

## EXPEDITION REPORT

Severnside Sub Aqua Club - Expedition to Monach Isles 18<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> October 2009

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## What could possibly go wrong?

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### SUMMARY

This had been a very quickly planned and expedited expedition as the result of an initial idea from Andy Torbet and Stu Keasley combined with an almost throw away suggestion again from Andy Torbet.

The success of the trip was due in no small part to the skill of the group, the fortuitous failings of initial plans and the support that a club structure can provide to such expeditions, and once there, an atypical weather window.

Due to the weather not a huge amount of diving was accomplished, but the 13 dives we managed did amass 11hrs 15mins underwater, identify a fabulous drop off and natural underwater amphitheatre and get some good underwater footage of wild seal interaction with divers. Though given the predictions of the weather in October on these islands we were very lucky to get that much time underwater.

We were also able to identify some other potential dive sites and spent a fabulous week of semi isolation and closeness with nature and were witnesses to a rare event that few divers get to see.

### THE IDEA

Andy Torbet, who had recently joined the club and was lamenting the fact that a planned project to visit the Monach Isles



during the Grey Seal breeding season would have to be shelved due to their boat failing to materialise. A conversation then followed something like this:

Andy M - Shame that you had not joined the club earlier and become an approved boat handler as you could have used one of the club boats

Andy T – Thanks mate that makes me feel a lot better

Andy M - Of course if you have room for one more then we could make it happen,

Andy T – If the club will allow it you're in

- the rest as they say is now history.

There was room for one more as the accommodation could sleep four and an additional body would make diving and logistics that bit easier and safer.

So when had you planned on going up there? 18<sup>th</sup> October, that's two weeks away!!!

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Logistically we had to move quickly, quick chats with DO, EO and Chair, gave the OK as long as any boat handlers were club members, which again was fortuitous as Martyn McGrath a well lapsed BSAC member (and Diver Cox instructor and AI) was also on the trip and had been thinking of joining one of the local Bristol clubs, perfect opportunity. There was a short discussion as to should we open the trip up to the whole of the club, as was typical with our trips, however the accommodation was limited to four, and the initial logistics had been planned around a small group. While initially there had been plans to camp as well, we decided against it for this first trip, thank heavens ☺.

However this would be a good opportunity to sound out the location for a bigger group from the club to go next year, maybe in the summer when the weather is better and the island is in full bloom, less seals but the resident population is still there.....

## **LOGISTICS**

The islands have been uninhabited since the early part of the century and all but one building has fallen into disrepair. The former school house is now run by a trust and has three rooms and a kitchen. One of the rooms being used by local fishermen, who during the summer months, fish for lobsters around the islands. One of the rooms is only used by the trust and the thirds is available to rent. There is no electricity and no mains water supply; however the kitchen is fed by a rainwater storage system, big tank and tap into the kitchen. The kitchen does have a gas cooker fed by propane cylinders however there are no lights

So the creature comforts would have to be taken with us,

- Generator, to recharge filming batteries and dive equipment
- Portable compressor
- All food for the stay
- All fuel for the week
- Solid fuel for the fire – peat and coal

Plus we would have to get film gear over for topside and underwater filming along with 4 sets of dive gear, spare suits and dry gear.

While in theory we could run back to the mainland for any additional supplies, we also needed to take account that the weather may not have let us

We planned on having to do three crossings to get all equipment over to the island unless we could pay a local fisherman who was going out to the islands to take our gear across for us, however here timing was against us all of the local fishermen had lifted their pots at the end of September and moved to long lining on the EAST side of Uist, or so we had been told.

Our other challenge was where to launch as the West coast of Uist is open to the full Atlantic Ocean and has a fair tidal range to boot, we identified through the assistance of a new BSAC club on North Uist two possible slipways that we could use, Stinky Bay, closest to the Monachs but exposed to a big south westerly, with a sea crossing of 8nm, or Kallin harbour around the top of North Uist and sheltered from all winds and usable in all states of the tide, but a 14-16nm trip. Stinky was the first choice with a poor weather alternative being Kallin harbour.

## **THE PLAN**

As fortune would have it the club was already running an expedition up to Oban the week before and both trips would benefit from the overlap. We would collect and save having to tow up and they would not have to tow back

The full plan and risk assessment can be found in the supporting pre expedition plan.

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### THE MONACHS

Date	Time	Event	Remarks
Sat 17 Oct	2200	Leave Bristol	Pick UP boat in Oban?

Both vehicles had been loaded earlier in the day and we left independently at about 22:20. The decision to leave late at night was soon to prove sound as we hit numerous road works on the M5 and 6 which had we met earlier in the day would have added probably 2hrs to the northbound journey.

Bar a rendezvous for fuel and a chance to grab some food it was non stop driving till we arrived at Oban. Driving was taken in turns with drivers swapping as soon as the nodding dog syndrome appeared.

