



St Kilda 2010

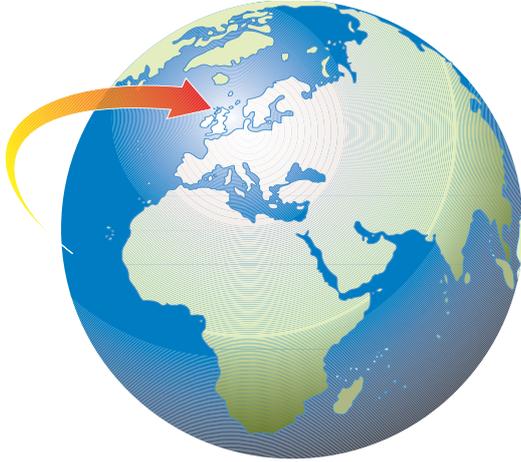
Trip Report



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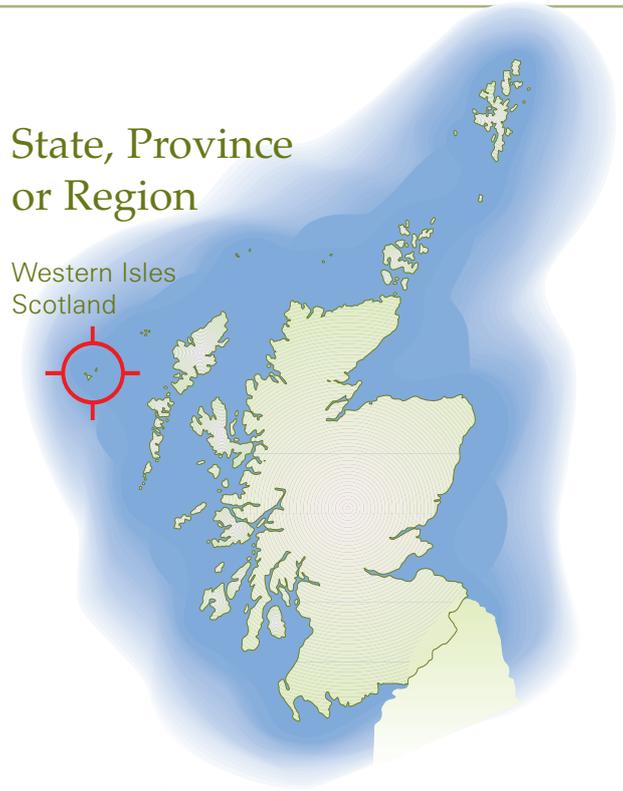
a. Country

United Kingdom



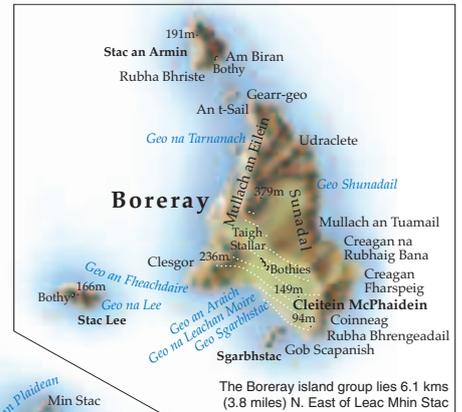
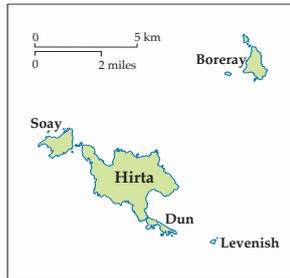
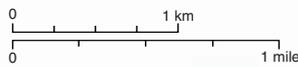
b. State, Province or Region

Western Isles
 Scotland

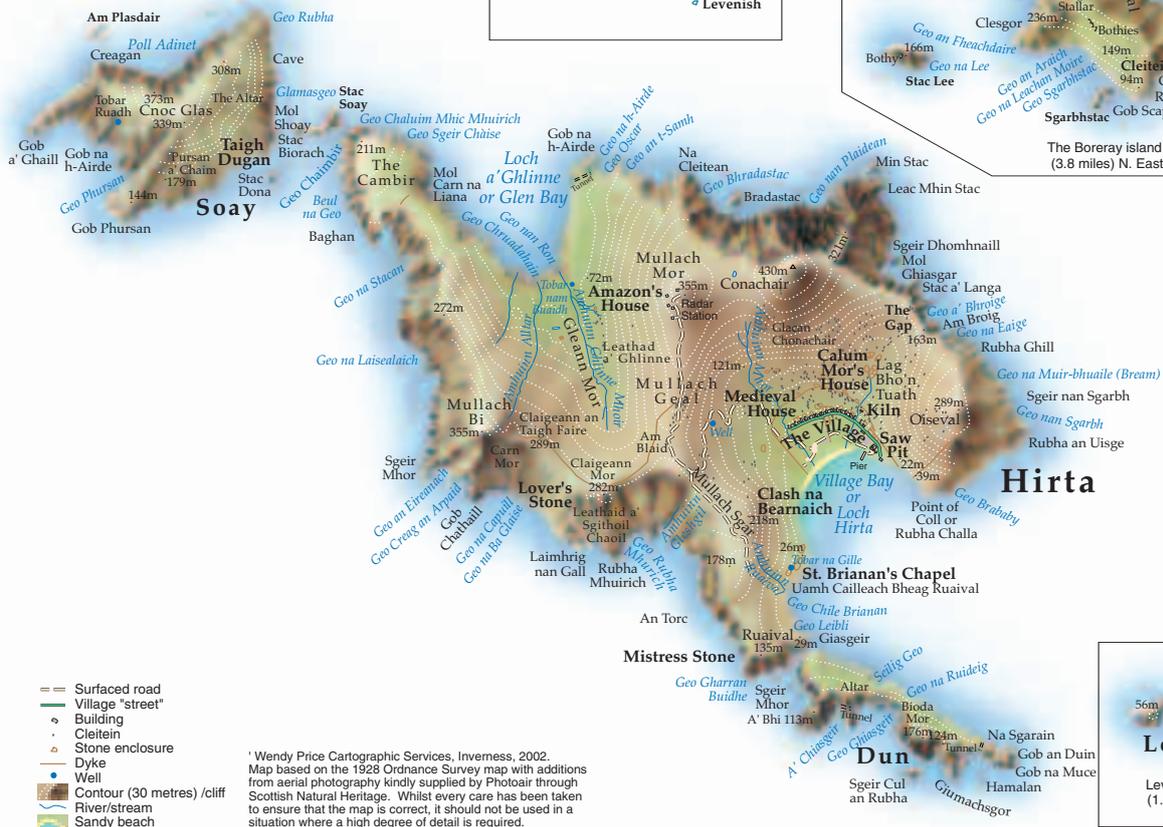


c. Name of Property

St Kilda (Hirta)

