



*Danny, John, Pep, Diarmuid (top) and Cathal, Sinead and Chris with Cox off Illa del Portitxol (Daniel Kearney)*



*Pep, Sinead and Noel in Cala Morae (Adrian Thomas)*



*Moray eel*



*Chris, John, Diarmuid, Danny demonstrate bog-snorkelling technique*

# In Search Of The Craic

Words: Adrian Thomas; Photographs: Adrian Thomas, Daniel Kearney, Rab Ronaldson and Sinead O'Keefe



Scorpion Fish (Daniel Kearney)

In the depths of winter piper  
Adrian Thomas led an assortment  
of Irish and Scottish divers to the  
Spanish haven of Javea. Here he  
recounts a tale of easy diving, big  
Mediterranean skies and Celtic  
camaraderie ...

## In Search Of The Craic

LOOKING DOWN, all I could see was a half eaten fin on my right foot and a large and very cross octopus chewing away at my other fin. I couldn't help feeling that this was a rather poor end to some nice fins and to what was quite a good dive up to the point when I left the reef pursued by this octopus with a taste for yellow plastic.

Sitting there at 5m doing my stop with this beastie hanging off me, 3m sharks circling below, and my buddy nowhere in sight, made me wonder if this was going to end well. No sign of the boat above either. Strange, I seemed to be sweating too, and that's pretty unusual in Irish waters in the winter. My dive computer was really annoying me because it was beeping constantly with a loud piercing tone that I hadn't ever heard before. Note to diary 'look up annoying audible signals in computer manual'.

I ripped it off and dropped it to the sharks – even stranger - it seemed to be playing Beethoven's 5th Symphony now too, just as a large reef shark swallowed it – perhaps that's a sort of electronic defence mechanism to get sharks to vomit it back up. I reckon my 3 minutes must be done now so looking around again for the boat I couldn't help but notice that the surface looked very like wallpaper - and as my head broke surface it sure felt like solid wallpaper too.

Falling out of bed, my legs didn't work and I couldn't find the buttons to make two phones and an alarm clock stop bleeping, bleating and orchestrating. Eyes focus, beep, beep, 3am! Cold wash, hot tea, another cold wash, more tea – gear, car, tickets, passport, more tea, Jesus whose idea was it to go diving at 4am on a Friday in January? Kate Lawlor - note to diary 'have a word with Kate about early starts.'

OK gather thoughts, have we got everything, people start arriving in the driveway, right we're giving them a lift – get a grip you can sleep on the way. Pack stuff into car, good news, fins look to be OK after all, I wonder where my dive computer is? Pep and Sinead load their stuff in the boot and before we know it we're on our way to Shannon for our 5am check in for good old RyanAir.

Decided not to mention losing the buddy and the whole Octopus thing, best not to worry BDOs with too much detail, least said soonest mended.

There's something nice about driving to an airport at 5am, though I forget what it is. The roads are clear, it's cold, dark and raining but at least you have it all to yourself. Arriving at the airport and being first there makes you wonder if you got the right day, or perhaps the flight's gone already? No worries mate, we'll have a few minutes to check the tickets, weigh the gear, join the queue and doze for a while.

The lads started to drift in slowly and formed a small crowd in the otherwise deserted airport. There was the usual panic when someone weighed their kit and found 5kg needed to disappear – OK spare BCD back to the carpark please. Er, excuse me, is that four pairs of shoes I see in your hand baggage? To be fair it's a bit of a challenge going on a diving holiday in January with a 15kg baggage allowance and just 10kg hand baggage – all strictly enforced unfortunately. Good thing we decided to hire weights and tanks when we get there - J. Luckily none of us had to wear a wet suit going through security or we might have attracted unwanted attention!

Soon the plane was cruising over the Pyrenees and we could see ski slopes, it was so clear and the snow looked just great. As we flew further south we could see snow on the high country in the

middle of Spain and then descended steadily into Alicante on the Mediterranean coast. Personally, I'd never thought of going to the Costa Blanca but it was on the best of recommendations that we'd checked out this area before Christmas. Car hire prearranged we picked up our fleet of Skodas, Dacias and Renaults all packed to the roof with dive gear and a few t-shirts. Hitting the open road the first thing that strikes you is the sun, the clear sky, the warmth – January heaven! When you contrast that with home, 4°C, dull and raining, there's just no comparison.

Head north up the dual carriageway toll road following the signs for Valencia, past Benidorm then turn right for Javea or Denia. The trick is to remember NOT to turn on your GPS till you get on the toll road - the journey takes about an hour and costs about 5 euro in tolls – well worth every cent because the roads are quiet and very easy driving despite being cack-handed. If you want to take twice as long use the GPS and set it to 'avoid toll roads and main roads' - this will take you on the 'old road' – very pretty, very windy, lots of nice villages with 30 kph speed limits, dirt roads through vineyards and orange groves etc and the journey takes 2 hours. This has been proven and demonstrated – twice!