Sun 18 Oct	1415	Catch Ferry	
	1600	Arrive Uist	
	1630	Recce launch RV with local seaman	

We arrived at Puffin Diving in a *heavy* Scottish *mist*, that required quick donning of water proofs as it was accompanied by a *light* Scottish *breeze*, to be met by Sean SSAC EO, who had stayed overnight to enable us to do a smooth boat pick up before his return back to Bristol and we continued up north

We arrived at Uig ferry terminal at 12:30, perfect timing after a spectacular crossing of the Sky Bridge and North Skye, resplendent in autumnal colours.

Well we had arrived North Uist, rendezvoused with Lee Coleman, our source on Uist, who also runs a general store, has his own compressor and O2. We stocked up on perishables and coal for a few days. We were also given a bag of peat as it is not allowed to be sold, but each local is allowed to cut for their own use.

Then it was off to the Langass Lodge - Restaurant [www.langasslodge.co.uk](http://www.langasslodge.co.uk)

The owner, Niall Leveson Gower has lived on North Uist since he was ten months old, and is also a diver and supplies fresh scallops, shore dived in 6m of water from the lochs on the east coast of Uist. Well worth a visit especially as they are one of the few places open on a Sunday evening for food.



Then it was off for an early night before the crossing. Not before what was to become a regular late evening conversation with Stornoway Coastguard about the weather for the following day and short range forecast, SE 34 increasing 5-6 gusting 7, that was to be a regular forecast as well ;-)

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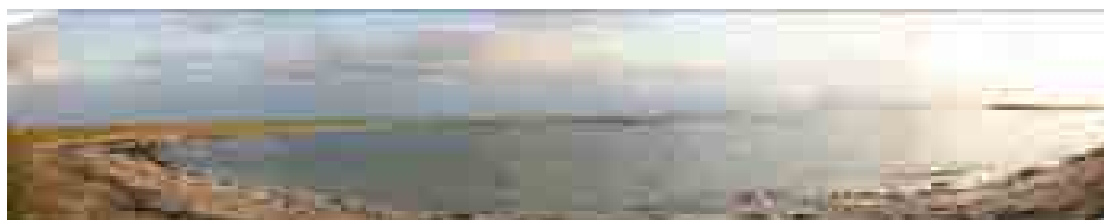
<b>Mon 19 Oct</b>	0800	Start move to Monachs	
	1600	Complete in Monachs	

We were up for 06:30 and away for 7:15 as we wished to catch as much of the high tide as possible but had also to wait for daylight.

The predicted SE was there but only a 2-3, so we were keen to make our first crossing as soon as possible. The slipway at Stinky Bay is interesting in that it is at the END of a long narrow jetty. After some initial attempts at reversing the now loaded SeaBiscuit down the jetty, it was decided that it would be far quicker and easier to push it down by hand, and indeed this took less than a couple of minutes compared to the 10 minutes of futile positioning that had preceded the unhitching.

The plan was to run over with the first load, drop Stuart off to do some initial filming while we had good light then come back and do the two remaining runs. So with all strapped in and in a lumpy sea we edged out of the bay and with a broadly following sea did the 8 miles in just under 30 minutes, on the other side we took a little while to identify the correct bay and again crept into the beach to un load and then the two Andy's had a bouncy but fast ride back, in a sea that was noticeably messier now that we had a full spring ebb tide against the wind. We were also glad that we found that we could get all of the remaining equipment in the next run. So parking up the vehicles and trailer, left the mainland in what was now a good 3-4 but still with the wind with us and the tide slackened enough that the crossing was even faster than the first one.

We unloaded on a beach that had cows with pups all along the beach with the bull coming up to keep a watchful eye on our antics from the safety of the waters edge. We had planned for a high water arrival to avoid humping gear too far and to ensure that we could launch from the slip at Stinky which had a significant step at low water.



Over the week the seals on this beach became used to us and tolerated us coming quite close. But initially as soon as they saw us they would head for the water with surprising speed such that at times their whole bodies were off the ground, not bad for something coming in at between 200 and 300 kg. Once in the water they would make a huge V wave in the shallows, list like a torpedo, till they were in the safety of slightly deeper water, where upon they would watch us with the curiosity of puppy dogs and heads that show the connections between the two.

The islands are home to seals all year round, however in October, the Monachs become one of three major breeding sites for the Grey Seal, when between 20 and 30,000 seals come to the islands



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Interestingly the cows would desert their pups very quickly as we got close, the exception being the pups that were less than a day old, here the mum's would let you know that you were not welcome and would hiss and show a good set of teeth. Those that have seen seals close up will know that they have a set of teeth that are bigger than an Alsations, and we were to learn later in the week just how strong these are.

Fortunately we found a couple of wheelbarrow, one a homemade job and the other rusty but functional, so that after only an hours hard graft all of the equipment, with the exception of the compressor and the spare boat fuel, was shifted the 500m from the beach to the schoolhouse.



