

The Sound of Mull & Oban Western Scotland

Text and photos by Steve Jones





Scotland

There is a point in the journey to the west coast of Scotland just a little way north of the City of Glasgow that the landscape changes from “merely” pretty to the full on highland spectacular. It seems as if you are driving into the wilderness. Modern life, along with its stresses, seems to become a distant memory, and it’s not difficult to imagine you’ve travelled back hundreds of years in time; relics of this country’s rich history, castles and ancient ruins, adorn the stunning hills and deep green valleys. The tranquility of the Lochs help to define a place that simply possesses a “kind of magic”.

I am heading towards Oban—a former Victorian seaside resort that has retained all its old-world charm. It appears quite at odds with the rugged beauty of the western Scottish landscape. Oban has become an attraction for a whole range of adventure tourists. Hikers, climbers, wildlife enthusiasts all flock here in droves year round. For Oban is not only the gateway to the Scottish Highlands, but also to the less visited Hebridean Islands with their deserted white sand beaches and crystal clear blue waters—favourite destinations of wildlife filmmakers. The attractiveness of this place is not restricted to the topside, however. This region has some of the finest diving in the British Isles.

Tucked away in a sheltered cove amongst the cliffs south of Oban, is Puffin Dive Centre—an ideal location to base activities given the fact that it is fully self sufficient—boats, gas, accommodation, all conveniently located right at your feet. Indeed, the location is also superb for families. Whilst mine went off to see

the many topside attractions in this area, I headed off to the see those under the water.

We are heading out first and foremost to the Sound of Mull—the channel of water that lies between the Isle of Mull and the mainland. This place is a graveyard for wrecks and coupled with sheer submerged cliffs, clear water and fast currents, it has all the ingredients for excellent diving. It’s a two-hour boat journey to the Sound, and Puffin’s large dive boat is fully enclosed—a welcome feature given the unpredictability of Scottish weather.

Within an hour of leaving our base at Oban, we see Duart castle standing like a sentinel guarding the waters that lie at the foot of hauntingly beautiful Mull. The view is simply awe inspiring.

Mull is the second largest of the inner Hebridean Islands, which lie close off the coast of Scotland. At first, it can seem quite foreboding, as the grey clouds circle the highest peak, “Ben More”. The view in the other direction is of the high-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Duart castle sits majestically atop a stony outcrop; Wildlife abounds in the rugged hills of western Scotland such as these wild deer grazing on the slopes; A view of the rocky landscape from the pier. PREVIOUS PAGE: A tall ship graces the waters of the Sound of Mull, as it glides past the austere hills of western Scotland