Never mind, eventually we all found our way to the dive shop which is close to Javea (aka Xabia) on the Costa Blanca. They have an ethnic minority language in the area and all the signs are bilingual, as are some of the maps. We were soon joined by the final car containing divers May, Graeme and Amber, who arrived in on the Belfast and Prestwick flights – a truly multinational ScotSAC expedition to the Spanish winter sun. Judging by the looks we were getting the locals immediately

labelled us as mad foreigners. We were all kitted out in t-shirts and sun glasses while the locals were going round in knee length boots, fur coats and warm hats – some even wore gloves! Well the air was only about 18°C warm.

We managed to find the two fine villas on the hill overlooking the village, which Kate had booked for us, and we dumped our gear, grabbed a room, admired the pools, and tore back to the dive centre to prepare for an afternoon of diving in the Med. Not bad going, Limerick in the morning, Med diving in the afternoon. We even found a shop selling Cornish pasties – I do love foreign food. I also have to admit that before my first visit in December I'd never have dreamed of going to the Costa Blanca for anything – the image of Benidorm killed it for me. However, the area around Javea and Denia is just fabulous in the winter – I guess it's mad in the summer though. They say it has the highest number of sunshine hours in the year anywhere in Europe.

We gathered again at the dive centre and were greeted by Rab and Ali Ronaldson, ex-pat ScotSAC now living the good life in sunny Spain. The pick-up was loaded with bottles and weights, we all signed in and formed a caravan as we headed out of Javea for a gap in the precipitous coast a few miles south – an excellent shore site known as Granadella. Entry here couldn't be easier, a short walk over pebbles from the car park and straight into easy water, rocky bottom, calm and sheltered. We managed to get in the water about 5.30pm by which time the sun was gone – this site is best dived in the morning in winter.

Swimming out of the bay and bearing left brings you to an area about 10m deep with a few big boulders and swim

throughs. Plenty of fish life, small octopus, cuttle fish, nothing too special but a very good shore dive for getting gear and weights sorted. The water was a chilly 13°C which is colder than normal in January, apparently, caused by the NE wind of the previous week bringing cold water down from the south of France. The Friday evening was a real treat too, we hadn't time to do food shopping so we ended up in a local seafront café at about 9pm – they had a fine seafood menu for about 10 euro a head.

Saturday morning came too soon and we tumbled out of bed for an early start – 10am seemed early but we were soon on the road again heading for another of Rab's fine south facing sites while the wind was still in the north. A short drive through some lovely farming country, a couple of nice villages, past a Lidl and hard left to cross the mountain known as Cumbrae del Sol, dropping down the very steep cliff road into Cala Moraig. This is an artificial beach comprised mostly of car park with a small pebbly beach at one end and a huge cave at the other. This was our dive base – down the concrete steps and straight into a fabulous cavern open to the sea at one side, the car park at the other and at the back, a deep dark pool gently rising and falling with the swell.



*Looking south west along the coast above Granadella*

The pool is connected to the open sea by means of a submarine cave at about 10m deep and about 25m long, and very spacious. Entry couldn't be easier, a clamber down over rocks to the flat area in front of the pool then a very short drop into deep water, plenty of room for 8 divers and a nice swim out through an arch into open water. Strictly speaking, not beginner territory because it's an overhead environment but exit from any point would be quite easy, as would a rescue, so this was a very good intro to cavern diving for some of the less experienced members. In open water we headed along the cliff at 10m and explored around and under the many large boulders which must have fallen from the huge cliffs above. Good place for octopus too – we saw three on this dive – all quite small but fun to bait.

Circling back to the cave was quite easy because the entrance is very distinctive and a short swim through the arch brought us straight into the pool for our safety stop while examining the hundreds of prawns on the back wall.

Mid afternoon we repeated the dive with Rab leading a big group and Graeme bringing along a second large group. This time we headed further along the cliff and into a huge cave which is famous as being the rising for a subterranean river flowing gently out of the mountain. This results in a layer of 'sweetwater' above about 5m and it's so cold you'd know the minute you put your head up into it. The halocline effects were very distinctive, like a mirror effect with our dive torches and gave an interesting visual impact. Rab later explained that local cave divers have now penetrated the river cave via a boulder choke and have made progress a number of kilometres inland, completely underwater. In fact while we were there



*Rab arranges lunch transfer under cliffs of St Martin Head*

The reef was just full of holes and there seemed to be a Conger or Moray eel sticking out of every one of them – and they were keen to come out and play too! I counted six but sadly our group was large and kicked up so much crap that photographs were out of the question.