Well ahead of schedule we decided to scout the island, we had hoped to also scout out some initial dive sites, but the forecast 5-6 had arrived and any thoughts of exploring the coastline were postponed, however we were here and we able to explore and look for sites from landside and explore this the largest of the five isles on foot.

So as it was by now low tide the inner mooring on the spring was dry so it was checked for later in the week when it would be usable in all states and we waded out and checked the deepwater one which at the bottom of the spring was just under two metres. As with the first there were multiple heavy chains secured to a heavy hawser. A second yoked bowline was set up and SeaBiscuit was secured and all gear strapped in for the impending wind.

Fortunately the rocks in the bay that are a hazard to easy navigation also provide a very effective break and so even in the biggest seas, except a E 8 the bay is relatively sheltered.

The islands are quite amazing in their construction, in that they are a group of rocks that are on the edge of a drop into deeper water. The crossing had us in no more than 20m of water the average being only 14. These rocks then which at their heist point are only 17m above sea level, have also formed the base for some huge sand dunes which form the majority of the two main islands, but there are also pebble beaches where the pebbles vary in size from cricket ball ones up to ones you can only just lift. This in an island that is only 1mile by ½ a mile long. The next which is joined by a sand bar that dries at low tide is the same, where the other three are primarily rock outcrops, the west most one being the Shillay Light house rocks, which we were also keen to dive as they from the chart we had seen also offered the potential for deeper dives and should offer some wall diving.

So weighed down with film and camera gear Stu and Andy T set off in one direction while Martin and Andy M were lightly loaded with a camera a piece in two others.

As we wandered along the shorelines care had to be taken for as you broke the skyline so the ever watchful seals would be away into the water causing a chain reaction that rippled down the beach till the safety zone was reached and the remainder just became alert, or continued just snoozing.

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Each bay or part of the longer beaches would be covered with cows and pups or pups on their own with mothers out feeding, with the dominant bull of the area patrolling his patch and seeing off any interlopers. The plan was simple a slow approach to any bay or beach and try and crawl to the edges of the beaches to then lay unobserved observing the variety of goings on. Just as from the sea every bay rocky or sand was full of seals. One wonderful sight was on the western side, a sand beach that must have been just over a kilometre in length, coined Long Beach, that was covered by seals as far as the eye could see, with occasional flashes of orange or yellow from the buoys large, very large and small forming the majority of the flotsam that along with other plastic waste discarded by humans litters these otherwise pristine shorelines



Soon the light was starting to go and we decided to break early and have a good meal before an early start and hopefully some time underwater.

Large portions of spaghetti bolognaise with fresh mince was soon being devoured and plans for diving and shore based work were taking shape. With darkness at 19:00 and limited light in the room, headlights, we all agreed that an early night was in order, being in bed by 21:30 with alarms set for 06:30. The last

planning action was the nightly call to Stornoway CG, with the news that the wind was due to increase for the next day, but that it would be fine and sunny. So the plan was simple, morning two Stu and Andy T would do topside filming and if the seas would let us out of the bay Andy M and Martin would explore what should be the sheltered side of the islands looking for sites

20-Oct

Tuesday

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Alarms went off at 06:30 and the kettle and porridge were on shortly, anyone venturing outside was initially lulled by the lack of wind till we stepped out of the lee into the strong SE that was buffeting us.

Plan was simple it was a clear sky so land based filming would be on, as soon as it was light enough we would check the boat and if navigable would venture round and into the lee of the North of the Island

Breakfast over and wandering down to the bay as the sun was now well up in a clear sky, we could hear the ever present cries of the seal pups wanting feeding and the occasional calls from the flock of barnacle geese that were on the island together with the startled calls of snipe as we walked across the grass disturbing them. By the time we got to the boat the wind had eased to a 3, so fine for us to explore but pointless trying any topside filming. Fins having been left in the boat and it being high tide meant that Andy M had to flap his way out to the boat, this was clearly to the amusement or bemusement of the seals of the bay, for after their initial flight into the water as we got to the beach they followed Andy all the way out the boat, at one point surfacing between his legs. Clearly they were intent on having fun and we surmised that these were probably local to the island and therefore reasonably used to seeing people, albeit not floundering in the water quite like this one

Once on board we steered a course very slowly out of the bay for we had seen at low water the quantity of rocks that made this both a safe haven and a challenge for the unwary.

Our mission was to spot the Bulls resting beach. A given dominant bull can only claim a territory for so long before they take a break or are beaten off the beach by a fresher stronger bull. As a result they congregate and chill, typically in large groups together with the adolescent males. This should be fairly easy for us to spot from the boat. For our plan was to dive close to these areas, in the hope that their natural inquisitiveness and lack of pups would lead to some good underwater footage and interaction with divers.

