

Surprise Surprise At The Sound Of Mull

Mike Clark revisits the popular wrecks of the Sound of Mull and finds that familiar dives can provide new excitement when you're in the hands of a good skipper ...



I CHECKED out the weather before my trip to Lochaline and a weekend's diving the Sound of Mull; it was the forecast from hell. Driving through Glencoe the weather didn't look so bad and by the time I reached the Corran Ferry (£6.20 now incidentally) it was positively sunny. From there on it was 33 miles of twisting and single track roads to Lochaline - a great journey through some of Scotland's most majestic Highland scenery.

The *MV Peregrine* was waiting by the pier and I met her skipper Alan Livingstone. Over the next couple of days I would be mightily impressed by Alan's knowledge of the area, especially relating to the complex tides over the wreck of the *Hispania*. I was on board with a group of Yorkshire divers who were a great bunch. As soon as the gear was on board we headed off south-east to the dive site Grey Rocks. It's a site I had never dived before and by the excited chatter coming from those who had, I knew it was going to be a good one.

Grey Rocks

This site isn't in any dive guides I have seen, it's just one of skipper Alan's specials. After a good briefing about tides and what direction to fin in I splashed overboard. Descending down I landed on a kelpy slope dropping onto a coarse sand and shell seafloor.

It was nothing too impressive at this stage, then the wall started to form and I kept to 18 metres as the seafloor dropped away below me. Masses of orange and white dead men's fingers started to cover the cliff, squat lobsters were everywhere

Images this page (clockwise from top): there's lots of colour colonisation throughout the wreck of the Hispania; the ship's bow; the porthole; the ship's ladder offers an interesting opportunity for new life.

Page 11: Mike manages a great shot of passing ballan wrasse; diver at the bow of the Thesis



and some really colourful painted top shells clung to the rocks. Then I noticed something strange tucked away in a gap in the reef - a male lump sucker guarding its brood of yellow eggs.

This was a great spot for me, as I hadn't seen one in ages and never one with eggs. He was nose into the wall so I couldn't get a good image of him but it really was great to see.

It was at this stage that I noted that I was experiencing a cold sensation on my knees and upper legs. Was it just cold or was I wet? I couldn't tell at this stage but I was betting on the latter. I took my mind off it by eyeing a large sea lemon and got some nice shots of that, then there was a dahlia anemone and some two spot gobys.

Wet suit or not after an hour in the water, in April it was time to ascend. Thankfully once back on board the *Peregrine* I found out what a fantastic heater it had, after I emptied half of the North Atlantic out of my drysuit. The earlier underwater sensation was explained - my neck seal had parted company with my suit, after a less than satisfactory repair!

Back in my car after the dive, I drove the short distance to the accommodation at the old post office house. This is magnificently positioned for completing the Lochaline wall dive, which is just off the facing beach. This excellent accommodation is available for groups through the Lochaline Dive Centre, as well as their rooms at the centre itself.

Sadly the excellent wall dive was not on the cards for me on this trip as I had to fix my suit. Thankfully Mark Lawrence proprietor of Lochaline Dive Centre had everything I needed to get my neck seal fitted properly. So whilst the lucky Yorkshire divers were in the pub I was up to my armpits in glue.

The Hispania

Snow lay on the hilltops as we headed up the sound to one of Scotland's most revered wrecks. The forecast northerly winds had arrived and were rippling the

surface of the sound, but thankfully we remained well sheltered from winds from that direction.

We arrived at the site of the *Hispania* and Alan advised us how the tide would affect us on the wreck and I splashed into the bright and clear water. My neck seal stayed in place and I went on to have my best ever dive on this wreck, largely due to Alan getting the tide spot on. This wreck always amazes me with its complete colonisation of orange and white plumose anemones.

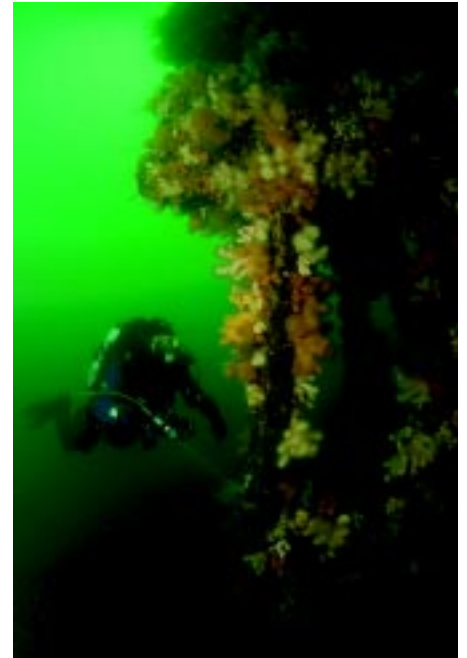
First I entered the bridge and saw the shattered remains of the captain's bath. I then meandered forward to the bow passing the now collapsed mast; here groups of breeding ballan wrasse posed in front of my dome port, allowing me to get a really nice image.

