



# Farne Tastic

Mike Clark visited the Farne

Islands eager to sample the

varied dive sites on offer and

ready to strike up a friendship

or two with the resident seals.

But would they want to play ...

SEAHOUSES HARBOUR, 12 miles south of the border town of Berwick upon Tweed, protects a vast array of vessels from the elements. Fishing trawlers, tourist boats and, of course, dive boats. They are all berthed here cheek by jowl due to the fantastic marine life found just off shore, on which, one way or another all the boats make their living.

For the diver Seahouses is a fantastic base. Just offshore lie the Farne Islands, which provide some of the best diving in the UK. There is a vast range of diving to be found here: deep walls, drift dives, shipwrecks, both shallow and deep, all encrusted in healthy amounts of marine life. The various islands offer divers limitless choice whilst also providing protection from the weather and tide. It all sounds amazing but this special place has one further ace up its sleeve and that is the large population of gregarious grey seals that inhabit the islands. If you are lucky you can make lots of furry friends on a single dive.

Making friends was certainly what I was hoping for when I visited in mid October. Even before I met the seals I met up with a group of divers from Solway Sub Aqua Club in Whitehaven, who were a great bunch. We headed out of the harbour into the long slow swell aboard the *Farne Diver*, skippered by Lee Hall. I first visited the area when Lee's

father Stan Hall was skippering the boat. The October weather was a risk I had to take and as it turned out it wasn't too bad. This time of year though, is the best time to experience very close encounters of the furry kind!

Sailing out past the islands there were gulls and gannets everywhere. At other times of the year there are puffins, razorbill and guillemots to keep the twitchers happy. Dive shallow and you will stand a very good chance of seeing these diving birds all around you at the right time of year. (Usually April to June but see Lee for details)

#### *Little Hurker*

Today the sea conditions were fairly rough and the outer islands were not on the diving menu. After some of the dive party explored the wreck of the *Somali* it was the time for the others including myself to get into the water, at the dive site Little Hurker. Whilst large waves could be seen smashing on the rocks further out to sea, on the outer side of the reef, here we were all very well sheltered and so were the hundreds of seals that were lounging about on the rocks. The females at this time of year are heavily pregnant and the bulls are busy organising their harems, which pretty much leaves last year's pups plenty of play time with the divers.

I jumped off the lift at the back of the boat, camera in hand and descended down the wall in pleasing green vis of around six metres. Seconds after landing on the seafloor I had my first seal encounter of the day as around six individuals buzzed me, getting closer as time went on. Being at a less exposed site, the encrusting marine life was not as impressive as elsewhere in the islands but there were walls of dead men's fingers, with long fronds of kelp in the surface layers. In the cracks and crevices, velvet backed swimming crabs were everywhere and on the seafloor colonies of sea urchins marched about.

Surprisingly with so many seals around there were fish as well and I saw some small ballan wrasse and juvenile pollack. I finned along the wall keeping it on my right as per Lee's instructions and kept close in to stay out of the tide. At around 9 metres, submerged islets lying just off the main island form tall narrow gullies, here there is more marine life about and I noted painted topshells and some nudibranches but the main resident was a sleeping seal on the sea floor gently rocking back and forward in the tide.

Through the gully, the bay I noted from the boat, takes shape underwater as the water shallows to around six metres. Long gullies run into the island all covered by broken kelp fronds and this is



Lobster



Velvet backed swimming crab



Starfish

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where you will find the bulk of the seals. I found a good spot and whilst I was photographing one individual another was tugging at my fins and another was lying on my tank. This really was one of my closest encounters and it's what the Farne Isles is famous for.

There is plenty of other stuff to see as well, I noted large schools of two spotted gobies and lots of scorpion fish about; edible crabs and lobster were also common sights. After around an hour of fun with the seals I moved out of the gully and finned further around the wall at around 11 metres. More gullies opened up and invited me to explore but my time was up on this dive. I was followed all the way up to the surface by a seal before it shot off at the approach of the *Farne Diver*.