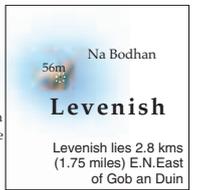


The Boreray island group lies 6.1 kms (3.8 miles) N. East of Leac Mhin Stac



- == Surfaced road
- Village "street"
- Building
- Cleitein
- Stone enclosure
- Dyke
- Well
- Contour (30 metres) /cliff
- River/stream
- Sandy beach

© Wendy Price Cartographic Services, Inverness, 2002.
 Map based on the 1928 Ordnance Survey map with additions from aerial photography kindly supplied by Photoair through Scottish Natural Heritage. Whilst every care has been taken to ensure that the map is correct, it should not be used in a situation where a high degree of detail is required.



Levenish

Levenish lies 2.8 kms (1.75 miles) E.N. East of Gob an Duin

Introduction

In most years during the 1990's varied members of the Club took a diving holiday around the Inner Hebrides aboard the "MV Harry Slater", operated by Dave Ogden until his death in 2000. The Harry Slater generally kept to the Sound of Mull with trips to Coll or further when the weather permitted – she was a small boat, and not built for comfort in rough seas.

However, we were lucky with the weather on many occasions, and got out as far as Barra on the last trip that I did. The weather was clear and flat calm, and the elusive St Kilda, which we had often talked about diving, and which Dave reached perhaps once a season, was only 6 hours steaming away. Common sense prevailed, but it always seemed like an opportunity missed, and reinforced my ambition to dive St Kilda one day.

Many years intervened, but following our successful trip to Norway in 2009, I decided that it was time to look at St Kilda again, and consequently made a booking for May 2010.

St Kilda

The archipelago of St Kilda, the remotest part of the British Isles, lies 41 miles (66 kilometres) west of Benbecula in Scotland's Outer Hebrides.

Its islands with their exceptional cliffs and sea stacs form the most important seabird breeding station in North-West Europe. The evacuation of its native population in 1930 brought to a close an extraordinary story of survival.

The National Trust for Scotland run an extensive website at <http://www.kilda.org.uk/>

St Kilda Underwater

The St Kilda website says ...

“The islands of St Kilda are bathed in clear, oceanic waters and support a spectacularly diverse and stunning range of animals and plants in both the intertidal (between high and low water) and subtidal (below low water) areas.

Beneath the surface a dense forest of kelp creates a swaying mass, providing refuge to a host of other animals and plants. The rock surface amongst the kelp holdfasts is covered by a variety of different sponges and sea anemones.

Going deeper with decreasing light levels, the kelp forest thins into a park but remarkably some kelp plants survive to depths in excess of 45m compared to a maximum of 25m on the west coast mainland of Scotland and only 10-12m on the east coast.

Space is at a premium, every square centimetre of rock is covered in a kaleidoscope of form and colour. Carpets of jewel anemones ranging from greens and pinks to vivid reds, startling bunches of orange deadman's fingers (soft coral), great swathes of orange, yellow, grey or green sponges, delicate hydroid and bryozoans all flourish in the plankton rich waters. Mobile animals such as chitons, snails, sea slugs, crabs and various starfish including featherstars, sun stars and cushion stars are to be found.

In the almost azure blue surface waters fish abound, shoals of herring create a dazzling light show as the sunlight reflects off their slender, silver bodies. Seals and even larger predators such as basking sharks and minke whales patrol these rich inshore waters. The marine life around St Kilda is a wonderful resource and a gem in the crown that is Scotland's spectacular natural heritage.”

The Elizabeth G



The boat that we had booked on was the Elizabeth G, one of only a few liveaboards operating in the Hebrides these days (where once there were many).

While almost exactly the same length as the boat that we used in Norway last year, the Elizabeth G manages to devote more space to the interior, adding to the comfort, but making the kitting-up area slightly smaller than would be ideal.

Accommodation was in six rooms with bunk beds, with plenty of space to put things. Each room has a small washbasin, and there were three (electric!) toilets and two showers on board to cater for the 12 guests.

The full [specification](http://elizabethgcharters.co.uk) of the boat is available on their website at <http://elizabethgcharters.co.uk>.

Assembled diving kit was strapped into benches just forward of the wheelhouse, as can be seen in the photo below, with plenty of space under the benches for dive bags and spare equipment. Cylinders were filled in place on the benches, saving the bother of dismantling the kit after every dive.



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Nitrox was available at reasonable prices (thank you to Pete and Lucy for the loan of Nitrox Cylinders), and rebreather divers could obtain oxygen easily due to the onboard Haskell booster pump.

Bringing wet gear into the boat was strictly forbidden, but unlike most liveaboards, where the drysuits lived with the rest of the diving gear, there were special rails at the stern of the boat to hang up suits, and a convenient dressing area at the back mostly out of the rain (but not necessarily safe from the odd wave coming through the scuppers as a number of wet-socked divers can testify!).

Hot drinks, including hot chocolate and speciality teas, were available all day long in stainless steel mugs, and small bottles of water were freely provided. Soft drinks, beers and wine were available at a sensible charge. Three full meals a day were provided of a very high quality, prepared by a professional, and dedicated chef.

Getting there

The Elizabeth G picks up its guests from the Railway Pier at Oban. We were told that we could board from 15:00, and that the Skipper would like to leave Oban at 17:00 to get the first part of the trip done that evening. Oban is 525 miles away from Crawley and having looked at all the options, we divided up all the equipment and people between my estate car and Mark's small van, and set our alarm clocks for 04:00. The journey was unhurried and uneventful, and we arrived in Oban at about 14:30, giving us plenty of time to locate where the boat was moored.