Passing big winches and lifeboat davits I soon arrived at the bow and noted the anchor chain running out through the hawse pipe. I drifted around the outside of the bow and with the turning tide I drifted back to the stern, along the shallower port side of the wreck. Massive pollack were common sights, some unfortunately sporting fishing hooks and line.

Passing mooring bollards and finning through now partially blocked companionways, beside the bridge, I arrived at the aft accommodation and noted the spare prop in the hold. The alternate steering gear is still at the stern I'm pleased to say, as it's one of my favourite areas of the wreck.

Dive time was now up and I ascended back to the shotline for my deco stops. This wreck is now deteriorating but certainly still ranks as one of the best wrecks in Scotland, certainly if the 'Yea haas' on surfacing were anything to go by! If you are up here don't miss this wreck.

Another interesting point about the *Hispania* is that Mark, proprietor of the Lochaline Dive Centre, has surveyed it using 3D sonar. I was lucky enough to see the results on the evening after



diving the wreck and was astounded at the clarity. I could actually see derrick cranes I had finned along earlier that day. If you wish to know more about this please see www.wrecksight.com. Packages of scanned wrecks will soon be available for divers to view.

Thesis

This is another one of my favourite wrecks in the area and, although it's best viewed in sunny conditions, we were fairly lucky and managed to dive between snow showers. The bow for me is always the most visually stunning area of this wreck and it's also the shallowest part gaining most sunlight. Back from the bow the hull plates have fallen away revealing a skeleton of spars covered in orange and white dead men's fingers.

The wreck is fairly open and it's possible to enter the wreck and fin internally down to the stern of the boat. There are two holds on either side of the engine block and boiler. Here there is less life and more silt, so I wandered back to the bow to try and capture a nice picture.

There are a lot of small nudibranches on this wreck too, so keep an eye out for them. Whilst finning around the bow a couple of Yorkshire divers, Paul and Chris pointed over to the port side of the bow and there on the sea floor was an old anchor which I had never noted before. Another great dive completed, thankfully before the winds freshened again from the north.

There was certainly a cold bite to the wind later as we headed to the local pub. Soon however I was enjoying a pint of excellent Guinness and a good meal. In the morning I awoke to sunlight streaming through my bedroom window, the snow had disappeared to the hills and the sound was bright blue and calm. Alan decided to dive the *Rondo* in these calm conditions and it turned out to be a firm favourite with all of the Yorkshire divers.

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The Rondo

The *Rondo* sits with her rudder in 7 metres of water and her bow at 50 metres. She slopes down the wall of a small island at a steep angle. The wreck has been heavily salvaged and for that reason she wasn't my favourite dive in the area. That said, I had a wonderful dive on her, mainly due to the marine life that carpets the remains of her starboard hull and the stern at the rudder, which was very photogenic.

I descended down to just over 40 metres and slowly worked my way back up. I negotiated the swimthrough underneath the wreck at 28 metres and was concerned by the huge plates that lay under the wreck and the massive slabs of steel that were in the process of peeling away from the hull.

Back out in the sunlight water again I followed the hullside ascending up the wreck. More plumose anemones appeared as the light intensified and at the stern the colours of the soft corals backed by the green water made a lovely sight.

This dive was getting better all the time and whilst it's an exciting dive for those who wish to go down deep, there is a lot of life to be found in the shallows, around the stern and rudder, therefore



Striking sunstar

the deep diver can have fun on the deco stops alongside the photographer who will undoubtedly find this area of the wreck the most rewarding.

The John Preston

The last dive of the trip was to be on the sheer wall, near the site of the wreck of the *John Preston*. There isn't much left of the wreck and all I saw on the dive were some slates which were her cargo.

This site lies out of the main tidal flow and can be dived at any state of the tide. Even so I was drifting along the wall at around a knot. Devonshire cup corals in luminous green and orange colours were common sights. A big conger hiding in a crack in the cliff was a nice spot too but he receded back into the darkness to get out of my torch-light.

Too soon though my dive time was up and I headed for my deco stops. Hanging about in the kelp there were plenty of nudibranches, shrimps and snails to keep me occupied, as the deco time ticked off.

For a weekend break I found Lochaline to be ideal, with close access to some of Scotland's best wreck dives. My accommodation at the post house was excellent and the day boat *Peregrine* is a great dive platform, with its large heated cabin up front and plenty of deck space at the stern. She also boasts a toilet and an onboard compressor so the *Peregrine* with Skipper Alan at the helm can make your diving in the Sound of Mull and further afield as easy and enjoyable as it can be.



Plumose anemones at the stern of the *Rondo*



NOTES

Lochaline is a very small place. It has one shop and a couple of restaurants. The pub grub is excellent and I have already mentioned the Guinness. If you want to save some cash, you can take your own grub up with you. If you are staying with Lochaline Dive Centre or the old post office you will find both have excellent cooking facilities.

CONTACTS

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Air and Nitrox are available from the dive centre and air is available on board *Peregrine*.



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