We did not have to wait long before we spotted what was clearly the male area, the white beach black with the closely packed bulls where either side the beach was strewn with pups and cows in far less packed concentrations but still hundreds of them.

Our plan was to see how close we could get before they were spooked to understand how far we would have to swim in to them in full gear. We got to within 100 m of the shore before the alarm went up and they entered the water, however unlike the females these were adolescents and were far far more inquisitive as we turned to move further off shore so we realised that they were coming out to check us out, so we were in fact able to get within 20m of the shore with seals all around us, as we gently moved up the coast so they followed us just like a pack of hounds easily keeping up with our slow pootle and porpoising along for the fun.





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We decided that we had clearly found a good area and made note of the location to come back and dive as soon as the seas would let us. In the now freshening SE Bull point as we had named it was uncomfortable to dive and was shallow 6m such that the swell would make filming or camera work impossible.

As we moved around the island we came across pot markers, literally as the line on them was floating on the surface for 10's of metres. Having cleaned one with the prop, we moved a little slower, but also noted that this was still very close to the bulls and a number had followed us and clearly should be good ground for some fresh lobster together with a bit more depth, 15-18m, another potential site logged.

We also noted and commented on the fact that all of the pot markers were polystyrene rather than plastic, which was surprising as we had all already commented on the huge numbers of hard plastic buoys that were all along the shore line, together we hoped with some good inflatable buoys to salvage.

As we moved around the North of the island and headed to what would be the now flooded causeway, we expected to find calm water, and indeed we did, along with a long slow swell coming from the North. This completely surprised us as it seemed to be against the prevailing wind which had been blowing now for three days. So our hopes of finding some sheltered and calm dive sites were dealt a bit of a blow, given that the size of this swell would mean that 6m down we would be bouncing around like corks.

However we continued to explore up the coastline, noting that just as before the high sand dunes seemed to pose no barrier to the seals as they were clearly visible on the tops of the dunes as well as all along the shore, be it on sand or rock if there was a flat space then there was a seal or seal and pup on it. All the time we had an escort or three or four seals who were checking us out, checking them out.

We had agreed to rendezvous RV back at the schoolhouse for 13:00 to plan the afternoon and a spot of scoff. So moving off shore we opened up and zipped back towards our bay.

The decision was simple we had no lee shore that was not either exposed to the SE winds or the Northerly swell, so as the sun was bright and there were no clouds filming topside was favourite, with the plan for the afternoon, quickly became a yomp with full camera gear to the far end of the island to look down from the sand dunes onto Bull Point we were after general shots but also keen to identify and record, Bulls fighting, Mating and if possible a birth. We had already noted some very young pups downy white with the remains of the umbilical still pink and fresh.

The seals mating process is interesting in that there is only a short period when the females are in season and it is just after they have abandoned their pups to fend for themselves, it is then that the dominant male try's his luck. Just like typical males they also try their luck when ever they can, only to be met by a fierce reprisal and a fearsome set of female teeth.

So all loaded up and dressed for protection from the stiff SE that had now got up we set off to Bull Point. As we approached the flat lands of the central strip gave way to ever increasing sand dunes. All over the island we noted that the hard plastic buoys were laid on the surface or lodged in depressions slowly being covered with sand, becoming part of the island. We were still intrigued as to why these had not been salvaged and used by the fishermen, we also commented on the fact that the wind truly



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must be gale force for the majority of the winter and much of the summer to move these buoys so far inland.

As we got closer to what we thought was the landward side of Bull Point, we came across cows and pups on the inside of these huge sand dunes, clearly seeking the refuge of the shelter from the winds on the beach to pup. Martin and Andy M had noted and commented



on the fact that the seals appeared to go well inland on the other island, it was still a surprise to see them so far in having climbed these significant dunes. A short break to film these before pushing on to the top of the dunes to be rewarded with a view down onto the Bulls being bulls,

which for most of the time meant lying there doing nothing. The occasional play fight between adolescents and an occasional disagreement between larger males, but most of the time, just laying about and chilling. The strong SE wind whipped over the top of the dunes driving the coarse white sand into faces and cameras and any exposed clothing gap it could find. It also sculpted miniature sand sculptures in the dunes.



That evening we soon fell into what was to become a familiar routine for the next few nights. Stu had taken up evening residence in the fishermans room. We had called ashore and gained permission to use the room for storage of all of the film gear and had been welcomed

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to use as we liked. This was great as we would have in fact struggled to get all of the gear in the single room otherwise. The generator was fired up again and batteries were soon again on charge. With hindsight and the gene being so economical we would again take some electric lights to give us additional evening light, but the head torches and the gas lamps made for an atmospheric ambience. The routine was Stu reviewing footage that he had shot during the day, however today Stu was somewhat elated as he had bagged one of the prime pieces of footage we are after, full on mating, captured in full Technicolor, or should that be HD, but that's another whole and very long discussion. The others fettling gear and preparing the evening meal. There was evidence of little unwanted guests in the kitchen so we soon had two little nippers borrowed from the Fishermans room and baited with chocolate set for overnight.

