

CLEAR BLUE

All the scenic diving you could want is right there on our north-western doorstep, says **John Liddiard** – and the nights pass just as pleasantly as the days

SKYE



CLEAR BLUE WATER, walls that come almost to the surface plastered in multi-coloured anemones and soft corals, hordes of fish, porpoises, glassy calm sea and hours of endless sunshine. Exotic creatures under water, and even on the land. Who needs the tropics? This is Skye.

Well, maybe I have stretched the point a little. Although clear, the water off west Scotland has a slight green algal tinge to it, even more pronounced in photos.

The hours of sunshine are not endless. About 10% of them are of the liquid variety and another 30% in that grey transitional stage between pale blue and liquid through which the sky passes.

But when you add up all the hours of genuine sunshine between dawn and about 10 at night, when it finally gets dark, I'm sure it adds up to as many hours as you get in the shorter days of the tropics.

As for the dazzling walls and hordes of fish, I haven't stretched the point at all, though my meagre linguistic skills are really stretched on the first day, when Skipper Gordon MacKay informs me that An Dubh Sgeir is pronounced something like "Andushka".

We arrive at An Dubh Sgeir a little early, having made a morning dive in the colourful gullies at MacLeod's Maidens.

A reef a mile or so out from Idrigill Point, An Dubh Sgeir is home to a few dozen seals and a lot more cormorants, their backs following the sun, with wings spread like a field of black sunflowers.

Crustacean tenement

The tide turns, and Gordon judges that conditions are now safe to dive along the wall at the south face of the reef. Following his briefing, we descend to the seabed at 18 to 20m and follow a crack that runs along the bottom 2m off the wall. It's like a Glasgow tenement for crabs, lobsters and conger eels. In fact, for those who prefer not to massacre Gaelic pronunciation, the dive site is also known as Conger Crack.

It's amazing how a day on a boat breaks the ice. Dive buddy Tim and I are already feeling like members of the Kelvin Divers SSAC club, with whom we

are sharing the trip. By the time we have unloaded from the boat at Struan and driven back to the dive centre, we have been invited to share the Thai curry they are cooking for dinner, and our canned supplies remain unopened.

Next day, the boat picks up at Struan again. It's all part of a plan to fit in all the best dive sites by moving the departure point between Struan, Meanish and Stein, where the dive centre is located.

Jelly soup

It's a lazy 30-minute journey out to a wall at the end of Wiay, an island in the entrance to Loch Bracadale. Here we find another good spread of anemones and soft corals. A bonus are scraps of wreckage from a wooden trawler that got dashed to pieces only a couple of years ago, but I wouldn't call it a wreck dive. For me it is more like one of the jellyfish lakes found in the Philippines and Palau, with a mass of jellies collected in a corner by the tide.

I spend ages spaced out in the top few metres watching the jelly soup swirl around me, though I do keep an eye out in case a lion's mane is mixed up as a stinging crouton.

Most experienced divers can pick a reasonable scenic dive off a chart. Just look for any rock, pinnacle, channel or headland with close contours and a bit of current, and chances are it will be worth a look. But that won't necessarily account for all the best scenic sites, as our next dive beautifully demonstrates.

There is nothing on the chart to indicate anything other than a gentle slope of kelp under the cliffs at Rubh nan Clach (and I have no idea how that should be pronounced). In fact, for a mile each way the coast is probably just that.

It takes the experience of someone who has been diving Skye for years and systematically exploring to know just where a group of big scour holes can be found. It's a scenic housing development for all the best marine life, from crawfish to octopus, tastefully landscaped with anemones and dead men's fingers, carefully secluded 3m below a surrounding arboretum of kelp.

Those familiar with out-of-the-way parts of Scotland will know that a good



pub can be almost impossible to find. You can end up driving for miles to sit in a sterile hotel bar.

That's not a problem that affects the Dive-and-Sea-the-Hebrides centre. A hundred metres down the road is the Stein Inn, the oldest pub on Skye, with real beer, real food, a good pub atmosphere and even a shower available for those on visiting yachts, or camping.