Happy in the Spanish sun

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they were portering stage cylinders and spare reels for a big push they were planning the following day.

On the Sunday a couple of us headed up into the hills to check out some local tourist attractions. I particularly wanted to visit el Castell de Guadalest, a small village sitting atop a craggy outcrop right up in the mountains just 60 minutes inland from Javea. The views were splendid and very few tourists about so it was a great day out with a long detour back over a mountain pass or two. The plan was to get back in time for the night dive at 6pm but the lads had been delayed a few times during the day and everything was running so late we just ate and enjoyed an easy evening.

Monday was an early start, meeting at the centre at 9am then faffing about for an hour getting ready. We finally got the two RIBs loaded and headed down the coast for our first dive at L'Schull, a really nice site just a little way off the cliffs south of Javea. We dropped onto a pinnacle at about 8m then finning off the side and a short traverse across open water to a small island where we descended to 27m to visit a reef well known for a goodly population of eels. The reef was just full of holes and there seemed to be a Conger or Moray eel sticking out of every one of them – and they were keen to come out and play too! I counted six but sadly our group was large and kicked up so much crap that photographs were out of the question.

After this good dive we changed bottles on the RIB, had some lunch and motored back up the coast a short way to the north side of St Martin head. The north wind had dropped so the sea was very docile – just how I like it! Dropping into the water at 1pm we hit the bottom at 8m and ran straight into two large scorpion fish who insisted on being videoed and photographed by everyone. The main purpose of this dive was to visit a cave with an interesting feature – namely a large concrete block with some ceramic tiles showing the Madonna.

Apparently this is a favourite pilgrimage site and fortunately the cave is designed well for the purpose, with an impressive entrance and a hole in the roof for exiting once you've reduced the viz to zero! Note to diary 'take care not to get separated from the group when lost in a white out in case your buddy doesn't miss you.'

In the evening we headed down to Cumbrae del Sol (the cave pool) again for the postponed night dive. As a site for a night dive it gets 10/10 but unfortunately it got quite rough in the open water and as we had some novices in the group Rab decided to knock it on the head and we turned back prematurely. No worries – it'll be there next year. I liked the idea of hanging a strobe over the entrance to the cave to aid our return. You learn something on every dive if you keep your eyes open.

Tuesday was our last diving day so we headed out early again with two RIBs and lots of bottles. Managed to get in the water for 10.30 this time, getting better every day! First site was again St Martin but this time on the south side of the promontory and again we managed a very enjoyable dive with lots of wildlife and visibility up to 10m which is regarded as poor in this area. This site is fabulous – there is a long swim through which brings you right under the head and out the other side – best done when the swell is light.

After another break, a second breakfast and a bottle change we motored down to Cabo Negro (Black Cape) and dived as two big groups onto a shelf at about 6m, heading inland along the cliff dropping to 20m and exploring some huge caves and swim throughs along the way. Easily the best dive of the trip with so much to see and interesting places to explore. Found a lovely drop off just covered with wildlife and spotted a number of different nudibranch amongst the anemones. This is a must do next time and I'll remember to bring the camera too.

With our flight now just 24 hours away the time was on us to stop diving and start re-hydrating - in a controlled and responsible way of course. By mid-afternoon we'd returned gear to the store and rinsed our own stuff as one must. Now for a good celebration lunch in the street café next door! After an extremely long and pleasant lunch with many tapas and beers, and a goodly dose of sunburn, we returned to the villas to start the clean and tidy routines prior to the evening celebrations. 'Villa A' had kindly offered to host the party and laid on a fine spread with enough food to feed about 50 people and drink enough to drown a horse. Excellent plan – and we rose to the challenge, partying late into the night.

Wednesday morning saw us up late, cleaning and tidying and heading for Alicante before lunch so we had time for a visit to the sports hypermarket Decathlon on the way to the airport. We left Limerick early Friday morning and we were home Wednesday evening having managed 10 good dives and a respectable bit of sunburn. The flights cost us half nothing, the villas were cheaper than staying at home and the eating out was exceptional value and quality. Even the diving was cheaper than Ireland so all in all we got a very good value holiday, some really good craic and four more Sports Divers signed off. 20 is a big group but we got on great and no complaints from anyone.

All in all, we'll be making this a regular trip because the water in Ireland is just too rough and cold and unpredictable in January so we get no training done. We just need to hope Mr RyanAir keeps up the cheap flights from Shannon.

For details of facilities for ScotSAC groups contact Rab and Ali Ronaldson through [www.amigosdelmarjavea.com/](http://www.amigosdelmarjavea.com/)

Thanks are due to Kate for the excellent organising, Paddy and Eanna for sorting all the gear, Chris for being the victim (in good spirits of course), John, Danny, Pep and Sinead for training, Graeme and Amber for being there and everyone else for their teamwork and good humour.