During the meal we reviewed the media plan and decided upon the refined schedule for the next day. The now regular call to our friendly Stornoway CG, predicted a calmer morning getting wet and possibly windy in the afternoon, ie increasing back up to a 4-5 SE. So the plan was topside land based filming again while we dived the locations we had identified in the morning to see if they would actually work.

The other evening event after the meal became the uploading of RAW images onto Stu's laptop and backup external storage, followed by reviews and technique tips for the following days stills. We had had an impromptu tips session just after lunch and the three of us benefited from Stu's advice in the setting up of our Cameras in RAW mode and the use of manual rather than automatic camera settings. The results were impressive in that we all started to take better photographs. So each night the efforts would be reviewed and more encouragement and tips given. We were all looking forward to getting some similar improvements in our underwater shots.

Then again it was an early lights out this time without Andy T in the room, being a very light sleeper as a result of his former life the snorers amongst us kept him awake, Stu had taken to ear plugs to resolve the noise, though in the final analysis we decided that the only non snorer was in fact Andy T.

21-Oct     Wednesday

We were greeted after breakfast in the dark, to a glorious sunrise and a sea that was calm with little wind. And the little nippers had caught their first victim, the other trap having gone off and bait missing, rearmed this time with bread they were left for the day.

Plan was similar to the Tuesday, Andy T and Stu, were going to do more topside filming as the weather was so good, Andy M and Martin were to dive the locations we had identified and see if they would be suitable.

After a prolonged preparation that included filming of the boat being retrieved, complete with fins this time and the constant seal escort. We left the film crew on the beach and were off for some dives. The first location was the reef just North of Bull Point. This we hoped would be good for both seals and lobsters. Well in reality it turned out to be poor for both and the combination of current combined with swell resulted in a dull 40 minutes for Andy. The visibility was not great with lots of suspended seaweed bits in the water. We decided to try closer inshore this time just with snorkels and the vis was even less. We suspected that the combinations of big springs and the SE winds, meant that there would be little vis here for a couple of days. We tried on the north side of the island with the same poor visibility.

We returned to base and noted that the water in our bay was very clear and full of little stingers normally seen in the Mediterranean. They were clearly on their last legs but their long trailing tentacles could still be felt one bare hands and would be unwelcome on our faces. We decided that a better bet would actually be our bay especially as the seals were always very attentive.

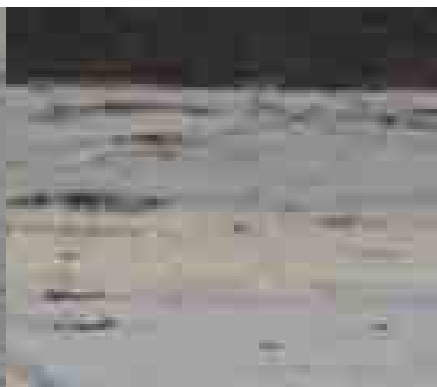
Given the poor vis and the fact that it was low water in the bay we decided that we would not try for filming that day but would continue topside and dive regardless tomorrow, in the bay or off Bull point

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The rest of the day had Stu and Andy T back out for more shooting, with Martin and Andy off exploring again with stills.

The advantage of a drysuit for taking pictures on the shoreline became apparent at low water as the seals in our bay were now for the most part content to have us walk past and if approached slowly and at their level get very close, ie lying within 6' of a mum and pup, and closer to new pups on their own, in amongst the seaweed and the wet sand with Sandlings and Turnstones scurrying along the waters edge



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There has long been conjecture about what could prey on the seal population in the UK. Almost every other seal population has either sharks or orcas in close proximity. Tales are told of the same happening in UK waters, but still nothing has been recorded. However we did get one tantalising view of a scared female, was this a shark bite or something else.



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At the end of the day while Andy T and Stu were prepping their dive gear we were treated to a spectacular northern sunset, so maybe the forecast would be wrong and we would have a good day tomorrow.





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### 22-Oct      Thursday

At 07:30 there was a stiff breeze blowing but by the time we had breakfasted and made our final preparations, as we left the school house so this had dropped away and we were granted a clear fresh morning. As this was to be our first full dive day, with the plan to dive the bay and if that was not suitable go for Bull point either straight away or in the afternoon.



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As we got to the beach so we saw that a cow had pupped earlier in the morning as she was protective and indeed by the time we had filmed our walk down to the shore she had delivered the afterbirth.