Even having done it many times before, it still surprises me how much equipment you need to take for a weeks liveaboard diving in the UK. All the usual diving gear, suits, undersuits, cylinders and weights that you would need for a normal day out. On top of that went a seldom used pony cylinder, a small toolbox with spare this and that, spare hoses, pressure gauges, inflators and all sorts of other things. There are a couple of small dive shops in Oban, but they're not much use to you when you're 132 miles to the North-West in St Kilda.

On top of that, and the clothes needed for a week, and a set of wet weather gear, I took my underwater camera which was another three bags / cases. Luckily there was no weight restrictions travelling by car, and there was ample space on the Elizabeth G to put all these things.

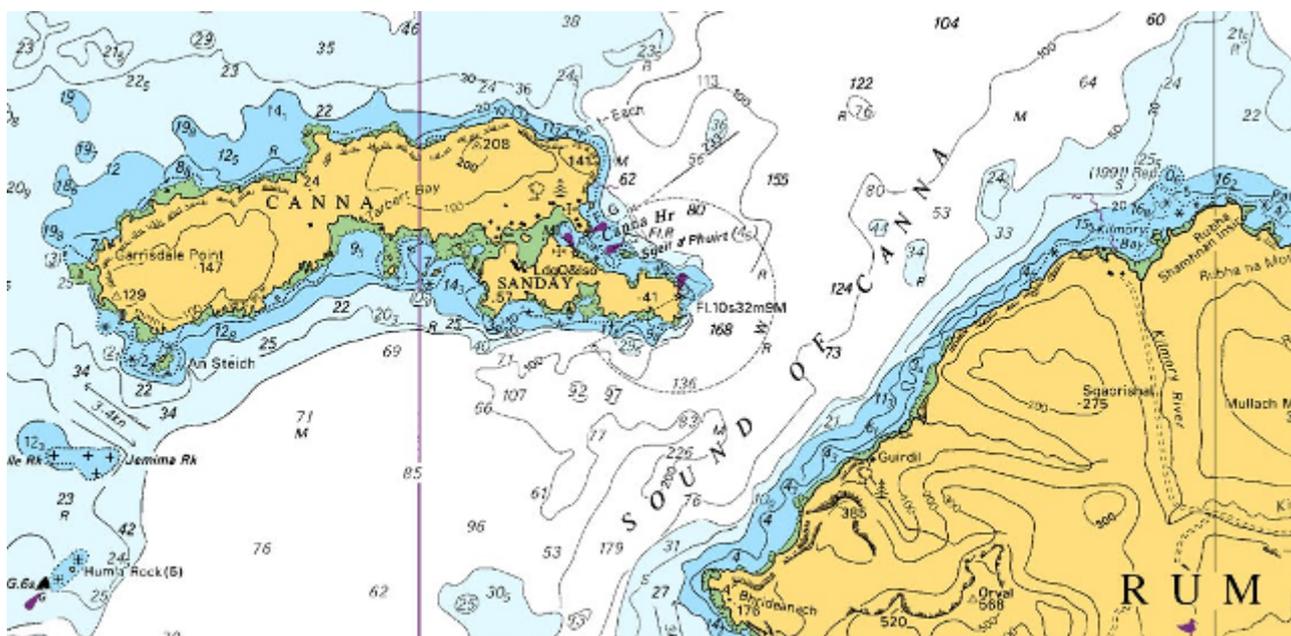
Getting all that equipment on board was an operation in itself, as we were near low water on a spring tide, and the decks of the Elizabeth "G" were probably four metres below the level of the quayside. Each piece of gear, and bag, had to be lowered down on a rope (kindly provided by the skipper, although I had foreseen this and had bought my own along as well). Unloading both cars, and finding a home for everything (including taking all the dry gear down to the lower decks, took the best part of an hour in the end.



Day One

We set off from Oban on time at 17:00 after all 12 guests were safely on board, and cars had been removed to wherever they were being parked for the week. The skipper, Rob Barlow, had decided that he wanted to get out to Canna (the westernmost of the Small Isles archipelago, in the Scottish Inner Hebrides) while the weather was still quite good, and the journey of 55Nm was expected to take about six hours. There was still plenty to do in terms of unpacking and setting up dive equipment, and our first three course dinner was had on the way.

We must have arrived at Canna after 11pm, but I didn't see it, being tucked up in my bunk long ago. As this part of the world is much further North and West of London, sunsets, even at this time of year, are an hour later than at home. My bedtime was prompted by not only the 04:00 start that day, but also because the crossing of the Sea of the Hebrides wasn't totally smooth, and I needed to get my sea-legs back. Keeping an eye on the horizon works well for me, but not when it's dark, so my bunk was found at about that time.



Day Two

Breakfast revealed that the weather was forecast to deliver North-Easterly gales for a short period as a weather system passed through, and the Skipper had decided that we would seek shelter on the South-West side of Skye for the day and do our checkout / shakedown dives there in moderate comfort.

Our first dive was a reefy sort of thing at "Rubh' an Dunain" at the end of a spit of land to the southwest of the Cuillin Hills on Skye. The five of us teamed up with Ron, a very sorted SAA diver from the West Midlands who was kind of on his own, although he did know another pair of divers on the trip. The remaining six were made up of two pairs from a couple of BSAC Branches on Tyneside, and a husband and wife team from Bath University.

There were two Inspiration / Evolution divers, two with KISS Classic rebreathers, and two with standard twinsets. The rest of us used single cylinders (some with pony cylinders on occasions) which appeared to be quite enough for 30 to 45 minute dive times to 20 to 30 metres or so in 9°C water temperatures.

The second dive of the day was meant to have been on the wreck of the "Doris" - ably described on Diver Magazine's website at [Wreck Tour: 39, The Doris](#). Sadly, the Skipper, despite pointing out that we had a slack period that afternoon of over 90 minutes, put us in while the tide was still running, and none of the 12

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divers got to see any of it. A bit of a missed opportunity, but it turned into a sunny, albeit rather windy late afternoon, and we settled down in the bay to the east of Neist Point for the night.