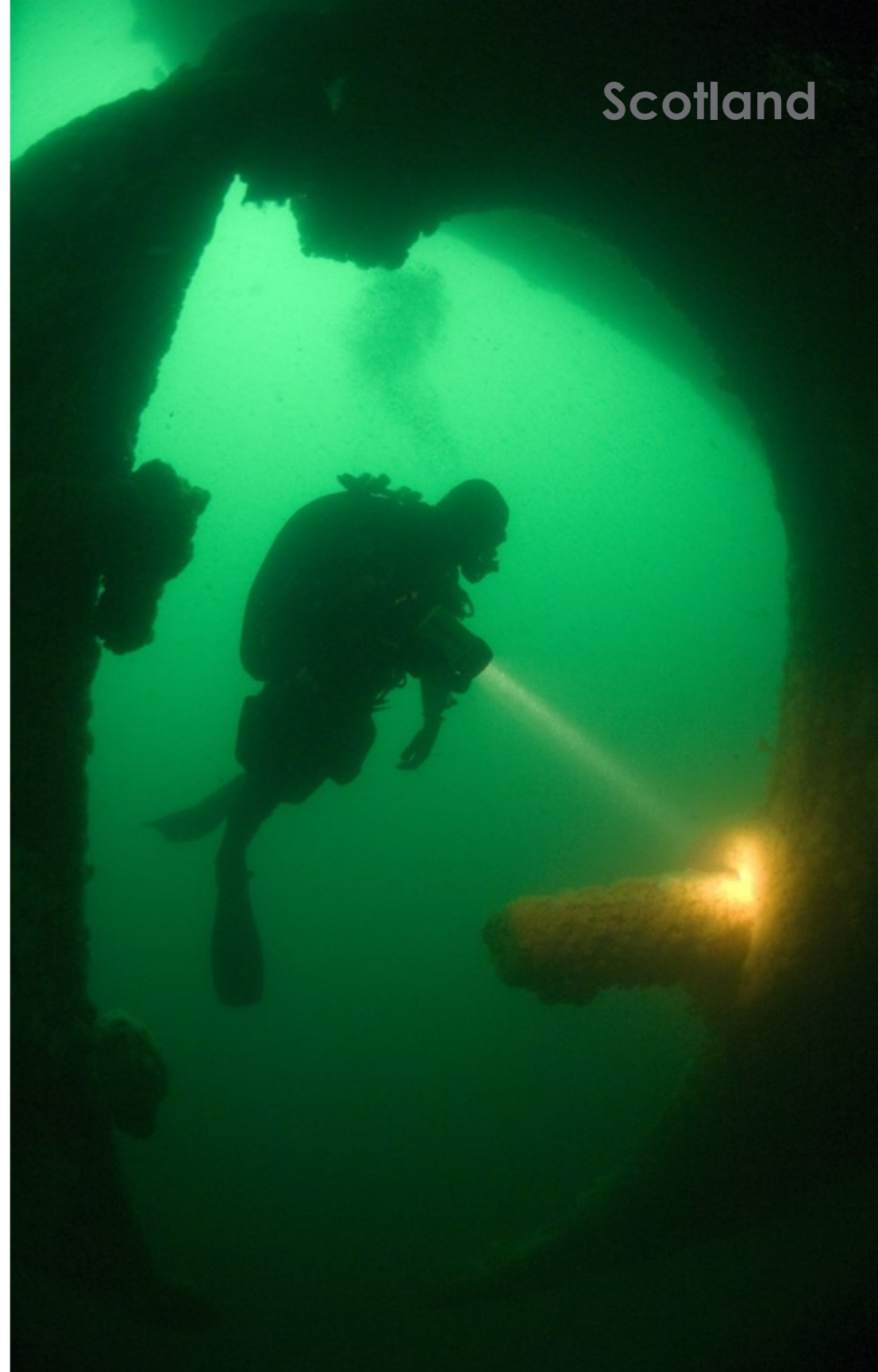


THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Hispania*

short wait and a thorough safety briefing later, and we are in.

The water is a deep emerald green. Eight or nine metres into our descent down the buoy line, we see the wreck looming below us. Torches are essential in these waters if you really want to bring the colours out, and my beam soon illuminates the wreck in its true spectrum—bright orange. The wreck is simply covered in plumose anemone.

This once proud ship is lying upright and intact. With a little caution, it's safe enough to explore



The Hispania

We are diving the *Hispania*—one of the most famous wreck dives in UK waters. A Swedish steamer, she was en route from Liverpool to Sweden in 1954 when she encountered atroc-

Captain Ivan Dahn chose to stay with his sinking vessel and went down with his command, allegedly saluting as she sunk beneath the waves—one of the few modern day examples of a captain choosing to go down with his ship.

We are at the mercy of the strong tides in this area—tides which also ensure the marine life on the wrecks is rich. Each day's diving is planned by the dive centre, so you are in the water when the tides are changing, and the waters are still. A



the open, beckoning holds.

We glide over the railings of the ship and drop into her dark belly. Fish life is plentiful, with schools swimming in and out of the ship's superstructure whilst the venomous Lions Mane Jellyfish drift by

oblivious to our rude intrusion into their world.

Average dive depth on this wreck is around 22 metres, making the use of nitrox ideal, and dry suits are really essential this far north for all but the bravest of

souls.

