

Diving Benbecula and the Outer Hebrides.

Richard Handy from Totnes branch of the BSAC recently led an expedition to the Outer Hebrides. So why go diving in the Outer Hebrides? Richard Handy explains.

Why Benbecula?

The dictionary defines an expedition as a journey with a purpose, and our purpose was to dive somewhere new! What better place to do that than Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides? This remote isle is off the west coast of Scotland, situated between North and South Uist and is about 8 hours steaming time from Oban by live aboard vessel. The more well known and remote island of St Kilda is further west and is a popular destination for live aboard trips, but some wonderful diving and hidden secrets are being missed by driving past the Uists. Of course, many divers have heard of the wreck of the SS Politician and its cargo of fine scotch whisky which was made famous in “Whisky Galore” by Compton Mackenzie. This ship was wrecked in WWII due to a navigation error in poor weather, and in both world wars the Uists were used as a route by shipping to avoid U-boats, as they make their way to the open Atlantic ocean. The narrow channels between the islands are a challenge to even the best navigator, and the potential to find other wrecks in this area is tantalising. There are also some exciting possibilities to explore the marine life and topography. The cool clear waters on the east coast of Benbecula can drop away quickly to depths in excess of 100 m in places, with many pinnacles and walls to explore for marine life.

How did we get there?

Probably the best way to get 12 divers and their kit to the Outer Hebrides is by chartering a live-aboard vessel from Oban. The weather can be changeable, and with many rocky islets and drop-offs to explore, this approach offers maximum flexibility. Our expedition live-aboard was the “Elizabeth G” from Northern Lights Charters, Duror of Appin, Argyll (<http://www.nothernlight-uk.com/>). The boat was excellent for the task, with room on the fore-deck for our plethora of twin sets, rebreathers, and helium cylinders! Air and nitrox were available on board. We mixed our own trimix, and thanks to Allen Murray of Totnes Branch, we also ran the new BSAC gas blender course at the same time. The vessel came with some crew who also made sure the team were well fed on some excellent Scottish fare (yes, we did try haggis!). The lounge doubled up as dive planning area and chart table (we also taught a chart work and position fixing course on the expedition). A good skipper with some local knowledge of the prevailing weather and tides is essential. Our brilliant skipper (Rob Barlow) worked hard in some poor weather conditions to help us achieve our goals.

[Figure 1 near here]

Unknown Wreck off Benbecula

An unknown wreck is charted at 46 m just to the east of Benbecula on the admiralty chart. The hydrographic office report indicates a steamship (52 m long x 13 m beam) intact and upright in a general depth of 55m, with a single mast and haystack boiler, identify unknown. The actual depth on the wreck was 53-4 m on the wreck with a few places where the seabed reached 56 m, and it was therefore planned as a trimix dive. The wreck is partly buried in the sand with only a 2 or 3 m clearance, and is covered in hydroids. The slack

window was limited, but generally follows the tides in the Minch. The wreck appeared to be a schooner with an iron hull and small steam boiler, and indicated this was probably a “hybrid” ship showing the transition from sail to steam, or perhaps an early steamship although there were no large boilers to be seen. We later recovered some medicine bottles which dated around the 1890s and a makers plate from one of the posts on the ship indicating a shipyard in Germany that was active around the early 1900s. We are currently investigating this and will hopefully have an identity to the vessel soon. There was evidence of charring on the forward section, perhaps suggesting the ship was lost to fire?

[Figure 2 near here]

SS Treverbryn

This wreck is report off South Uist and seems to have never been dived. This ship (4163 tons) was built in 1910 by J. Readhead & Co. The ship was reported to have struck a mine and sunk about 2 miles E.S.E from Ushinish Lighthouse, South Uist. The mine was probably laid by the German submarine U-75. We steamed out to the expected position of the SS Treverbryn, and after a systematic grid search, found the wreck in 75 m of water, with the top of the wreck at 64 m. We completed several passes over the wreck to get a good sounding of this huge ship. Having found the wreck, we planned to do a trimix dive the next morning. Unfortunately, the weather was against us at this exposed site and conditions were not safe enough for the long decompression stops required. Expedition diving can be about making judgement calls between adventure and expedition safety, and on balance this one will have to wait for the next trip with better weather!

