of a hermit crab – getting a free ride and helping to disguise the crab in exchange.

In the middle of the week we took a short break from diving both to allow our bodies to vent the built up nitrogen and to see some of the left-overs from the Monaco Grand Prix the week before. A trip to Monte Carlo gave us an opportunity to put the opulence of St Tropez in perspective – it made the Astons look pretty routine really! Didn't see any Pagani Zonda but we did see a rather nice Bugatti Veyron ...

To summarise, we had a ball, exploring the small town of St Tropez, we had some fabulous diving including lots of lovely reefs and underwater cliffs, good light and visibility, plenty of fish and underwater scenery and an extremely efficient and friendly service from Claude and his team at Octopussy Plongee.

This was a perfect venue for recently qualified divers and enough entertainment for everyone. I think we'd all love to dive there again and I'd certainly recommend it to anyone who wants to combine some good Mediterranean diving with exploring some lovely French Riviera.

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