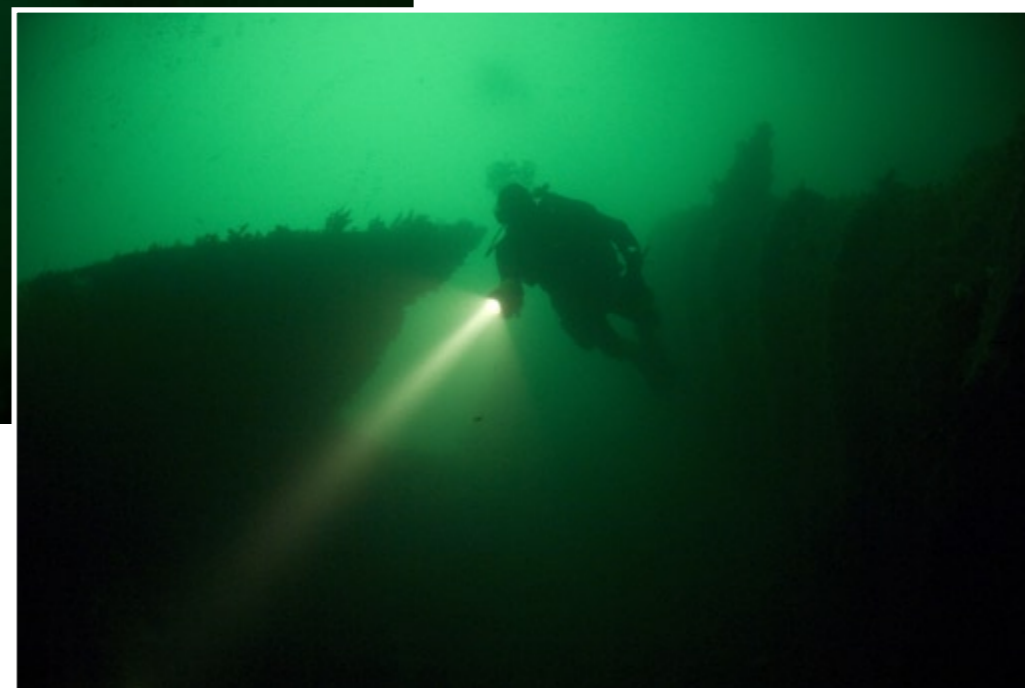
The best of the dive is saved for last, for the bridge of the ship, open as it is to the tides, is bursting with life that would rival a tropical wreck. The decaying hull has created a catacomb

est Scottish peaks including Ben Nevis. If you dive here in the winter months, you will invariably surface to the view of snow-covered peaks in the distance.

cious weather. The captain chose the more sheltered route between the Scottish Islands, but in poor visibility, the ship struck a reef close to the Mull shore.

The crew abandoned ship but





THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Rondo*

that allows safe exploration, always having clear exit points and no overhead environments. Until recently, even the captain's bath tub was still intact in his quarters.

Sixty minutes into the dive, it's time to return to the surface—the cold is starting to creep through my suit, and the currents are beginning to flow.

The *Hispania* lies at the northwest side of the Sound, so the boat spends the next few hours slowly making its way back towards Oban. In the afternoon, there is an opportunity to sample the natural rather than the man-made reefs in this area—a scenic dive on the shores of Mull itself.

The reefs here are dominated by kelp forests for the first 15 metres of water, and it's amongst these forests that much of the marine life can be found—sea urchins, squat lobster and large crabs make the protection of the kelp forest their home, whilst species of wrasse orbit above.

As abruptly as the kelp forest ends, the reef plummets away vertically into deep water. The sound is abound with drop-offs, as it's over 100 metres deep in places—the underwater topography matching the rugged steepness of the topsides.

The Sound of Mull

The Sound of Mull is formed by the deep

stretch of water, some 25 miles long and one to two miles wide, which separates the Isle from

mainland Scotland. Many a ship sought out this sheltered passage for refuge from the fiercest Atlantic storms only to fall prey to the many islets and shallow reefs that bespeckle this channel.

The appeal of this area lies not only in the number of wrecks, however. The fast currents that flow here also make for a rich marine biodiversity and set the

scene for exciting drift dives; currents can exceed three knots on many of the drift dive sites. At these speeds, it's possible to cover over a kilometre of ground in one dive!

This area is often described as having one of the best collection of shipwrecks in the British Isles. In addition, there is diversity in the wrecks themselves. Most

of the wrecks are relatively deep, sitting on the seabed at around 30 to 35 metres. Since many are upright, however, the average dive depth is more likely in the 20 to 25 metre range, making long dives possible with the use of nitrox.

There is one wreck, however, that stands out from the rest for the particularly adventurous dive it offers. The *Rondo's* stern lies in three metres of water whilst its bows are in 50 metres. The whole ship lies at an angle of around 70 degrees. This is one of the few wrecks where a true deep multi-level dive can be carried out, starting in the deep water areas and finishing your dive around the shallow stern. The bows themselves lay in dark but crystal clear water due to the nature of the tides in these waters.