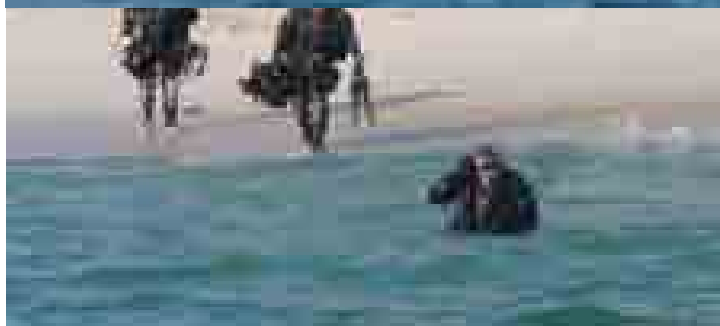
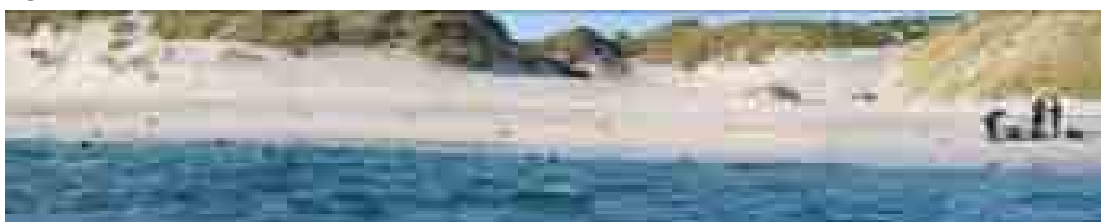
The bay was a disappointing brown compared to the crystal clear waters of the previous evening, so we were off to Bull Point. As we approached so our escort moved into the water and approached us all recorded on film to provide a post processing challenge of removing the boat movement from the final production.

Then at last we were ready to have divers in the water, Andy T in full face mask, Stu with monster video and Martin with both his stills and Stu's stills camera. Andy M providing boat cover, well laying in the bottom of the boat taking sneak pictures of the seals as they came close to investigate.

While they were diving for the first 40 minutes a local fisherman out collecting his creels came past, the owner of the pots we had noted two days ago no doubt.



Soon there were three figures wandering up the beach and de kitting, soon all was apparent, the water temperature had taken its toll and all three needed to slip out of their suits, pee zips do have their advantages 😊



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However it was a picture watching them being watched by the 100 or so seals that had moved into the water that were tantalizingly close.

Seals eyes are far better underwater than ours, and while for us they were swimming at the edge of our vision, they could clearly see the divers from 10-15 meters away underwater, before going in closer. These seals were clearly not used to divers, unlike the seals of Lundy or the Farnes, they were more wary also there are rumours that they are still shot in some parts of the islands. However that said they did approach the divers underwater and some fin pulling was captured. After a further 50 minutes they signalled to be picked up and Andy M dropped in close to the boat to see if they would come closer to a rebreather without all of those noisy bubbles. As it was he found a dead pup just under the boat that was alive with little shellfish, so Stu was back in the water to record and then they spent some 40 minutes taking stills and having brief encounters with seals.

The visibility while better than the previous day was still poor, especially close in to the shore. We decided to wait another day for underwater filming and returned to the bay to prep for the next day and continue with topside filming and the hunt for a seal birth and for some serious male interaction.

While sorting out the mooring the fishing boat that had passed us came in and moored on the outer mooring. The result was a friendly invitation to join us for an evening meal as, Donald, was planning on staying over the night before a return on the flood tide in the morning to Grimsay. Donald also provided us with fresh lobster,

as he is unable to sell single clawed ones we had 9 lobsters between the five of us along with neaps and tatties, followed with hot chocolate or coffee with Rum or Whiskey in. Very civilised. Donald amongst the discussions also confided that having fished the monarchs for nearly 20 years, he had no real understanding of why the tides and swell would run in the opposite directions but that they often did in the presence of a south easterly and he also answered the question as to why they did not use the buoys that were so abundant. The Seals liked to play with them and bite trough them so that they sank loosing the creels with them. The polystyrene was less fun as there teeth punctured but did not sink. He also explained that they enjoyed wrapping the lines up as they would often find a line that had been wound into a tight ball when all the others around were fine. All in all it is a good job that these creatures are so benign in the water, for with their weight, amazing manoeuvrability and formidable jaws they could be quite dangerous, and are to each other, the bloodied bulls necks bearing testament.



Again we were off for an early night once the genni had finished charging, with Donald saying that he would be away as we were getting up to catch the tide and declining breakfast

### 23-Oct Friday

06:30 came and the porridge was soon on and two more of our night time guests were disposed of and the little nippers re bated. During the night there had been a significant

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increase in wind, however now this had dropped away and we were granted yet another stunning sunrise.

The plan for the day was simple, more filming on Bull point with hopefully better vis as we were now moving into neap tides, followed by exploratory dives round the Shillar lighthouse.

We were away early, but were soon back again as even the best of us can have a flat battery, somehow, Stu had drained the battery of his video so once we had captured some topside shots we had to return to get a replacement battery.