Wall Dive on Lairday Glas, Loch Skipport

The chart shows many small islets around the headlands of lochs that rest on steep reefs or walls on the east of Benbecula and South Uist. We were spoilt for choice and selected to do an exploratory wall dive at Lairsay Glas near Loch Skipport. To our knowledge this rocky islet had not been dived before. We dived around slack. This was a high energy site with a small sandy bay in the middle of the seaward side of the island. The depths in the bay are around 10-15m, and it is a convenient point to drop the divers in the water whilst allowing a safe turning circle for a hard boat. We headed north keeping the island on our right shoulder, and the sand (which was full of sand eels and flatfish) quickly gave way to complex gullies, and then a steep wall down to 30 m. The wall starts at about 20 m and is sheer to 30 m in several places with a boulder field and more gullies at the bottom. The wall was covered in deadman's finger, urchins, seasquirts, and anemones. Cockoo and Ballen wrasse were noted on the wall, and other fish including saithe and lesser cod. The water was clear, and the morning sun gave a lot of light to explore the rock face. The rock wall returned to a steep boulder slope on the NE corner of the island, and the kelp in the shallows harboured a variety of crustaceans. Dogfish were also seen. The surface swell can be significant on parts of the wall, and divers need to swim away from the wall when surfacing for maximum comfort. This dive was a fantastic example of the local marine life and topography.

[Figure 3 near here]

Diving the Isle of Canna

There are several other islands to visit, going to or from Benbecula, and dive guides are somewhat sparse on recorded dive sites on many of the islands in the Outer Hebrides. There is little diving reported on the Isle of Canna, and we decided to dive the north side of the island at a new site. This long thin island lies E-W, and the north shore gives a good dive in strong southerly winds. We did a detail search along the north shore using side scan sonar, alas no wrecks appeared, but we did find a series of interesting parallel reefs running out from the shore that were not marked on the chart. The depth soundings on the chart proved inaccurate in this area, with the water being 10 meters deeper than the 12 m charted depth in several places. We did some scenic dives on the reefs to record the site. The sand was very coarse, and the water was crystal clear (even in poor weather). The reefs met the sand at about 20 m, and were covered in life. The top of the reefs had some thin kelp cover which attracted the fish life. A variety of white fish were schooling above us during the dive, and dense shoals of sand eels were seen on several occasions in the sand. It was like diving in an aquarium! The rocks were home to jewel anemones, light bulb sea squirts, hydroids, urchins, and a variety of crabs. Overall, a rewarding scenic dive was had.

Bad Weather Options: The Isle of Skye

The weather can blow up quickly, and Benbecula offers little shelter for a live aboard vessel in strong easterly winds. A safe anchorage for the night and some diving can be found in Loch Bracadale on the Isle of Skye. The dramatic scenery of the Isle of Skye in storm conditions was reward enough, and the diving was certainly excellent for a “plan B” with a number of walls and slopes to explore. We elected to dive the NW corner of Wiay island in Loch Bracadale which remained safe to dive in the lee of the storm. The water was cold and clear, and this was a typical low energy site on the west coast of Skye with a kelp line that quickly gives way to boulder slope. The rocks on the slope were home to numerous squat lobsters and Norwegian lobsters (*Nephrops species*), and there were some bright pink and yellow bryozoans growing on the rocks in places. Divers can drop into 10 m at the top of the slope and pick their own depth, reaching sand at 27 m. Swimming north or north west along the slope gives the most interesting dive. There is an abundance of queen scallops in the sand. In the shallows we also saw several different sorts of plankton, including a large swarm of small squid only a few millimetres long each. We were diving towards dusk and clearly this bay would seem to be nursery area for several types of marine life. On surfacing, divers are rewarded with a view of the mountains; Macleod’s table behind them, and a view across to the Cuillin hills which were brilliantly lit by flashes of lightning in the distance. Nothing short of spectacular! Anchorage further in Loch Bracadale also gives the opportunity to visit the famous Talisker distillery, which was only a short walk from our moorings.

Overall, the expedition objectives of diving new sites was achieved, and this was done along with some diver training. The team are to be commended for showing adaptability, careful and safe dive planning, in what can only be regarded as some of the worst possible weather for this time of year. The team left smiling, and I would like to extend my personal thanks to the divers, and the skipper and crew of the Elizabeth G. The expedition opened the door on a plethora of other dive sites, and this unfinished business means we need another BSAC expedition to dive these. So, if you fancy the challenge of diving somewhere new, contact Richard Handy!

Expedition Planning and support: To get the best out of your expedition, some research on dive sites, tides and weather are needed. The BSAC website has an expedition resource: (<http://www.bsac.org/page/509/grants-scheme.htm#top>). We would like to acknowledge the support of the BSAC expedition grant scheme and support from 155 Transport Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps, of which Corporal Ivor Farrell is a full time serving member and attended the expedition as his annual Adventurous Training activity.

Photograph library and dive sites: More technical details on the dive sites, slacks, and photographs of the marine life can be found on the Totnes branch website (www.totnes-bsac.co.uk).

Figure 1: Preparing dive kit on the Elizabeth G (upper panel) and gas blending on deck (lower panel). Photographs from Allen Murray.



Figure 2. Artefacts from the unidentified “steamer” off Benbecula. Medicine bottles (upper panel) and brass post with makers plate (lower panel). Photographs from Allen Murray.



Figure 3. Example marine life on the wall at Lairsay Glas, Loch Skiport. Light bulb sea squirts (upper panel) and sunstars (lower panel). Photographs from Malcolm Nimmo.