For the diver who wishes to stay above 18 metres, the Farnes have hundreds of sites. If you prefer wreck diving there are dozens to be found in this range. Many are broken up and have come to grief on the same tragic rocks so it's difficult sometimes to know which wreck you are on. Sometimes props belong to one wreck and boilers to another. On a return visit with calmer conditions I visited one of the area's top wrecks ...

*The Abyssinia*

At 5,753 tonnes and 137m in length, the

*Abyssinia* is said to be the largest ship wrecked in the Farnes. Built in 1900 by Palmers & Co. at Newcastle, she was a steamship under German ownership. On September 3, 1921 her hull hit the Knivestone and was ripped open. The wreckage now lies strewn over the steep underwater slope of the island, which is the most seaward rock of the Farne Isles.

Lying in 10m of water, on a ledge just below the kelp line, the propeller is a good place to start this dive. The propeller is large, with four blades and completely covered with pink, encrusting growth. Nudibranches, butterflyfish and sea scorpions are all in residence in fact one of the scorpionfish was eating a butterflyfish. It's an excellent site for macro photographers in its own right! Further down the slope at 15m, the engine block and crankshafts can be seen, along with other sizeable pieces of wreckage.

I stopped to

photograph one of the colourful ballan wrasse that frequent this part of the wreck. Amazing amounts of marine life can be found here. Octopus hide in the wreckage; if you are lucky one may be tempted out as they are inquisitive creatures. I found one just beside a massive brass nut that still remains here. It shone in my torchlight and looked to have been polished by every passing diver's hand.

For divers wishing to go deeper than 18 metres the two boilers lie where the seabed flattens out around 24 metres. There is much more to be found in the shallows however and I fin back up to





Scorpionfish



Young seals take a great interest in divers' fins



A diver takes on an eerie persona in a gully

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the propeller. The scorpionfish is still there but no sign of the butterflyfish. From here I fin on to my favourite area of the dive. Keeping the wall on my right hand side I fin along passing over anemone encrusted plates and spars. After 10 metres a gully forms - it's sheer sided and the depth starts to increase again from 10 to 15 metres. It's much more tidal here so care is needed, but Lee's briefing prepared me well for this. The walls look to reach right up to the surface but the gully is only three metres wide and shrouded by kelp at the top, through

which the sun flashes brightly.

Marine life is profuse; plumose anemones and dead men's fingers cover every patch of wall. Keep your eyes peeled for seals, as they love to dart past you in the confines of the gully. Vibrant red sunstars cling to the rusting metal and dahlia anemones from pure white to pink and purple are found in large numbers here. Finning further along this gully its now becoming a real struggle as the tide is pounding against me. I decide just to turn around and drift back along the gully back towards the prop again.

Now finning with the wall on my left I keep going and find myself in another gully and whilst there is lots of life and wreckage to be seen in it, I don't find it as exciting as the one I had just left.

As there can be lots of dive and pleasure boats around the islands I put up my delayed SMB and am quickly picked up by Lee. Once back onboard I'm given a lovely warm cup of coffee to take away the chills. Water temperatures here vary from 4°C in winter to 14°C in late summer, so a drysuit is best for diving here.

## FACTFILE

Farne Diving Services operate two dive boats and are out every day of the season between April and November, from Seahouses Harbour. Their base is in Beadnell a couple of miles south of Seahouses, here you will find their accommodation and compressor. Both Seahouses and Beadnell are nice places to explore and Bamburgh three miles north of Seahouses has long golden beaches and a very impressive looking castle.

To get to Seahouses travel south on the A1, 7 miles south of Berwick upon Tweed you will see the clearly marked

signs for Seahouses. The road takes you straight past the harbour where you will find Lee's boat.

### Farne Diving Services Info

£360 per day weekends 12 divers  
 £30 per head minimum 5 people mid-week/small group packages available  
 Please contact Stan or Lee Hall for enquiries, bookings, prices & availability  
 Phone: 01665 720 615  
 email: leehalldiving1@aol.com  
 Farne Diving Services  
 St. Ebbas House, Beadnell  
 Northumberland, NE67 5AP



Accommodation  
 Farne Diving services have 13 twin and double ensuite rooms and 2 dorms that both sleep 6.