However this did afford us a chat with the local farmer who had come to collect some of his sheep, his technique for transporting the sheep out to his brothers fishing boat was interesting and the one for transporting out his quad bike quite amazing.



We were soon all back out on the point, Andy M boat cover on a sea that was bathed in a wonderful morning light that gave the whole coast a rich deep yellow hue. Andy T was first up as the Aga mask using more gas and him being on twin 10's. Stu and Martin remained with the ever more inquisitive seals. Stu surfaced content that he should have the footage needed underwater now in the can.



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So we were back in for a spot of lunch before splitting into a topside film crew and dive group

We were joined at lunch by another island local, this time one who flew into the schoolhouse and trapped itself in our living quarters. Fortunately it was calm enough to be easily caught and carried outside, the pipit remaining calm but with pounding heart in Andy M's hand until its release outside.

The forecast change in weather had not arrived and the day was fine and calm. So much so that we could actually follow the southern coast to the Shillar rocks.

Once there we chose the outer most set and gently explored the contours until we found what looked to be a pinnacle that fell away sharply down to about

35m.

The plan was if slack



enough then would circumnavigate the pinnacle, if there was a reasonable current then would deploy DSMB so that the boat cover could easily follow. As luck would have it we had timed it for dead slack. The bottom at 15m was heavy kelp on large boulders that fell away sharply, over huge boulders the size of houses, giving vertical faces that were festooned with orange sponges and large patches of jewel anemones, this continued down to 38m where the incline lessened but still dropped away at an inviting rate. Retracing the decent back to 20m, amongst shoals of Pollack and wrasse with the occasional seal popping down but always just at the edge of vision. The colours were vivid and the visibility so good that it was hard to say how good, none of the suspended weed

of the shallower dives. Swimming under a huge boulder to enter what was a huge underwater bowl with sheer sides was amazing as one half was predominantly jewel anemones, the other half white plumose anemones. This would have been an amazing dive with a bit more flow such that they were out feeding. Would also have made an amazing picture if a charged battery had been put in the camera as well, ho hum, so even the amateurs can get it wrong as well.

After just over the hour having swum through long ravines on the circle of the pinnacle, Andy M broke the surface about 10m from the entry point. However the weather had changed some 20minutes earlier and we were now in the middle of heavy rain so a swift exit from the water and a run for home, which prevented a closer examination of the Shillar light which is impressive and large with the house at the bottom boasting at least 9 rooms from the number of chimney pots. Donald had also informed us that that was where he normally stayed in the summer, one to explore for a possible return trip.

The rain and hail on the return trip was like little daggers stabbing our faces such that hoods and mask or sunglasses became essential.

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However just as we rounded Bull Point the wind eased and the rain stopped. The forecast was for a storm to blow over us that evening and most of the following day with calm weather returning for a spell on Monday before increasing the remainder of the week. So our plans was secure the boat and film some large seas breaking on the shore and try to capture a seal birth, the still elusive piece of footage required.

So well fed and after a review of the days pictures and underwater footage we off again just after 10:00. Only for Andy M to be woken just after midnight by a commotion and flapping in the kitchen. The little nippers had caught but not dispatched two more unwanted guests, these were taken outside and joined the increasing little pile of corpses at the skull mound and then rebated.

### 24-Oct Saturday

The predicted wind was here and as you stepped outside the door it was hard to say which way the wind was coming from as there appeared to be no lee, however when you finally stepped around the SE corner the full force of the wind struck, it was looking like the 7 gusting 8 was here.

Breakfast was soon on the table, but not after yet another little corpse was added to the pile, that made five, and one of the traps had been sprung as well, so they were rebated.

The final plan was made, topside filming and packing of gear today, with an early dash for the mainland on Sunday as we could not afford to miss the weather window, and as much as we would have liked to stay on the islands for a further week that would have to wait for another trip, hopefully in the summer months.

After lunch during a heavy down pour, we explored further the stocks of food that had been left by other guests. We had resisted detailed investigation of one large cool box as it looked carefully packed, however upon examination we decided that in the best interest of future guest we should dispose of the contents as they were some months past there sell by date of March 2009, so with great gusto and banter we laid waste Pringles, Penguins, crisps and various other chocolate and sweet fare.

The final evening saw us enjoy a feast of frey bentos together with summer fruits and custard, the latter courtesy of previous guests, we left our uneaten food in exchange



### 25-Oct Sunday



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Saw us up early but it was already light outside, opps who had forgot to set their clocks, even though we had taken account in the tidal planning, we neglected the clocks going back on the day itself.

Body number six was dropped outside and breakfast was soon polished off and we packed the compressor and generator along with some of the bags in for the first trip.

We left Andy T on the island to shift the final pieces of gear and give the schoolhouse a clean and run through the lockup procedure.