The last time I dived these waters was over 20 years ago, and it was amongst some of my first ever open water dives. Since then, I have travelled the world and dived a myriad of waters. So, on this return visit to Oban, I was unsure of how



A diver sheds his light on the wreck of the *Thesis*
 RIGHT: A diver examines the coral growth on the wreck of the *Shuna*

as I gaze across the incredible scenery, that Scotland is breathtaking and mysterious both above and below the water.

Top Sites

The wreck of the *Hispania*

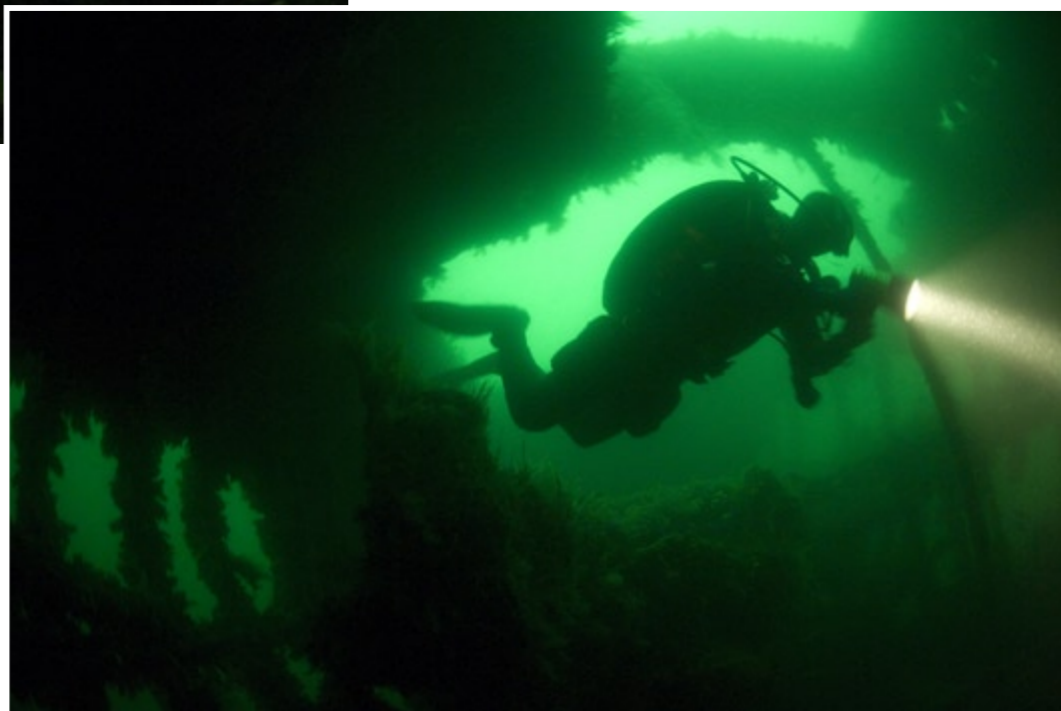
(position: 56.34.55N 5.59.13W)
 Undeniably a masterpiece amongst the Sound's dive sites, the *Hispania* is often described as one of the best shipwrecks in the UK. A Swedish steamer, which sank in 1954 in bad weather, the captain chose to go down with his ship. Today, his ship lies as a beautiful shrine, absolutely covered in orange and white anemone. Virtually intact on the seabed with a slight list to starboard, the gangways and handrails are all still in place, and the cavernous cargo holds are an oasis for exploration.



my maturity and knowledge would affect the experience.

Diving in clear tropical waters, may be easier and require a lot less equipment, however diving in green waters is often more rewarding due to its challenges. I have grown to appreciate the variety of temperate marine life and the atmospheric qualities that totally absorb and surround one.

Rejoining my family after my last dive, for a barbeque on the chalets veranda, I am reminded



A diver investigates the interior of the *Thesis* wreck

The wreck of the *Rondo*

(Position: 56 32 18N: 05 54 45W)
 One of the most thrilling dives in the area can be found further down the Sound. The *Rondo* was lost in 1935 after breaking her anchorage in a fierce storm. She ran aground on the islet of "Dearg Sgeir", and after a salvage attempt, she slipped down the cliff coming to rest almost vertically. The bows are in 50 metres of water, whilst the stern is only a few metres from the surface! Only the hull remains, along with various debris, but the wreckage is rich with anemone, and large fish schools are always to be seen. The *Rondo* has to be

one of the few wrecks where one carries out a true deep multi-level dive, starting midships or deeper and finishing in the shallows at the stern. The only apt description for this dive is spectacular.