The picture above is a panoramic view from the anchorage at Neist Point looking to the North and East. The high point in the middle of the photograph is Waterstein Head at 293 metres above sea level.

Day Three

The boat was off to an early start with the objective of getting to St Kilda as soon as possible. The high winds from the previous day had abated, but there was still expected to be a bit of a swell coming from the North as we made our way over to St Kilda.

From Neist Point, we headed NNW towards the Sound of Harris, getting there in a couple of hours. Another hour saw us safely through the Outer Hebrides, and then the final part of the journey, 40 miles to Boreray, the first of the St Kilda Isles that we would be visiting.

The crossing was predictable, with a long swell of about 2 metres in height. The majority of UK liveaboards are old converted fishing boats, have a nasty tendency to roll quite a lot when they get seas on the beam. Many skippers try and counter this by filling their bilges with ballast, which lowers the centre of gravity, but also makes them sit lower in the water. The Elizabeth G was unusual in my experience in that she had active stabilisers, which worked superbly, reducing what would have been a considerable amount of rolling to only one or two degrees.

Having set off at about 07:00, we reaching Boreray in the middle of the afternoon, and had a fairly sheltered dive at Rubha Bhrengadal, (but one during which my drysuit neck-seal leaked), before heading back to the safe anchorage in Loch Hiort (Village Bay) on Hirta.

A second dive was done (not by me!) at the end of the afternoon, around the south side of Dùn away from the swell which was still a major influence on where we could dive.



Day Four

Well, the plan was for a normal wake-up and breakfast before heading out to Boreray to dive the submarine arch at Sgarbhstac. This is a deep dive in an exposed position, and so we set up pony cylinders and other instruments of destruction ready for the dive. As chance would have it, as soon as we put our nose round the corner and headed north-east past Rubha an Uisge, Rob decided that the swell would make the site at Boreray undiveable. The sea didn't appear vastly different to the photo on the last page.

Instead, we went round Dùn to the south-west side of Hirta to dive a pinnacle at "An Torc". The dive was manageable but generally uncomfortable, and we still hadn't managed to get out of the swell, and it persisted right down to the bottom of the pinnacle at 27 metres. Staying in one place was almost impossible for the whole dive, and taking close-up photographs proved to be a frustrating experience for Chris Higgins. We did however find possibly the biggest Crayfish that I had ever seen, with antennae easily spanning a metre or more.

The photos below are typical of what much of the rock faces were covered with at St Kilda. The sites are undoubtedly "high energy", and this attracts certain types of marine life. It would seem that the criteria needed in order to thrive here is an ability to stick to the rock like glue (which the kelp, and the anemones below have), and an ability to photosynthesis (kelp) or to snatch food out of the water as it flies by (the anemones). Not much else seems to have a chance! I apologise that these photographs aren't from St Kilda, as I didn't do any macro photography this trip, but are from Cornwall last year.



These jewel anemones seemed to be on every spare piece of rock in these high energy sites in St Kilda, making it all very colourful – something that you can only observe in a small handful of accessible offshore sites between Dover and Lands End.

Apart from these bits of marine life, some pretty tenacious red algae, and some sea urchins, the landscape was fairly barren at times without the proliferation of starfish that is sometimes seen.

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During the interlude between dives, the inflatable boat that lived on the top deck behind the wheelhouse was winched down into the water, and everyone was issued with proper lifejackets and ferried over to the jetty on the island for a walk-about. Well, everyone except myself, who chose to use the time to put my camera together ready for the next dive, having summoned up the courage to jump in the water holding it, rather than having it handed in, which we were told was impractical on a boat the size of the Elizabeth G.

Various small groups were observed to wander along the village street, while others such as Ted and Mickey additionally took the opportunity to climb up the only road on the island to heights of 200 / 250 metres above sea level to get a better view, and photographs, of the village from the top. The island has a full-time National Trust for Scotland Warden during the summer months, who greets passing visitors, and gives out advice on how and where to go, and mans a tiny shop for the odd souvenir of the island



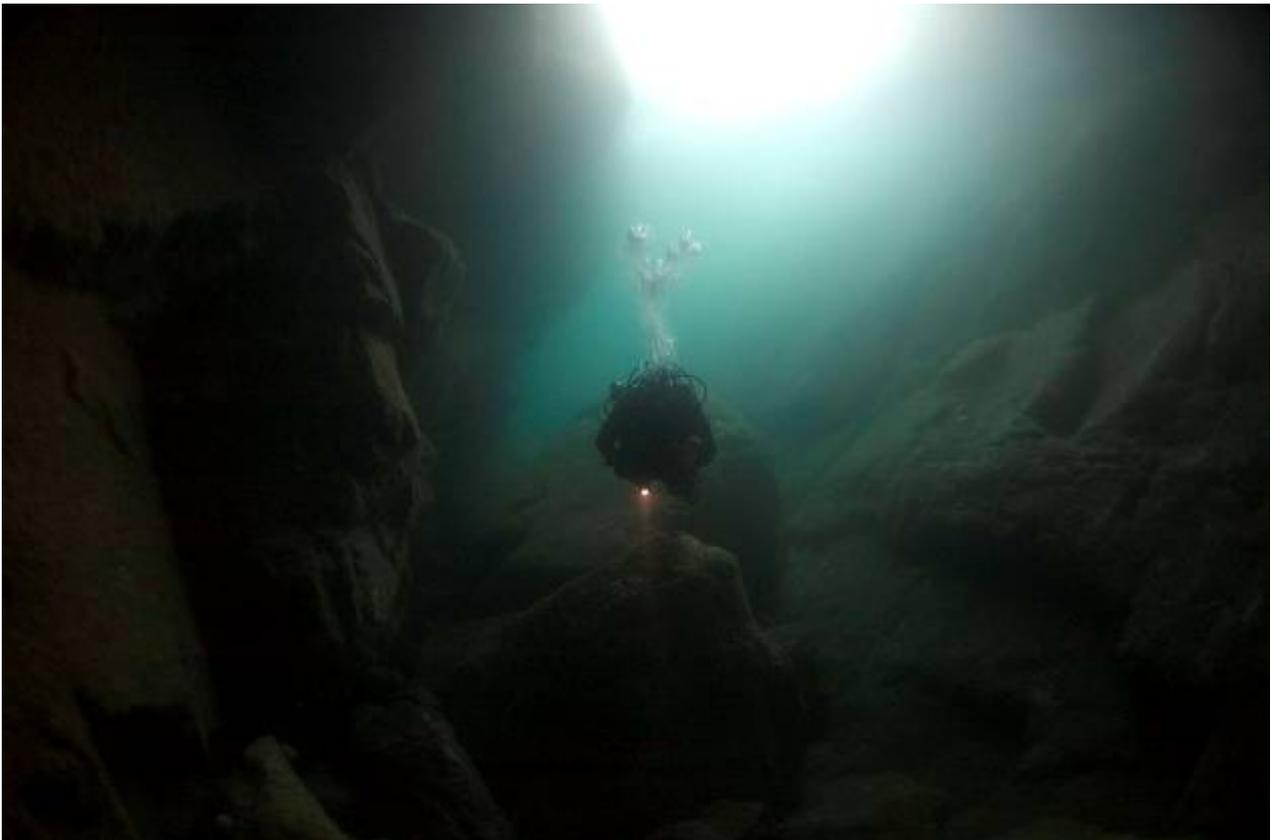
The following photograph is a panorama taken from the middle of Village Bay, running from North-West round to the East.



