

The Doris

A huge pile of steel steamship at a site where the viz can be exceptional – that’s Skye’s Doris, says **John Liddiard**
Illustration by **Max Ellis**

THE NORWEGIAN STEAMSHIP *Doris*, like the nearby *Chadwick* (Wreck Tour 20, October 2000), steamed straight into rocks in fog. It went into a gully in the rocks at the back of Skye’s Neist Point, close to the smaller Ness Point.

The crew and passengers escaped in the lifeboat, leaving the *Doris* flooded and jammed in the gully. Within two weeks she had fallen back and disappeared beneath the surface. That was nearly a century ago, and the wreck is well broken up, but the piled remains are pretty much still tight into the rocks.

If you could get easy access it would be possible to shore-dive the *Doris*, but it is a good couple of miles on foot down a steep path to get to the entry point.

Even so, Gordon and Aileen from Dive-and-See-the-Hebrides recount the tale of a lone diver who hiked down wearing a wetsuit and a set of lightweight gear, dived the wreck and hiked back again. Rather him than me.

I sketch most wrecks from the side, but for the *Doris* the most convenient view was looking along the wreck and into the gully, the line being just west of north.

A dive on the *Doris* starts most easily from right in the crack of the gully (1). Bring the boat in carefully as close as possible, slop into the water and swim the rest of the way on the surface.

The shallow end of the gully is 7 or 8m deep, with a sandy seabed and kelp overhanging from the rocky sides. A trail of odd girders and scraps of wreckage leads out past a boulder which partially blocks the gully to the main body of wreckage (2), at a depth of about 10m. It’s a huge heap of broken steel ship piled tight between the rocks.

Staying on the south-west side of the gully, the wreckage begins to thin out near a pair of bollards (3) at a depth of 18m. The visibility should be good enough to make it easy to follow a trail of scraps of metal out to a winch resting by itself (4).

Directly down the slope from the winch, a small cylinder, possibly the casing from the condenser, rests on one side, followed by the *Doris*’s single main

boiler, standing on end in about 24m (5). The casing of the boiler has broken open and many of the tubes are also fragmented, so it is possible to swim right through the boiler (6) among the wrasse which have made it their home.

Again, it should be possible to see all this from the winch, so there is no risk of losing the wreck.

Continuing down the slope there are some nice dead men’s fingers on the rocks and occasional scraps of wreckage, fizzling out at about 32m (7). I would recommend turning and traversing the slope at a depth of 30m, leaving a little margin to avoid missing the rest of the wreck by swimming too deep.

The next significant part of the wreck consists of the remains of the rudder-post and steering quadrant projecting from the seabed (8). This is soon followed by a section of shaft, still attached to the four-bladed iron propeller (9).

Off slack water the sea above the stern of the *Doris* is turbulent and boiling where the current tumbles round the point, so anything that sticks up, such as the steering quadrant or propeller, is covered in big yellow dead men’s fingers, anemones and hydroids.

Close to the other end of this section of shaft, the spare propeller lies flat on the

seabed, with the tips of two blades partly buried under plates of wreckage (10). The uphill plate is almost touching the rocks at the north side of the gully.

If you have time for a short diversion, the next gully to the north (11) is well worth a look. There is no wreckage, just a narrow chasm full of delicate plumose anemones.

Back on the *Doris*, the wreck must have fallen against the north side of the gully, then tilted away from it, as the propeller shaft continues forward from here (12) and there are obvious keel sections resting against the rocks.

Following the propshaft forwards, it bends slightly to the left and continues all the way up to 18m and the remains of the thrust bearing and engine (13). There isn’t much left, just the crankshaft and some bits of connecting rod, but no pistons. Here the wreckage is more sheltered from the current, the predominant marine life being kelp.

