



Regular contributor Mike Clark

finally makes it to St Kilda in

this account of diving in the

remote but spectacular island

group. And of course he had a

pint at the Puff Inn ...

# Worth The Wait

AS WE HEADED towards Harris, the sun kissed the top of the hills and set the clouds on fire. It looked as if there was a beautiful eruption taking place. The skies were all purples and violets surrounding that dying golden orb of flame.

How the mood on the charter boat *Elizabeth G* had lifted and not only due to the beautiful display off our bow. A matter of hours earlier we had pulled into Portree and a mood of despondency was starting to grip the team.

Getting to St. Kilda isn't easy. That's part of the allure of the place, or so I thought. After a failed trip a couple of years ago, I had contacted Northern Light Charters and Hannah had buoyed up my spirits by confirming that this year they had a 100% record for getting out to Kilda.

This was some feat in what had been generally recognised as a bad year. But the magic was failing quickly in Portree bay and I had resigned myself to another trip around Skye.

Even the morning dive here had to be cancelled due to the strong northerly wind that denied us a trip to Bonnie Prince Charlie's Cave. The shortbread was safe, at least until after lunch.

Amid all this doom and gloom was

skipper Rob Barlow who was still confident of a crossing to Kilda on Tuesday. But Monday lunch time in

Portree everybody thought otherwise.

After lunch though, the wind had dropped letting us search for the shortbread at the Bonnie Prince's cave. Although we missed the main site here we all had a good dive with lots of lesser spotted dogfish resting on the coraline outcrops.

On surfacing, the sky was blue for the first time in a long while and the sea was definitely reducing. Could the forecast be right? The skipper definitely thought so - and we pushed around the north of Skye.

I sat in the wheel house and took in the splendid sights. Passing islets, the sea started to glass over now with only a mild swell reflecting all that golden evening sunlight. The pirate talk was back amongst us as we all were feeling the excitement. The omens looked good.

I popped out of the wheel house to look for Basking Sharks or whales. The evening sea air was fantastic and as we neared Harris - and Loch Rodal, our port of call that night - the sun started its descent, and I took time to capture that breathtaking sunset.

A clear but cold morning followed and we were off out to see if the crossing to Kilda was possible. I had even, to this point, not raised my hopes fully and

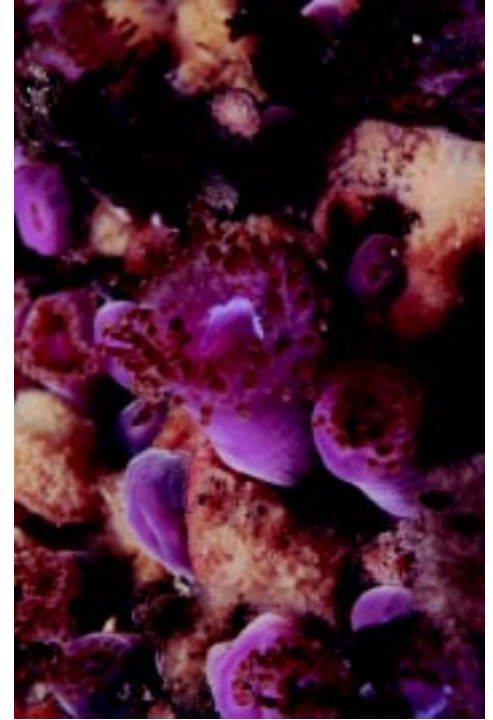
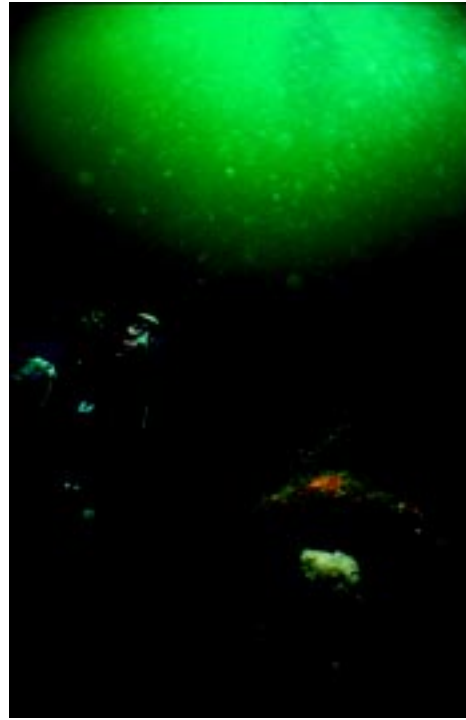
when I asked 'will we make it?' the response was, 'if you can't make it in weather like this you never will'. It was on; we were going to Kilda!