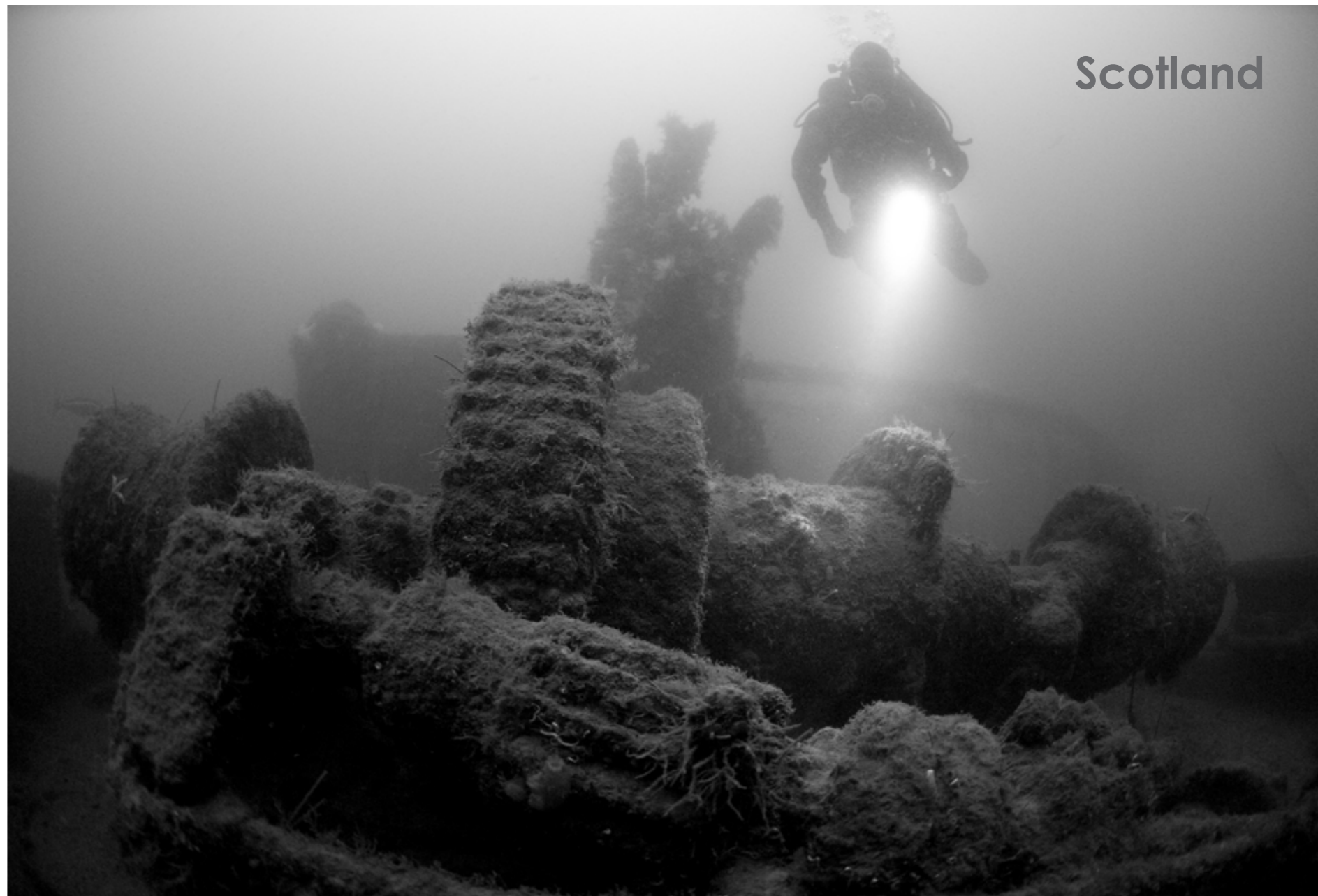