The wreckage then continues up into the shallows and denser kelp, ending as

MISTY MISTAKE

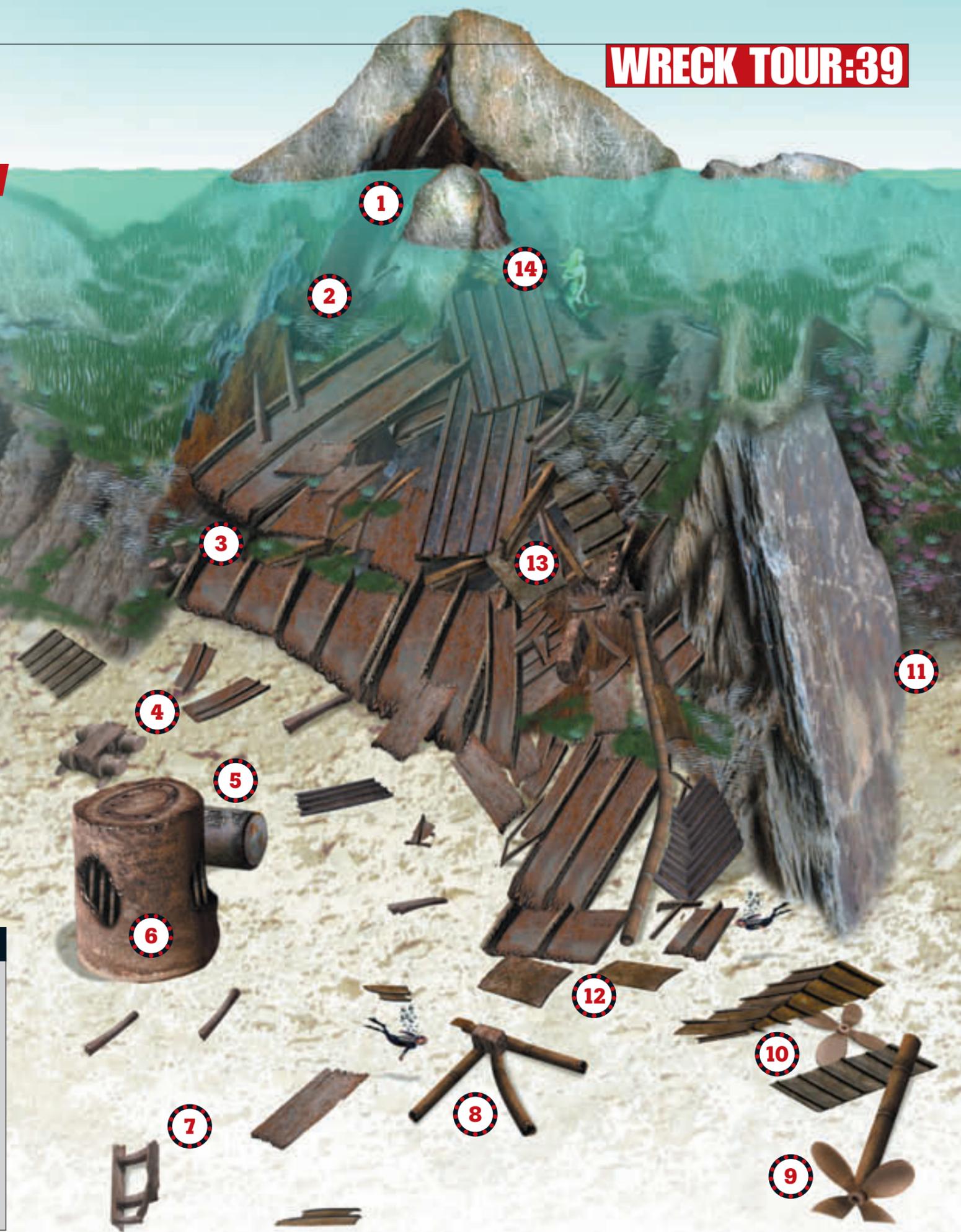
Captain Arentz lost his 1381 ton Norwegian steamer *Doris* because he made the same mistake as many others before him, writes *Kendall McDonald*. He thought that the mist which hung right down over the waters of the Little Minch off the Western Isles was just thin stuff, and he would be able to spot any danger through it.

The west coast of the Isle of Skye is littered with wrecks because their captains couldn’t tell thick from thin.

On 10 July 1909, the 255ft-long *Doris*, on her way with a general cargo from Liverpool to Stettin in Poland, plunged into that “Minch mist” and found herself suddenly in thick fog that blotted out all visibility.

Captain Arentz rang for slow ahead, but he was too late. The nine-year-old ship ran onto Neist Point in Moonen Bay, West Skye, and hit so hard that her bow buckled.

The 19 men of her crew, though unhurt, knew that she would not sail again. All landed safely from the ship’s boats. A great deal of salvage was carried out before autumn storms put her right out of sight.



