



*hermit crab*



*spider crab on hand*

# After Dark In Oban

Nighttime in Oban isn't just Guinness and Lamb Rogan Josh.

Alison Fuller-Shapcott found some interesting late night

action in the west coast town ...

LIKE MOST visitors to Oban, the highlight of a club diving weekend is a night out with my diving buddies and an opportunity to savour what the locals have to offer in the way of evening entertainment. Of course when you are going out for the evening, it's important to dress correctly; dry suit, stab jacket, tank, mask, weight belt, torch and a camera. "What", I hear you cry; "no visit to the Oban Inn or the local curry house?" Yes, I'm turning down the

chance of a chicken korma for a dive in a silty bay in 5 metres of freezing cold water in February.

Actually it was my husband who got me into the delights of night diving; showing me that a seemingly barren mudscape can turn into a humming metropolis with the departure of daylight, and the application of a keen eye.

My first foray into night diving in Oban was back in 1998 at the site of the

Old Pier next to the Port Beag slipway. The fairly steep mud and gravel slope to the left of the slipway was a veritable junk yard containing old tyres, tins, broken crockery and an old toilet; each item being a home to a crab, squat lobster or scorpion fish.

The experience was a mixture of 'scrap heap challenge' and Scottish muck diving. To add to the excitement of this dive was the noise and vibration from the arriving and departing ferries in the



*juvenile velvet swimming crab*



*stickleback*

main harbour. The first time this happened, I was terrified, and pinned myself to the slope praying that the ferry captain had got his navigation right.

Given the pleasure of this dive, it's hard to believe that there are better sites on offer; one such site being the small bay further south along the Gallanach Road, below the Kilbowie Hostel. The kelp, sand and rock bottom, which slopes down to about 15 metres, has plenty of life to observe. I once spotted a small cuttlefish buried up to its eyes in the fine gravel.

However recently we have moved further south again and have been diving Gavallach Bay next to Puffin Dive Centre. By day, this mud and gravel bay is busy with dive boats arriving and leaving from the slipway, whilst the north side is used as a training ground for novices undergoing tests. The meagre bottom features, such as blocks of concrete for mooring buoys, odd wooden objects now decayed beyond recognition, and the odd patch of rock and weed, give the trainees something to see. But when all the other divers have left the water, and the slipway lights glow orange, this is the time to enter the water, to see the night time inhabitants of

this sheltered bay.

Either follow the slipway straight out to between 5 and 8 metres, then turn right (north) and go directly across the bay. Or from the slipway follow a bearing of 120 degrees straight out across the bay to the area beneath the buoys. As fresh water enters the bay next to the slipway, visibility through the top layer of the water, where the fresh water and salt water mix together, is rather like looking through jelly.

Once off the concrete slipway, the bottom is a mixture of silt and fine gravel, with small patches of short kelp and weed. Out beneath the buoys, blocks of concrete and other 'objects' act as small weed covered reefs.

Now in the dark, crabs, squat lobsters and shrimps that would normally hide away from divers, become almost fearless and walk about their territory with 'attitude'. Delicate long legged spider crabs, who usually hide within the folds of the kelp leaves, now sit on top of the kelp, poised, waiting for supper to pass by. On the patches of gravel, small gobies, flat fish, scorpion fish and dragonets sit motionless, whilst crabs scuttle past. The normally shy squat lobsters emerge from their holes

and virtually attack a camera or torch.

All this activity is fascinating to watch, but sometimes there are extra star attractions. For the past two years, we have spotted several small grey gurnards walking delicately across the bottom. Still skittish, even at night, their blue tipped pectoral fins flash vibrantly as they fly off into the darkness.

By crossing backwards and forwards across the bay, gradually working shallower and therefore inshore, an hour of fascinating creature watching can be achieved all for the price of a bottle fill. And if you aren't that good at using a compass, the orange slipway lights, which can be seen from beneath the water, make navigation back to the slipway relatively easy.

So if you are ever stuck for an evening's entertainment next time you're visiting Oban and don't fancy a curry, just remember that there is always something to see in Oban's more unusual night spots.

Thanks to my fellow night dive buddies David and James, and my fellow dive club members who took on the perilous task of child minding 'junior' for an hour or two.

plaice



grey gurnard



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fan worm