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The second dive of the day was at Cleite, noted as being on Hirta, but more likely to have been next to where the dive was the previous afternoon on Dùn at A' Chiasgeir. This was a swim through a rock tunnel, but one which was open to the surface for the whole of its length. It was a very light and pleasant dive, with little swell, and a great place to try out my recently assembled camera, along with a new filter for colour balancing green water.

Sadly this didn't work quite as well as I had expected, largely because the water at St Kilda isn't green in the same way that the water around most of the UK is, but is really nearer a blue colour. I should have used the blue water filters that I already had, and ended up instead having to colour correct the photos back again!



Nice though St Kilda was, it is still UK diving, and at 20 metres or more, in tunnels, there isn't a lot of natural light to go round however good the visibility is, and I needed to turn up the sensitivity of the camera, and use a very wide aperture in order to avoid terminal camera shake.

Day Five

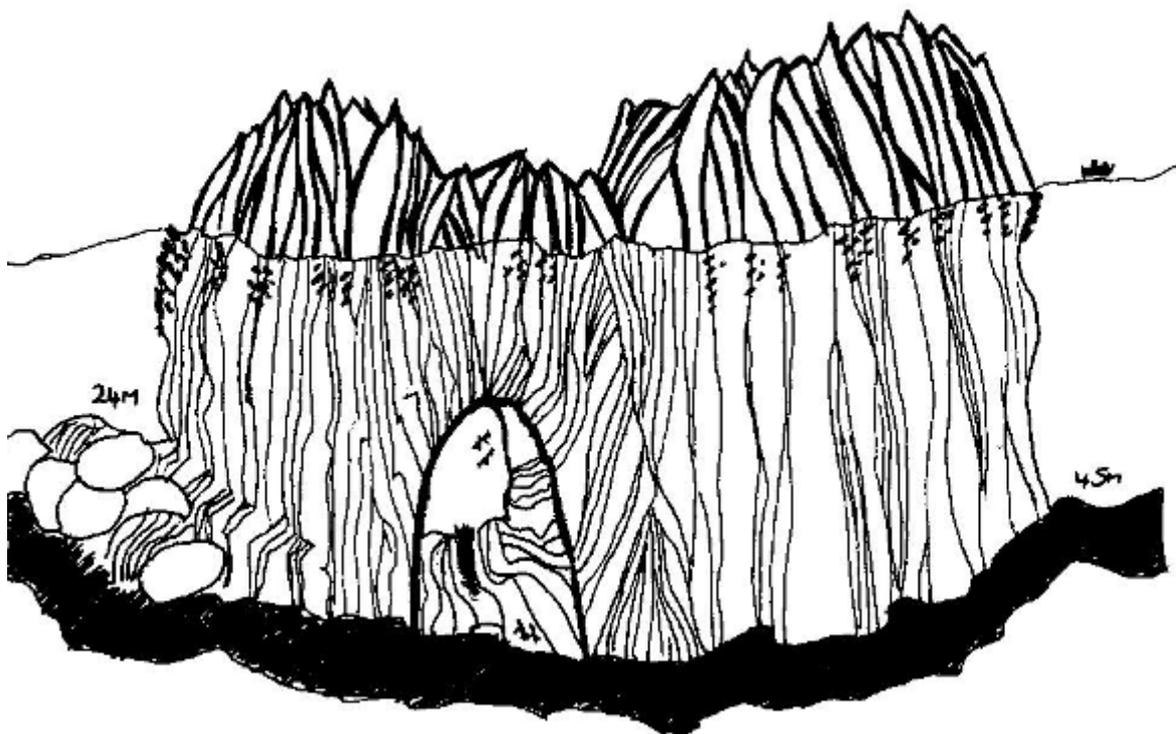
This started as a re-run of Day Four, except that the weather was a little kinder. When we got out of Village Bay, Rob decided that the swell was indeed manageable, and we motored off in the direction of Boreray. As the previous day, the intention was dive the submarine arch at Sgarbhstac, a long thin rock sticking out of the water just to the south of Boreray. To my mind this was certainly the signature dive of St Kilda, and I was determined to do it if it was at all possible. It is featured in Karen Gargani / Len Deeley's new book as "The ultimate arch dive", although I'm not sure that Karen Herself has done it, and it may have been Len.

St Kilda is not particularly well blessed with Dive Guides, although Simon Campbell mounted two expeditions to St Kilda in 2008 with a view to publishing a new guide to the islands. The only previous one was written by Gordon Ridley following an expedition to St Kilda in 1978, and which is now out of print and almost totally unobtainable. Luckily for us, Rob had a laminated copy on board the Elizabeth G, and we could see what all the fuss was about. The entry for the Sgarbhstac begins ...