You could see the islands a long way off as we headed west at 8 knots. Our first dive was to be at the Sgarbhstac Arch. 30 minutes before we arrived at the site, cameras were readied and kit was checked. It kind of focuses the mind diving way out here.

Soon the *Elizabeth G* was in position and off we went into Kilda's waters. I descended down to just under 30 metres. The walls were vertical and there was an absence of the normal soft corals that you expect to see. In their place was an expanse of variously coloured Jewel anemones.

I knew the fin was around 100m to get to the arch but it felt a bit longer. Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement, initially thinking a diver was overtaking me. It was no human diver though, but one of the many Grey seals buzzing me. We would get close to quite a few of them. What a start!

It was now that I noted the change in the wall a few metres ahead and there it was, the Sgarbhstac Arch, possibly one of the most amazing geological structures I have ever seen. Its roof is at around 30 metres whilst its base is at 50. It's around 30 metres long and 20 metres wide at its base and the whole structure could be seen in the immense visibility. Through my viewfinder divers looked tiny as they



Images above (left to right): bubbling under; divers enjoy some excellent wreck diving; purple jewel anemones. And opposite page: approaching St Kilda

finned through the arch.

I battled against the low light levels to get a good exposure. It was hard work and I was at 50 metres for around 10 minutes getting the required shots. Needless to say, I had racked up over 20 minutes of stops. This is where I realised the negative aspect of diving Kilda for the first time.

I planned a gentle ascent taking in the sights as I went, but all I could see at depths above 20 metres were walls of kelp. In the crystal visibility, kelp thrives here far deeper than I had experienced before.

It was 6 pm by the time we dived the Sawcut; not the best time of day to do so as the sun (if it's out) is low and little light enters the site. Add to that, the fact that the sky was now overcast and conditions were turning unpleasant.

My intended image of capturing a diver in the narrow confines of the Sawcut was impossible to create, so my mission now was to picture some of the many Jewel anemones which I found inhabiting the gully, prior to entering the Sawcut proper.

These gullies were impressive enough

and I was enjoying myself. Walls rose up covered in life and the boulders in the bottom of the gully had plenty of my intended subjects to photograph. You can imagine my surprise and delight when finning over one of these large boulders and - boom! - the Sawcut fell away vertically to around 30 metres.

Its walls are only 3 metres apart in places and they are covered in marine life, although no Jewel Anemones that I noticed. It's an awesome dive and had the sun or the moon been overhead it would have been right up there with the best. I finned on, squeezing past a large boulder that marked the end of the Sawcut.

By now the waves crashing on the island of Dun were reverberating in my ears and I could physically feel the pounding on my body. After a quick couple of snaps of some red dahlia anemones, I decided to retreat back along the gully. I was holding film back in the hope to find more little Jewels before the end of the dive, and I did find some on the underside of some boulders at the exit end of the Sawcut.

Here the dive just stopped and a slope

fell away below me. After such a long and deep morning dive, I was not keen to go deep again but even at 20 metres down, the wall that I could follow was completely covered in kelp.

I decided to have a rummage around in here hoping to find a crawfish or something interesting. All I found were some nice anemones and as I got nearer the surface, the surge made these increasingly more difficult to photograph.

After a while I gave up and took in the wider picture. Above the kelp, large Pollack lurked coming very close, completely unafraid of divers. These schools of Pollack were the only fish we saw frequently at Kilda. I was personally surprised by the lack of fish life here. I had expected more and could find no explanation for the lack of fish life.

Back on board, I was in line for the use of the single shower. Tonight would be a special night. A visit to one of the areas most exclusive clubs, well eh! the only one! The Puff Inn. There's a warm orange glow coming from inside, which is very welcoming and the place is decked out with flags and pennants.

Before we had our pint, we met the ranger and were shown to the islands museum where we realised the grim reality that was the way of life on Kilda right up to the mid 1950s. Moved by what I had learnt, I returned to the Puff Inn for my can of lager. There is nothing on draught way out here.