The wind had swung round to the NE so we had a following sea, back to Stinky Bay, which we did in remarkably good time. After unloading we left for the second and hopefully only run as the wind was getting up and was against the tide. This was the longest crossing of all even with an empty boat the swell and chop meant that speeds were reduced at time to only 10knts, however at times we were also fully airborne, an exhilarating crossing, we very much hoped that with the high tide passing we would have a better return trip.

Just as we arrived back in our bay so Andy T arrived having completed the sweep and tidy, all of the remaining baggage fitted easily and soon we bid farewell to the now familiar seals of the bay and with the escort of the big bull and few others motered out slowly till clear of the rocks before gunning for home on a sea that had dropped and afforded us the fastest smoothest crossing of all. Which was most welcome, truly a lull before a storm as later in the day the winds moved back up to the predicted 5-6. Truly the weather gods had been kind to us, given the conversation we had had with Donald we experienced quite exceptional weather for October, lots of clear sunny days, relatively little wind, and fortunately none of the normally strong prevailing south westerly's that deposit so much onto the islands and afford the seals protection in their breeding grounds

After an abortive attempt to find a different restaurant in Lochmaddy, only to find that they were operating winter hours, ie closed, we returned again for an excellent final meal in the Hebrides at the Langass Lodge

### 26-Oct Monday

We left the crewhouse at 9:30 right on plan in the teeth of a dry clear SE 6, glad that we had left the Monachs when we did.

We planned to do some drive by filming of the boat and landrover with the highlands back drop, so these accomplished we dropped in on Lee to thank him again and pass on the marks and slack timings of the Shillar light as he wanted to do a trip out with the new club there sometime next year as an alternative to the east coast lochs

The journey home was uneventful but spectacular as we had driven the majority of the Scottish section in the dark on the way up, the return trip was in daylight an a burst of sunlight would have made the spectacular colours awesome, but that was not to be and we just marvelled at the landscape and colours especially of Glen Coe that seemed to go on for an eternity

Our travel time again meant that we missed all of the travel black spots on the way home making Bristol in the early hours of Tuesday morning

### Conclusion



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During the week we had a number of discussions about whether we were on an expedition or was it just a bunch of blokes going diving, doing what any competent group of divers or club could do.

Andy T was bemoaning the fact that there were few real expedition opportunities these days where you were really challenged. This provoked the debate about what is a challenge to one is easy to another. For example as ex special forces, the thought of a good yomp carrying all dive gear and then abseiling down a sheer wall into a cave or cove held no fear for him, others would faint at the thought.

We decided that while many could do something it was often the fact that it was the few that would get up and do them that makes a trip into an expedition, that plus a bit of the unusual.

Upon return we looked to the BSAC website to see if we actually met the guidelines of an expedition and could thus enter a report for a shot at the Expedition Trophy.

The definition of an expedition is "*a journey with a purpose*". A BSAC diving expedition is simply a group of divers going diving for a *purpose*.

By this definition any dive might be an expedition, but most divers would probably reserve the term for diving that is more challenging or that delivers specific results, than an average club dive or holiday.

Well we think we met the terms, we had a purpose that was pretty unique and for all of us educational and captivating.

Did it deliver specific results, well it turned out some wonderful above and below water images and we hope some good footage underwater that will be good enough to make it onto at least the small screen.

Was it more challenging, this gets back to Andy T's comment, more than the average club dive where these days most locations have gas on tap and mains electricity, but taking the portable compressor and Generator resolved those easily. Were the seas challenging maybe, but we had a good boat, very fortuitous sea conditions and competent crew, could most other members of the club done the trip, probably, but here's the rub would they want to and would they put in that extra effort, we shall see as we are looking to do a return trip next year, if the Hydrographic Agency has any wrecks in the area, or we might just go for the isolation, do we have takers?

Did we meet our objectives

1. Study Grey Seal in their largest breeding ground in UK

Most definitely we all know a lot more about these fabulous creatures than we did before the trip

2. Dive with seals

Yes but not the level of interaction we all we hoping for, this we suspect is because these were wild seals in the true sense not used to seeing many people let alone divers

3. Identify good diving locations for any future dive trips



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Not many, however the rocks and reefs of the Shillar light must hold wreckage of more than one vessel as on top there is half of a trawler thrown there by a winters storm. And the reef walls alone would be worthy of a dozen dives on their own

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### Appendix

#### Record of dives

Date	Bull point reef	Minutes		
21-Oct Wednesday AM	Andy M	30	18m	CCR
22-Oct Thursday AM	Bull point			
	Stu	40	4m	12x2
	Andy T	40	4m	10X2
	Martin	40	4m	12x2
	Stu	50	4m	12x2
	Andy T	50	4m	10X2
	Martin	50	4m	12x2
	Andy M	40	4m	CCR
	Stu	40	4m	12x2
23-Oct Friday AM	Stu	85	4m	12x2
	Andy T	60	4m	10X2
	Martin	85	4m	12x2
PM	Shillay Light			
	Andy M	65	38.5m	CCR

..... end of report .....