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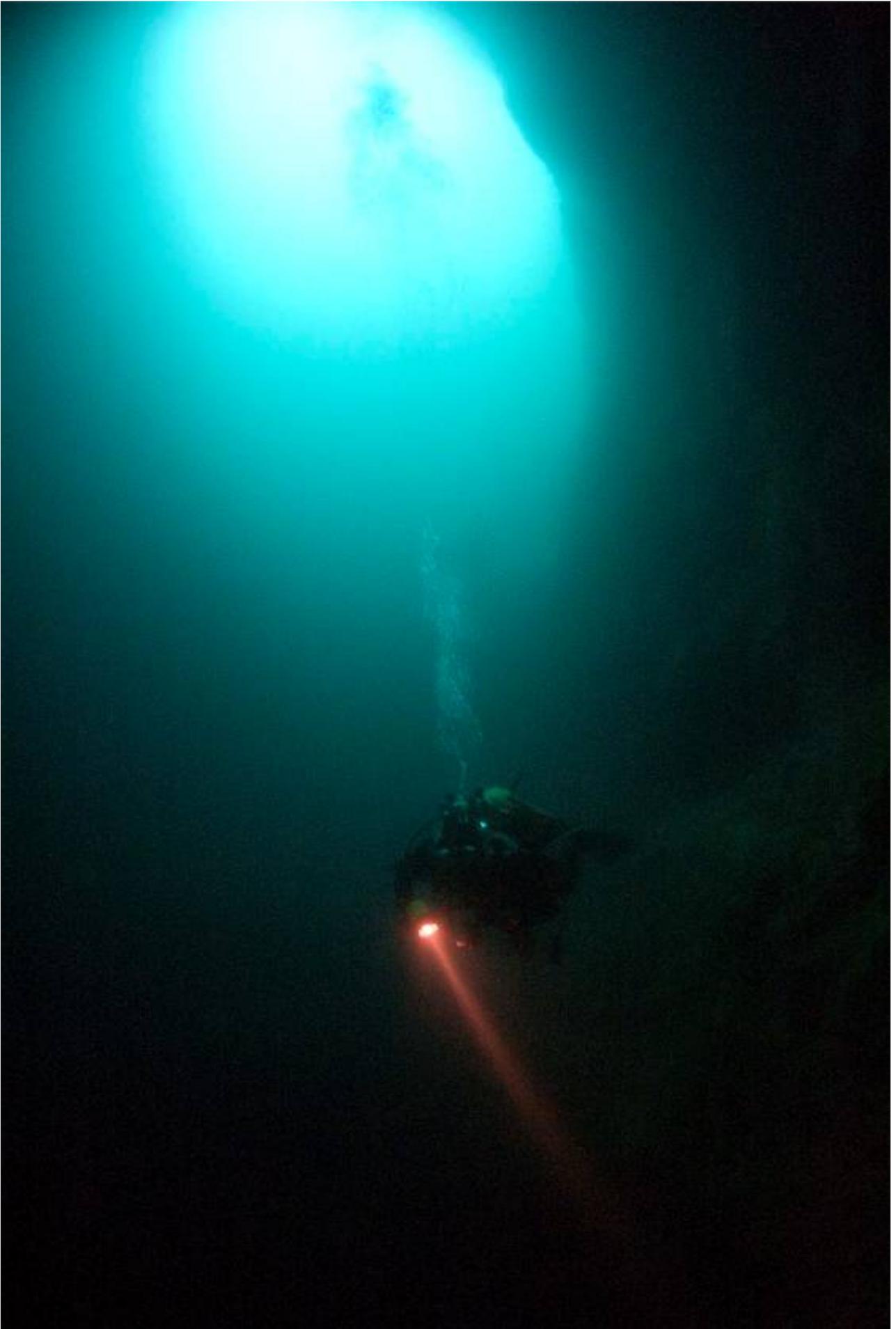
143 Sgarbhstac Submarine Arch NA15300452

Discovered in July 1977 by Dave Shuker and Alan Robbie, and first dived by Henry McInnes, Mourice Kilmister and Gordon Ridley the next day. This may be the ultimate underwater arch. It certainly provides one of St Kilda's finest dives. Some people have claimed this as the world's best dive site, but I think this is a little exaggerated, though very experienced divers have been seen surfacing in a state of some exhilaration. Seeing 9 tiny humans in 40m visibility gliding through the crystal clear blue waters of this vast gateway to St Kilda's underworld is an intense and quite unforgettable experience. In poor visibility and rough conditions this site would probably be terrifying. The apex of the arch is at a depth of 30m and it flares out to meet the sea bed at 50m. The arch is about 30m long and 20m wide with a broad geological dyke running along the base. The rock architecture is amongst the finest I have seen underwater. Seals swim through the arch and puffins surround the divers on occasions though there is no sighting of one going through the arch itself. The sides and roof of the arch are solidly lined with sponge, tubularia and anemones, and the life of the arch top traps pockets of glistening exhaled air.



On our dive the conditions weren't totally benign, and two of our party had decided not to dive it. The visibility was about 20m rather than an ideal 40m, and there certainly was still a considerable swell. It wasn't terrifying, but it was tricky. We were dropped off about 50m in front of the rock face and about 50m to the right of the entrance to the arch. The swell made descending down the rock face from the surface a poor decision, so a free descent was made about 30m from the cliff. A hastily set compass bearing at the surface made sure that we ended up in the right direction and, although last in the water, it seemed like everyone else followed us!.

We followed the briefing, taking a diagonal route down to the left to 33 metres where the outside wall simply stopped, and the arch appeared in front of us. Down at that depth, all the swell had gone away, and while it was very dark going through the arch, it was very quiet and serene. Chris had plenty of time to pose for a few photographs in extremely low light, which have come out as what I shall describe as "atmospheric".

