



All The Fun Of The Pier

SCOTTISH DIVER regular Alison

Fuller-Shapcott returns to her old

stomping grounds and writes with

affection of the simple pleasures of

shore diving on the south coast ...

THE LIFEBOAT pier off Kingsway, East Beach, Selsey is probably one of the most perfect dive spots I've come across.

Parking is free (always a bonus these days) although you have to park on the roadside close to a bus stop, it's next to a huge grassy area which is handy for kitting up. There are toilets nearby and the dive site is only a short walk down a path to the shingle beach.

As the beach is used by the local fishermen you will need to watch out for moving cables as boats are winched up and down the beach. Oh, and the water temperature in summer can reach 21 degrees, and if you like fresh fish, there is plenty for sale in many of the little huts along the beach road.

Selsey is a lovely, unspoilt little seaside town, with its shingle beach and grassy play areas it's ideal for a traditional family day out at the seaside. The only downside of Selsey is getting to it. Selsey Bill is close to Chichester, and so traffic on the A27 during the peak of summer can be very heavy, especially at weekends. Therefore you will need to plan your journey time accordingly.

Entry to this dive site is a short walk down the beach to the legs of the lifeboat pier. It is a slack water dive, and this is approximately 4 hours before and 3 hours after high tide at Selsey Bill. The 3 hours after ebb slack is probably the best for visibility.

Because the area is used by many small boats, a surface marker buoy should always be used during the dive. If the lifeboat needs to launch, divers are recalled to the surface by three loud

bangs on the pier structure. Divers are also requested not to dive in front of the lifeboat ramp.

'God is in the details' for this dive; take your time and look carefully. The legs of the pier are covered in life and the surrounding shingle and mud seabed is similarly smothered in weed which is home to a myriad of creatures.

Similarly the old footings for the previous pier, which lie on the north side of the current pier, and numerous bits of other debris, concrete blocks and even an old admiralty anchor, have become small reefs. But you have to use your eyes. Swimming slowly and carefully, you can easily spend an absorbing hour or more on this site. With a maximum depth of 6 metres, you won't have a problem with air consumption or decompression.

When visibility is good, and the sun is shining, you can look upwards through the pier legs to see the silver flashes of fish as they move in and out of the structure. There are many types of fish here from bib to bream.

Slightly to the south of the pier, there are the remains of a wooden groin. Next to it is a patch of white sand and here I have seen black sea bream swimming backwards and forwards, playfully churning up the sand.

On two occasions a small conger eel has swam past me, but the strangest encounter of all was with a large trigger fish. It was lying in the weed, and at first I thought it was dead, then I saw its large eyes move, it stared at me for a moment then with a quick wiggle it

moved off. Apparently they are a common sight here in the summer.

On my first dive under the pier, I was introduced to the wonderful Leach's spider crabs. These tiny little crabs, with their cute little faces - sorry there is no other way to describe them - hide under the tentacles of snakelocks anemones. It seems that each anemone has its own resident crab, found either under the anemone, or hiding amongst the tentacles. The snakelocks anemones are a gem in their own right, with their beautiful pale green arms with purple tips waving and pulsating in the water.

Another inhabitant of the area is the playful and very cheeky tompot blennies. These charming fish stare out at visiting divers from amongst the weed, under planks of wood and every conceivable crevice. Some are braver than others and swim out momentarily to check out divers, whilst others retreat back under cover. These are the marine equivalent of meerkats. Some are even bold enough to pose for photographs, but most only stay long enough to make eye contact before shooting off as if late for some important meeting.

Sometimes lumps of weed appear to move across the sea bed. These are well camouflaged spider crabs. Spider crabs are a common sight here on the south coast, but these are a smaller version of the spiny spider crab, and have the unusual name of sea-toads. They use seaweed and other encrusting growths to camouflage themselves to blend in with the surrounding weed. They can then settle down and wait for their prey to pass by.

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The remains of the old pier make perfect mini reefs



Leaches spider crab hiding amongst the snakelocks anemones



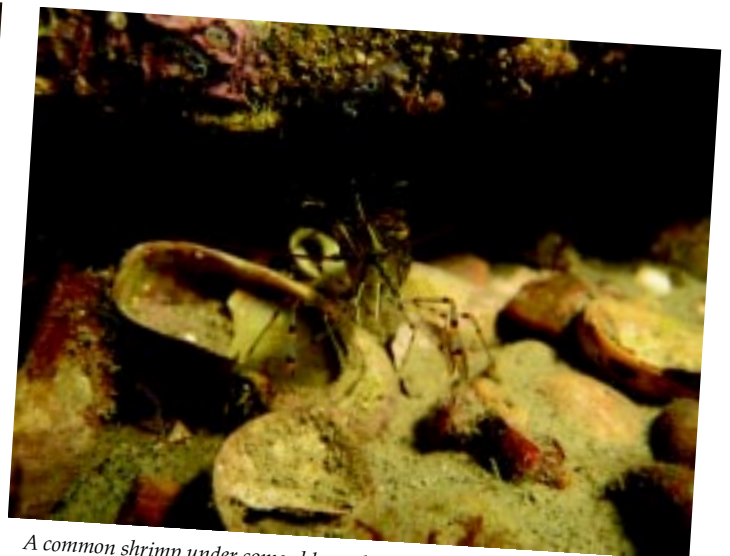
Diver on a huge anchor



All divers must use a SMB when diving around the pier



A greater pipefish



A common shrimp under some old wood

All The Fun Of The Pier

Having thoroughly explored under the current pier, move out from the north side of it and across to the remains of the previous pier. What's left of the original footings on the sea bed, make ideal mini reefs. Encrusted with weed and sponges, each island reef is home not only to more tompot blennies, but also greater pipefish, small scorpion fish, dragonets and numerous other little fish.

Look under the debris and you will find common shrimps, standing side by side, guarding their holes. These humble little creatures look so delicate underwater. By zigzagging back and forward on a north-east to south-west bearing, you can gradually make your way across the seabed back to the shore

At a depth of about 3 metres, look carefully amongst the weed as there has been reported sightings of seahorses here. I'm afraid I have never been lucky enough to see them, but I intend to keep looking. Another experience I have yet to have is the flamboyant displays put on by courting cuttlefish which appear in April. This was featured on the BBC's Coast series with diver Miranda



One of the hundreds of tompot blennies

Krestovnikoff. I did go down last April, but bad weather blew out the site - still there is always next year!

Having finished your dive, you can then relax in the nearby pub, The Lifeboat, which is only a stone's throw from the pier. It serves an excellent pint of real ale and a whole host of traditional fish dishes using locally caught fish. A rewarding dive followed by excellent après-dive at the pub; I can't think of a better trip to the seaside than this.

FACTFILE

For more information on diving the Selsey Lifeboat Pier, contact: Linda Frampton, Mulberry Divers, Tel 0143 601000 www.mulberrydivers.co.uk

The Mulberry Divers web site gives times of slack water at the pier and will provide surface cover at specified times. Mulberry Divers also provide an excellent guided dive service for dives under the pier. It's worth the expenditure alone for not having to deal with the SMB, especially if you have a camera.

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