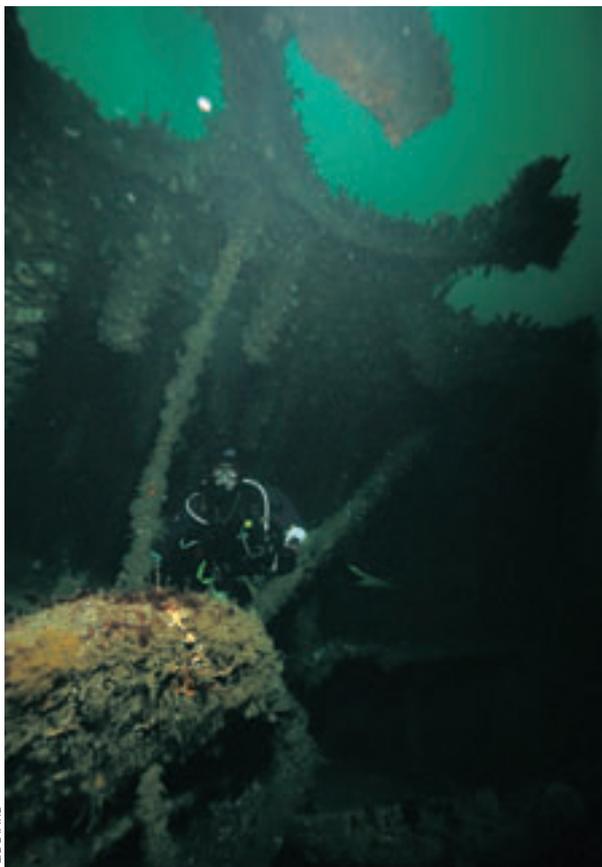
The Doris

shallow as 5m, with plates resting on the boulder that partly blocks the gully (14).

Surfacing in the gully could give the boat problems picking you up, so rather than end the dive here, it is safest to follow the rocks out again at a depth of just a few metres, then surface close to the entrance of the gully, where there is more elbow room.

As a parting thought, keep an eye out in the boat, and even under water, for minke whales. As I was getting back into the boat Aileen told me that one had breached next to it just as I started my dive. Apparently the turbulent water of Neist Point is a popular feeding place.

Clockwise from right: The next gully along is decorated with plumose anemones; a section of the Doris's stern and keel; the prop stands upright, covered in anemones and dead men's fingers; inside the boiler. Bottom: Crankshaft section from the engine



JLIDDARD

TIDES: Slack water is reliably four hours after high water Dunvegan and very unreliably two hours before high water Dunvegan.

HOW TO FIND IT: Co-ordinates: 57 25.192N 6 27.003W (degrees, minutes and decimals). From Camas Ban on the east side of Neist Point, the small ridge of rocks at the south of the bay is Ness Point. Below this are two distinct gullies in the rocks, the second and wider of which is the site of the Doris.

DIVING AND AIR: Dive-and-See-the-Hebrides at Lochbay near Dunvegan has a boat, compressor, accommodation, cylinders and weights, 01470 592219, www.dive-and-sea-the-hebrides.co.uk

LAUNCHING: The closest slip is at Meanish near Glendale.

ACCOMMODATION: There are many hotels, B&Bs and hostels catering for the large numbers of backpackers who travel to Skye. Contact the Highlands of Scotland Tourist Board, 01997 421160, www.host.co.uk/skye/index.html

QUALIFICATIONS: Best suited to Advanced Open Water/Sport Divers or equivalent, though less qualified divers could comfortably dive the shallower parts of the wreck.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Admiralty Chart 1795, *The Little Minch*. Ordnance Survey Map 23, *North Skye*. *Shipwrecks of the West of Scotland* by Bob Baird. The official Skye website is at www.skye.co.uk

PROS: A colourful wreck in usually excellent visibility. Depth can be selected to suit divers of any ability. Many alternative sites available if the weather is unco-operative.

CONS: Extortionate bridge tolls when you cross to Skye. Limited slack water.

Thanks to Alex Poole, Jonathan Peskett, Gordon MacKay and Aileen Robertson.

Would your club or dive centre like to see its favourite wreck featured here? If you would like to help John Liddiard put together the information for a particular wreck, why not invite him to come and dive it with you? Write to John c/o Wreck Tour at DIVER. 



GETTING THERE: From Fort William take the A82 and A87 to Kyle of Lochalsh. Cross the bridge to Skye and take the A850 and A863 to Dunvegan. For the slip and pier at Meanish, turn onto an unclassified road to Glendale just before entering Dunvegan. Continue through Glendale and on to the end of the road at Meanish. For Lochbay, from Dunvegan continue on the A863 towards Edinbane, but after five miles turn onto the B886 to Waternish and Lochbay.



NEXT MONTH:
tour the
St Dunstan