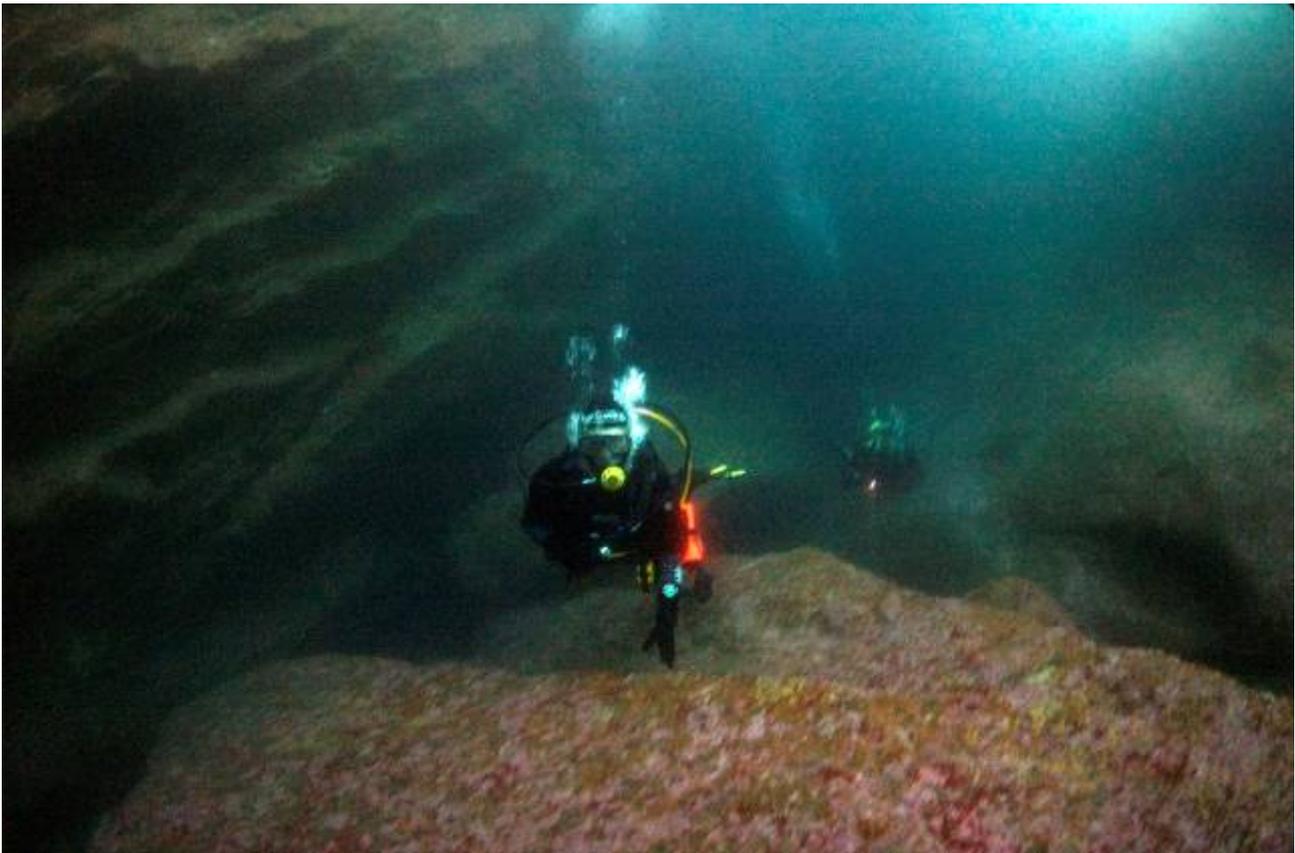


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After the dive, we stayed on Boreray, and stopped right under towering cliffs full of thousands of nesting gannets as the mist rolled in and started to sink spookily lower and lower down the cliffs.

Our second dive, a site called “Fat Boy’s Passage”, was another cave / tunnel / swim-through, but this time very much more “tunnel-ly” and one in which you could barely see without a torch at times. The way out was a thin tubular passage at about 9 metres that was subject to the usual swell, with the result that you were swished back and forth as you went through this 20m long tunnel, until you were ceremoniously spat out at the other end.

The photos again suffered from low light, long exposures and noise (ISO 1600), but the light was absolutely gorgeous as I hope you can see from the following photo from that dive



Back to Hirta, and the day was finished off with third dive on the south side of village bay, another dive in 20 metres under a high, vertical, north-facing cliff, at 6pm, and I wondered why there wasn’t any light around! I did get one taken of me, but you had to know it was me!

Day Six

This was the day in which we had to start sailing back to Oban, so an early morning dive was scheduled. The skipper wanted everyone to hit the water at 08:00 sharp, and although we did, few got the best out of the dive.

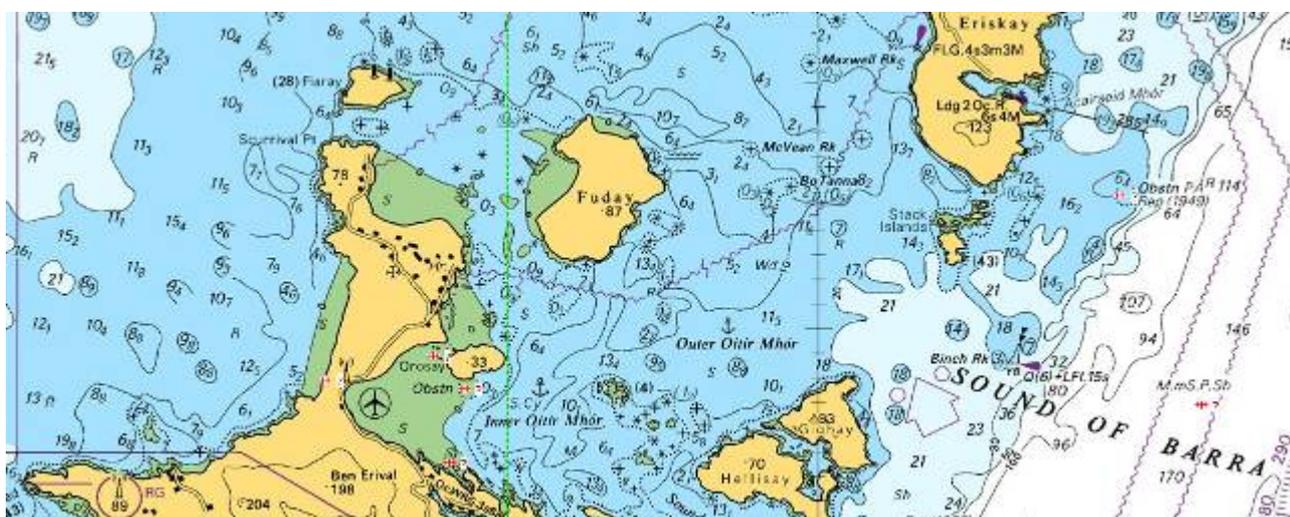
It should have been a very nice one, and was one of the more famous of the St Kilda dives, being known as “The Sawcut” at Dun. It is described as follows - *“The Sawcut consists of a vertical crack that cuts back some 60 metres into the solid rock face that makes up Dun Island. You are dropped close to the entrance and then swim into the narrow cleft dropping gently downwards until you reach the bottom at 32 metres. Exiting from the entrance, one comes across an area of huge boulders, covered in a rich layer of multi coloured jewelled anemones”*.