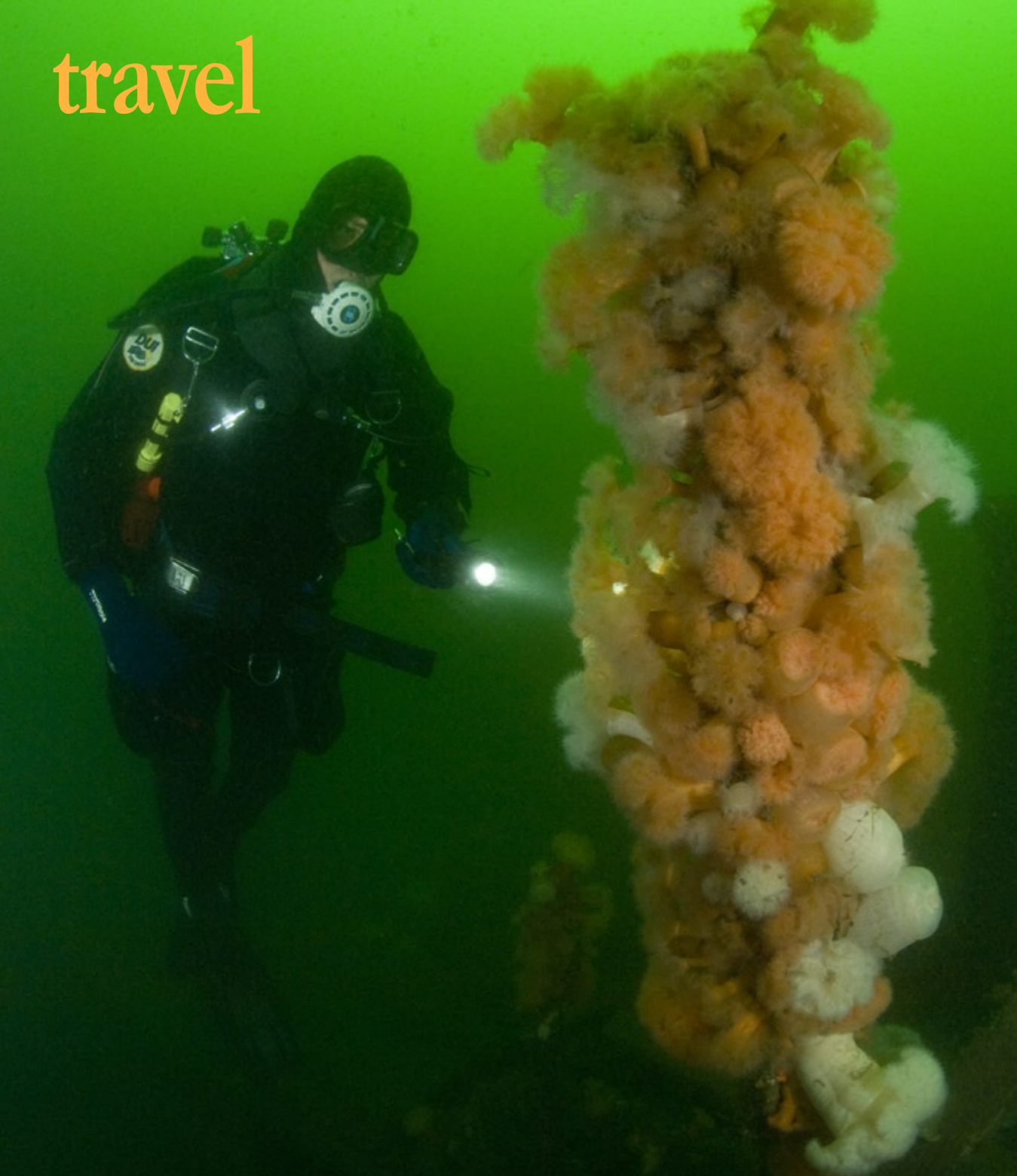
The wreck of the *Thesis*