Opposite: A belligerent crawfish spotted at Waternish Point. Above, from top: Gordon MacKay at the helm of Elena C; the dive centre at Stein; a butterfly at Lochbay Pinnacle



Following another invitation to dinner, we adjourn to the pub, and the conversation drifts to other dive locations. Some of the Kelvin club had recently dived the pinnacle at Bo Fascalde off Ardnamurchan, the westernmost point of the UK mainland. Except that, now well-lubricated with pub logic, I conclude that it isn't. With Skye now joined to the mainland by a bridge, perhaps the island's Neist Point should now be officially recognised as the westernmost point. Diving continues with a wall to 25m at Flosnam. Lurking above another pair of divers, I see that they are being stalked

by a ling. I descend to get closer, and the ling retreats to a crack in the rocks. The other divers are still unaware of it. Divers and equipment are suffering attrition. So far there have been two broken drysuit zips, a punctured boot, a squashed scooter, a bad case of sticky ears and a swollen knee that can't get up the ladder. Fortunately the boot can be patched, the zips can be shortened with Aquasure and fishing line, and at least the diver with sticky ears can get down for half the dives and has a good time on the boat. But with such nice diving, it's a shame to miss even one dive, whatever the reason.

To make up for those missing it earlier, we head out to An Dubh Sgeir again. This time the waves and current are not in our favour, so Gordon drops a shot on a submerged reef that runs out to the east of the site. The dive starts off well, with a slope leading to a wall with the usual coating of soft corals and anemones, then it just gets better and better as we pass one shoal of fish after another. In between are plenty of wrasse, with conger eels, crabs and lobsters in the cracks and scorpionfish hiding among tufts of hydroids and bryozoans. I can see why all the cormorants and seals like



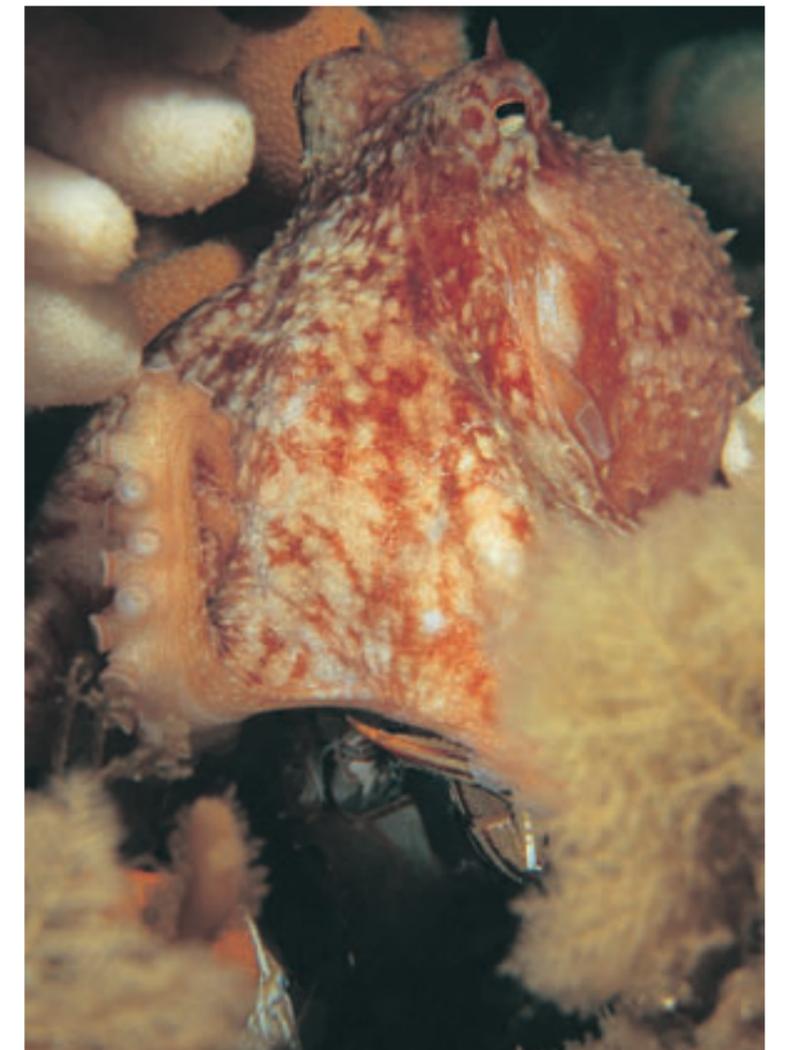
Above: Immersed in jellyfish soup at Wiy
Right: An octopus dines on a fiddler crab at Waternish Point