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Unfortunately on our dive, the ever-present swells had re-established themselves, and even dropping in on the rock wall near the sawcut, we experienced surges all the way down to 20 metres and more. One of our pairs got separated right at the start of the dive, and another did a bit of bouncing off the sides of the sawcut in the swell before giving it up as a bad job. Even the rufty-tuft, experienced St Kilda divers came out about as fast as they went into it, saying afterwards that it was no place to be in the conditions that we had. A great dive on a good day, something that we didn't have!

Off we set for home, with the mist / low cloud from the previous day considerably lower than it had been. The journey from St Kilda to Tobermory was estimated to take 12 to 14 hours, travelling 60Nm to the Sound of Barra, then a further 50Nm from there to Tobermory. There was a lot of "Are we there yet?", and even the Inspiration Divers finally got bored with fondling their kit.

The initial journey was considerably more comfortable than the early morning dive might have suggested, and there really was very little swell, but the fog started getting closer and closer until, going through the Sound of Barra, it was probably less than 300 metres. Every now and again a large island or rock would loom threateningly out of the fog. The passage through the Sound of Barra isn't a piece of cake in the first place, and the Skipper was having to make course changes about every 500 metres.



Strangely enough, once out into the Sea of the Hebrides, normally a pretty rough place to be, and one in which the Harry Slater rarely ventured, the sea calmed down completely, and the fog went away. We were accompanied for a while by groups from a large pod of Common Dolphins who were bow-riding, and leaping out of the water for probably a half-hour or so.

We made good time, and managed to moor up against the Coll Ferry on Tobermory Pier in good time to go ashore and grab a drink or two at the Mishnish before closing time, and unexpected and welcome diversion. The Mishnish looked much the same, with the exception that the lounge bar has now become a Champagne and Oyster Bar, which in itself is probably a very nice affair, appeared to be totally out of keeping with the more earthy, spit-and-sawdust character of the rest of it.

Before we went in for our drink, Ted and I had a short walk around the waterfront of Tobermory harbour, which seemed very quiet compared to how busy it used to get in the middle of the summer. I had one of those increasingly common, but nevertheless still frightening, moments when, as I came onto the Mishnish, I was pounced upon by a group of divers from a South London BSAC branch who came and thanked me for the advice that I'd given them recently about diving in the area, with one chap even claiming that I'd taught him a number of courses in the past. A quick pint of 80/- was required to settle my startled nerves before we found the rest of our party nestled in one of the snugs.

Day Seven

It would seem that the tides weren't really working for us, and the original day's plan was changed before breakfast, and we got up to find the boat motoring down to the bottom of the Sound of Mull ready to give us a 09:00 dive on the Thesis, a nice little wreck that I'd done many times before. The water nearer Oban was certainly a lot greener than that out at St Kilda, and not being hit directly by the Gulf Stream, probably a degree or two colder too. Certainly both of the dives on the last day were a good deal chillier than the ones earlier in the week.

The final dive was around Duart Point, underneath the Castle, on a rather rocky and muddy slope with the intention to allow the Tyneside hunter-gatherers to take some scallops home for tea.



Oban was only a short ride away after that, and there was just enough time to put all the dive gear away in its bags before we were tying up at the Railway Pier again.

The chain-gang approach to loading and unloading gear kicked into effect again, but a week's hard diving had obviously made us all fitter, and it seemed like less effort to move all the gear up from the boat to the quayside than it had been lowering it down at the start of the week. After a lot of posing for group photographs, we started our long journey back to Surrey and Sussex, getting home individually between one and two o'clock in the morning.

I felt decidedly out of sorts on the next day – sort of floaty and light-headed. I put this down to tiredness after the long drive, and that I hadn't eaten a proper evening meal on the journey back, but the feeling didn't go away. Speaking to Chris about it, he suggested that it might be the residual effect of living on the boat for a week (although it's something I've done many times before and never suffered anything similar). At his suggestion I took two Stugeron tablets (the normal dose for sea sickness) and all my problems went away!

At the end

It was undoubtedly a “Grand Adventure”, and the most of my expectations were met.

I admit that I was expecting to see seals, and while they were spotted by some, they weren't obvious. I was expecting to see more fish underwater, but there was no basis for that expectation, and reflecting on the fact that there can be up to 1.5 million seabirds nesting on St Kilda at any one time, perhaps it is surprising that there are any fish in its seas at all. I think that, on balance, I would have liked to have seen the Dolphins that, according to the crew, were playing with my SMB on my first dive at St Kilda!

Sadly, in the time available, you can only scratch the surface of what St Kilda has to offer. Gordon Ridley's book lists 150 or more dive sites at St Kilda, and we only managed to do eight of them along probably less than one tenth of the coastline. There were whole-day walks to be had (on a sunny day) for those so inclined, and whole days could be spent at sea just sitting under the cliffs watching the seabirds.

We were very lucky to have got there at all – many trips try and have to turn back, and the long sea crossings that we did were very comfortable and in seas that could have been far worse. Result!

So ... what's next?



Boreray from Hirta showing seas not dissimilar to those that we encountered at the start of Day Four

Photograph by Sue Scott/SNH/JHCC