(Position: 56.29.56N 005.41.28W)
 Without doubt one of the most atmospheric wreck dives in the Sound of Mull, the *Thesis* was a steamship that sank in 1889 carrying a cargo of pig iron. This 50-metre long wreck lies on a slope between 20 and 30 metres and must be dived at slack water, as the tides can be fierce whipping between the Sound of

Mull and the Lynn of Morvern. The superstructure and decking of the ship have all but disappeared, leaving the ribs of the hull exposed in many places. It is possible to swim the length of the ship below deck level. The deep emerald light beaming through the many holes in the ship's side make it a truly unforgettable dive.

The wreck of the *Shuna*

(Position 55.33.26N 5.54.52W)
 This 73 metre long steamship sunk in 1913 after running aground in a storm. She was the last large wreck to be located in the Sound, being accidentally



discovered by a commercial diver. Sitting upright in 30 to 36 metres of water, her decks are only in 16 to 20 metres depth. The sides of the ship are covered in thousands of brightly coloured sea squirts and, as a rare treat for wreck divers, the propeller is still attached. The holds carried coal, and as she lies in a sheltered spot, the *Shuna* is covered in a layer of silt. Careful finning will keep the normally good visibility intact.

Lochaline Pier

The waters beneath the pier at Lochaline slope steeply before dropping off vertically to depths exceeding 70 metres. The upper reaches of the cliff are kelp covered, giving way to gullies and overhangs profuse in marine life. It's a stunning wall dive and can also be dived from the shore, although advice should be sought on the tides as danger-

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *SS Breda*

ous downward currents can occur at certain times.

Calve Island

One of the finest scenic dives can be found on the north-west of Calve Island, which lies just outside Tobermory Bay at the North entrance to the Sound. Dropping away to over 45metres, chimneys and gullies covered in life drop off vertically in places. The town of Tobermory is also worth a visit, having one of the most colourful of sea fronts.