At 11pm sharp, we awaited the arrival of *Elizabeth G's* inflatable to take us off the island. Back too the boat for a wee bit of chat and a whisky before we hit our bunks. In the morning we would dive the largest sea cliffs in the UK, on the north of Hirta.

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# Worth The Wait

The morning dawned dull. The *Elizabeth G* was dwarfed by the massive north facing cliffs. Light levels were so low, that even above the surface I was only getting a reading of f4@1/20th of a second (very poor).

It was macro photography once again and we dived a site just west of Mina Stac. This site probably had the lowest billing of all three sites we dived at Kilda but it was definitely my favourite dive. Once again I was on the hunt for those glamorous Jewel anemones, trying to see how many different colours I could photograph. I soon found some luminous green and pink ones, then orange and lastly purple.

The possibilities for negative space photography are unlimited and I captured a velvet backed swimming crab against an orange background, punctuated by luminous green Jewels. It was just fantastic and my film was at an end all too soon. I had been so engrossed in what I was doing that I hadn't even seen a seal yet. This was about to change very shortly though.

The dive started to peter out and I decided to retrace my steps. A large sand patch could be seen and I noted Tim and Louise just sitting there.

I knew something was going on and it wasn't long before one seal after another sauntered past. My film being finished, I could just relax and enjoy their antics.

I finned on and noted a seal on the sea floor around 6 metres below me. He was just looking up at me as I hovered looking down at him. It was great!

It was then that I felt the gentle tug on my right fin tip. Spinning around, the culprit was there, giving me that puppy dog look that's so endearing. This seal then floated slowly up to the surface taking a gulp of air and then drifted back

down to me again, placing it's snout on my fin before sauntering off.

That's what made this dive so special for me. I had been cuddled by a seal in the Farnes before but I had never fell prey to the old fin pulling routine.

My allotted hour underwater was up and for now, so was all diving at Kilda as a big southerly blow was forecast for this afternoon. It was therefore back to Harris and Loch Rodel, being accompanied for part of the way by a pod of spectacular White Beaked Dolphins that rode the bow wave for a few minutes.

After the extreme diving at St. Kilda, the wreck of the *Stassa* was the exact opposite. A fully intact wreck but in a very silty, sheltered location. 30 metre vis to 3m in an afternoon, how I wished we had a little more time out at the islands.

After the dive on the *Stassa*, we crossed the Minch back to the west side of Skye and had a wonderful dive on the wreck of the *Doris*. A broken steamship with a large four bladed prop embedded in the sea bed and a ruptured boiler amongst all the broken plates.

The fish life was back big time thankfully with a nice male Cuckoo Wrasse standing out from the duller Ballan Wrasse and Pollack. Another little bonus was the lesser octopus that broke cover right underneath me. We had a 45 minute max time limit enforced by the skipper on this dive and it flew by to quickly.

Steaming down the sound, the Cuillin hills of Skye doffed their caps of cloud. We then cruised between Rhum and Eigg. Lots of spectacular scenery.

The big wall dive off Canna was out due to the deteriorating conditions so we headed for Loch Sunart and a dive on Sligneach Mor. I had dived this site before and was amazed at

the life on this steep wall. This time unfortunately, the viz was a murky four metres at best and the nudibranches and fish life that I had experienced on my last visit, were not there.

The sun was out for our steam back into Tobermory, or Balamory as my kids would recognise it. We tied up beside the *Elizabeth G's* sumptuous sister ship, *Hjalmar Bjorge*. That vessel has undergone a conversion and looking through the lounge windows, their guests were enjoying a candle lit dinner. We all drooled outside feeling like ruffy tufty pirates - oh, arrrrhh!

I took the chance to have a look around *Hjalmar Bjorge* and it must be one of the best fitted out liveaboards in the UK. Comfortable and modern with excellent facilities. It certainly is a blueprint for Rob to follow when converting the *Elizabeth G*. (*Elizabeth G* has since undergone a full refit and is said to be a fantastic liveboard boat.)

Slack didn't really appear on the *Hispania* but we dived it anyway which, was great as its one of my favourite wrecks. Time is taking its toll on her though, as I noted the large fore mast has now toppled over the starboard hull.

On our steam back to Oban, I took time to reflect on the trip. The diving at Kilda, even in less than perfect conditions, had been amazing. Those three dives were like an appetiser enticing me back for more.



We made it!



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