it here. Could all UK dive sites be this good, if it were not for over-fishing? Our morning departure point moves round the coast to Meanish Pier, itself a nice shore dive (April 2002) and conveniently close to Oisgill Bay and the wreck of the *Chadwick*. Slack water on the *Chadwick* is mid-afternoon, so we begin with a drift along the rocks at the south of the bay. Out at the west end of Skye the currents are stronger, making the dead men's fingers and anemones even bigger and brighter. Just to the south of us is Neist Point, perhaps now, as pub logic had concluded, the westernmost point of the UK mainland. Later, on the *Chadwick*, it takes me ages to find the spare propeller, despite refreshing my mind from a sketch I had drawn on a previous trip (*Wreck Tour 20*, October 2000). But this isn't a wreck-diving trip, and I dive with a macro lens. Our final day arrives with an easy departure from the jetty in Stein. A

couple of the Kelvin club have already departed, as they have to work, and a few more are staying ashore nursing further injuries, at least one of which is self-inflicted from a heavy night in the pub. With a fresh wind and choppy sea, it's quite nice to have a half-full boat. Our initial target is a wall sheltered by the island of Mingay at the mouth of the loch, though when we get there sea conditions are better than expected, and we head on to Waternish Point and a drift northwards with the tide. The shelving reef has everything I have come to take for granted over the previous few days. Short sections of wall, canyons and gullies; carpets of huge yellow and white dead men's fingers; anemones; plenty of fish, including a shoal of sand eels being hunted by small pollack; lobsters; crawfish; crabs and octopus – the last two featuring together, as the octopus is eating the crab. The weather is getting squally, alternating blustery showers with patches of sunshine. We head back in to the Lochbay pinnacle, a 20m ridge rising from a silty seabed. It's the only real

“loch dive” of the trip. After the coloured splendour of the exposed dive sites, the big scene is all a bit grey. Even so, there is plenty to see, with a wallpaper of featherstars, pipefish, butterfish and lots of scallops. This is one of the few sites where Gordon allows divers to pick up dinner. I settle for watching scallops fly. I wake up late to an empty dive centre. The Kelvin club returned to Glasgow the evening before. Having invited Tim and I to dinner all week, they have thoughtfully left behind the ingredients for a fried breakfast. While working my way through a big helping of instant heart attack, I add the last few notes to my logbook. I am surprised to realise that I haven't gone deeper than 27m all week. The depth was there if wanted, but I didn't need it. So back to my opening statement: top-quality scenic diving as good as it gets. But what did I mean by exotic land creatures? Try looking a highland cow in the face and tell me it isn't exotic. Though for danger, I think Gordon and Aileen's twin toddlers show far more destructive capability. █

Above: Dead men's fingers on the wall at MacLeod's Maidens
Right: Fiddler-crab sex at An Dubh Sgeir



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE: From Fort William, take the A82 and A87 to the Kyle of Lochalsh. Cross the bridge to Skye and take the A850 and A863 to Dunvegan. Turn north on the A863 towards Portree and Uig, then, after 5 miles, turn onto the B886 to Waternish, Lochbay and Stein.

DIVING: Dive-and-See-the-Hebrides, 01470 592219, 07980 106263, www.dive-and-sea-the-hebrides.co.uk

ACCOMMODATION: Self-catering accommodation for 10 can be booked at the dive centre. B&B is available in Stein. Rough ground by the jetty can be used for camping.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Admiralty Chart 1795, *The Little Minch*. Ordnance Survey Map 23, *North Skye*. Kelvin Divers, www.kelvin-divers.org. *Dive West Scotland* by Lawson Wood.