Dives outside of the Sound

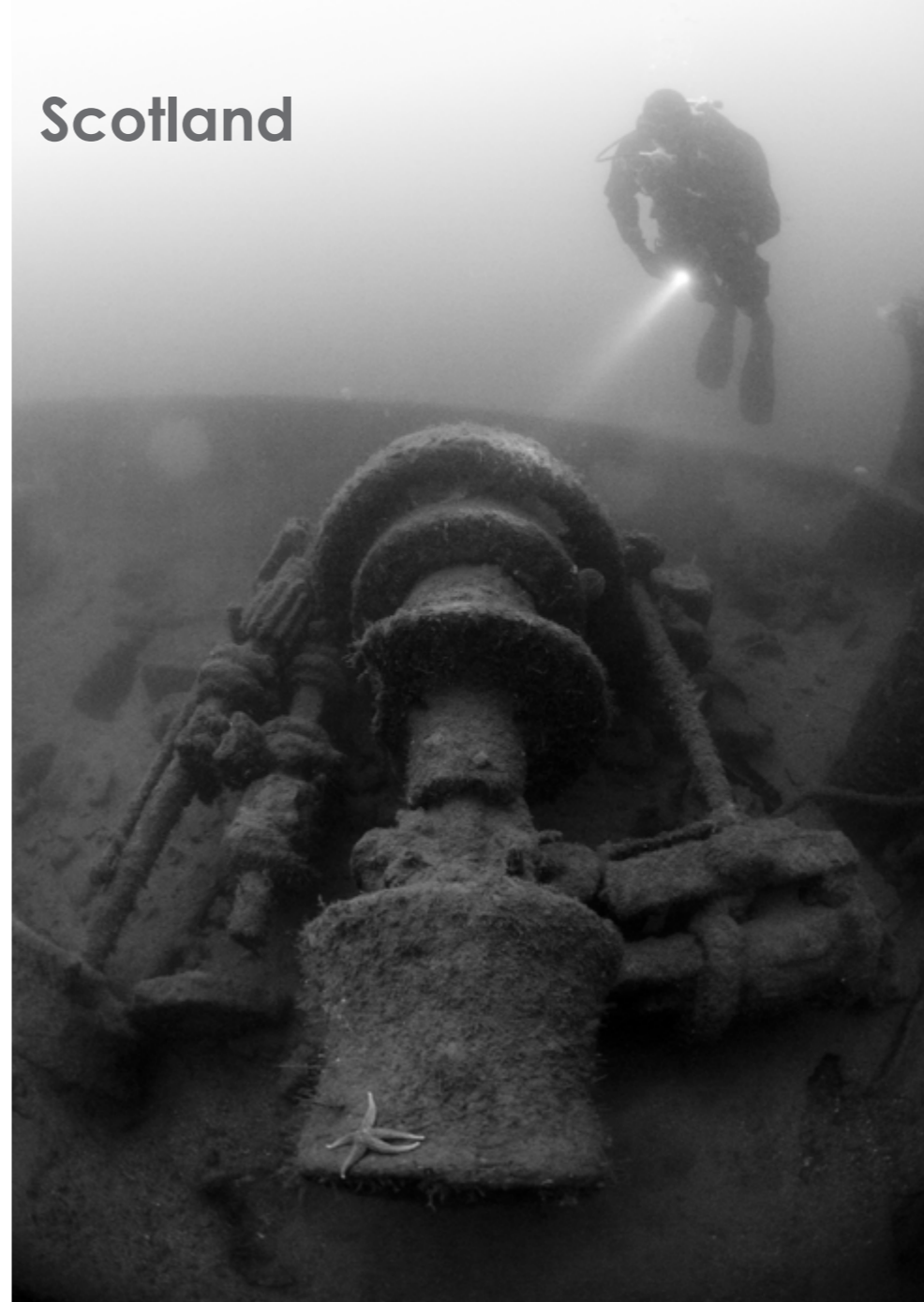
SS Breda

(GPS location: 56°28'32"N; 05°25'07"W) In addition to the superb array of dive sites on offer within the Sound of Mull, one should not overlook the sites closer to Oban. The *SS Breda* has long been a favourite amongst divers. Requisitioned as a supply ship during World War II, she met her fate on 23 December 1940 whilst anchored in the Lynn of Lorn. Damaged by the bombs dropped by a German





Scotland



OBAN Oban is the quintessential Victorian resort town, possessing a unique character. Here, you will not find the pre-packaged entertainment to be found in so many more accessible resorts. The activities on offer put you firmly at one with the countryside, the history and the nature of the surrounding area. Spectacular walks, whale watching, historic castles, wildlife parks, island hopping—this is a destination for people who want to experience the countryside's natural beauty rather than man-made entertainment. Or of course you could soak up the atmosphere in the Oban Inn following a visit to the world famous whisky distillery.

DIVING Puffin Dive Centre (www.puffin.org.uk) offers a comprehensive shop, full recreational and technical training facilities, and a variety of well-equipped dive boats, ranging from large offshore rigid-hulled inflatable boats to a jet-powered catamaran. These make light work of the journey to the Sound of Mull. Puffin caters to groups and individuals of all levels of experience and provides thorough briefings covering the wrecks and all safety aspects before each dive.

CONDITIONS Despite the foul weather that can occur in this region, there are very few days in the year when diving is completely impossible. There are many dive sites, so finding a sheltered one merely requires some flexibility. The region is therefore one of a few in the British Isles where year-round diving is possible. With water temperatures peaking at around 15°C between July and September, they will drop to a refreshing 4°C by winter. This is drysuit territory, all year round, if you want to make the most of it.

USEFUL LINKS
 Puffin Dive Centre www.puffin.org.uk
 Oban Tourist Board www.oban.org.uk
 Isle of Mull www.isle.of.mull.com
 Visit Scottish Heartlands
www.visitscotichearthlands.com/areas/oban/index.cfm



seabed that slopes from 24 to 30 metres. Standing upright, the superstructures have largely disappeared following the work of salvage divers in the 1960's. However, her cavernous cargo holds are full of interesting artifacts, and the stern of this 127-metre long behemoth is covered in dead mens fingers and anemones. Good buoyancy control is a requirement. The wreck catches the silt deposits from Loch Etive, so normally good visibility can quickly deteriorate if divers are not careful. Because of this, great care must be taken when venturing into the holds.

The Falls of Lora

Loch Etive itself also holds one of the most challenging and exciting drift dives for the advanced diver. The Falls of Lora ("Lora" being a rough translation of

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver explores the wreck of the *Hispania*; Thousands of tunicates decorate the wreck of the *Shuna*; The *SS Breda* wreck

the Gaelic word for noisy!) are caused by many millions of litres of water rushing between Loch Etive and the Firth of Lorn through a narrow constriction under the bridge at Connel, about six miles north of Oban. Nicknamed the "washing machine", only the most experienced drift divers should attempt this dive when it is flowing. Currents can exceed six knots, and downward currents are common. The most established dive centre in the region,

Puffin Dive Centre, offers a series of build-ups to this dive, taking divers in for familiarity dives at lower current strengths before the real thing. Excellent boat cover is essential. ■

Special thanks to Puffin Dive Centre www.puffin.org.uk for their support in producing this article. More of Steve Jones's work can be seen at www.millionfish.com

Heinkel 111 bomber, she limped into Ardmucknish Bay before finally sinking. She remains one

of the shallowest intact wrecks in Scottish Waters, with her decks standing eight metres above a