

Land of Fire and Ice

words & pictures



Steve Millard



In July 2005 a group of 10 KISS rebreather and open-circuit divers travelled to Iceland to explore the dive sites on the northern and eastern coastline and to return to Scotland via the Faeroe Islands. Steve Millard recalls their trip aboard the *Hjalmar Bjørge* with memories that include days that never darkened, terrifying wolf fish, majestic whales and towers of beer!

THE EXPEDITION was organised and led by dive boat skipper Mark Henrys and made use of the charter boat *Hjalmar Bjørge*; a Class 0 boat, which is licensed to operate worldwide - probably the only commercial dive boat in the UK with this rating. The objective of the divers was to explore some unique and rarely dived sites both in Iceland and the Faeroes, using the hardboat to its full potential.

Most of the dive group arrived in Reykjavik a few days early and took the opportunity to discover some of the inland attractions of this geologically active island. A trip was made to Geysir, the site of the original geothermal vent. We also visited Silfra, an intercontinental tectonic rift which is widening by some 1.5cm per year.

At one location the rift is filled with crystal clear water from a glacier melt at a chilling 4°C, which provides a dive of stunning 100m+ visibility. However as our dive kit was on the other side of Iceland, we only had the opportunity to look at the site and feel

the near-freezing water temperature before moving on. Other highlights of the inland tour included two spectacular waterfalls and the opportunity to climb on to one of Iceland's many glaciers. A significant bonus of being in Iceland in the summer is that it never gets dark. This gives plenty of scope for activities but can be disorientating at times.

The group of 9 divers then flew to Isafjordur in the north of Iceland to meet the dive boat and our diving skipper. The airport lies tightly between two high ridges giving a spectacular landing that is not for the faint-hearted! We received a very welcome reception on arrival; a local Icelandic diver gave useful information on several dive sites and then offered to take us to a site nearby in his RIB. We were also given an insight into how some Icelanders like to spend their dark winter months ... participating in Viking/pagan ceremonies, although we were unsure as to how seriously this was taken! After this warm-up dive at a site local to

Isafjordur we then headed out into the north-eastern fjords with *Hjalmar Bjørge*.

With an exploratory trip such as this it is expected that not all dives will be entirely successful. At the next dive we searched for a wreck on a relatively flat bottom but could not manage to locate it. The unusual Icelandic sea life was of interest however and we came across several ugly looking wolf fish, full of teeth and menace. Unlike the wolf fish commonly seen hiding in rock crevices at St Abbs, these Icelandic wolf eels are often seen freely swimming or resting on the bottom.

The next dive site proved to be one of the highlights of the trip. We took the opportunity to dive on an underwater geothermal vent. This was a submerged version of the geyser we had seen on land and comprised a pinnacle rising from a depth of 55m to 17m. Although the ambient sea

Images this page top right: party pose for a scrapbook shot on the Hjalmar Bjørge and left: underwater geothermal pinnacle the Icelandic

temperature was below 4°C, warm water could be clearly seen issuing from a number of vents. Cold hands were quickly warmed up by placing them onto the warm rock, a rare pleasure!

The whole of the Icelandic mainland lies just below the Arctic Circle and we made our most northerly dive commencing about 50m south of there. We finned along the bottom in a northerly direction, thus crossing the Arctic Circle during the course of the dive. Apart from the novelty of the experience we again saw wolf fish in many crevices and holes, and out in the open.



Icelandic Wolf fish

We took advantage of these conditions to make a stopover at the remote island of Sula Sgeir, positioned some 50 miles to the north west of Cape Wrath. Due to its isolation this site is very rarely dived and we were looking forward to seeing ...



humpback whale (R. Hiley)

On the north-east side of Iceland lies the small town of Husavik. This is the centre for whale-watching in Iceland and most locals are opposed to the recent resumption of commercial whaling by their country. We visited an impressive museum at Husavik showing the history of whaling and the social and commercial impact on the local communities.

The museum was notable for displaying a number of complete skeletons of different whales, which really allowed an appreciation of the immense size of these gentle giants. A very balanced view of both the benefits and drawbacks of whaling were presented but the verdict seemed to be that it is a Bad Thing. A pity that the rest of Iceland doesn't share this view.

We actually saw very few whales ourselves around Iceland, which was rather disappointing. However a previous whale watching party had excellent sightings of humpback whales in close proximity to the boat, not far from Husavik. Our time was to come later in the trip.

We then moved on to the town of Seydisfjörður and the site of the wreck of the WW2 tanker *El Grillo*. This ship had been attacked by three German bombers whilst at anchor in the fjord and now lay upright and relatively intact at a depth of 46m. The remainder of the oil cargo had finally been pumped out in 2002.

The dive itself was one of the darkest and coldest we had experienced in Iceland. A layer of fine silt covered every surface and the visibility was 3-4 metres at best. This was thought to be due to ongoing construction of a road tunnel nearby. The water temperature on the wreck was a chilling 1°C and dive times were kept relatively short, even by the KISS rebreather divers.

This was to be our last dive in Iceland. The weather conditions had remained unusually calm and we took the opportunity to make an easy passage to the Faeroes, some 36 hours away.

Overall the diving in Iceland has huge potential and our expedition barely scratched the surface of the possible dive sites. The diving is of course very remote and the logistics of access and safety are not inconsiderable. We were fortunate in having exceptionally calm weather; in fact fog presented more problems than wind whilst we were there. We appreciated the opportunity to dive in such spectacular surroundings, and the chance to experience very different underwater conditions was well worth the effort.

The Faeroes comprises a population of just 50,000 people (and twice as many sheep!). It is made up of 17 inhabited islands together with one uninhabited one and all have massive tides of up to 12 knots flowing between them. We arrived in the Faeroes in time for St Olav's Day, which is a national day for parading in traditional costumes, row boat racing, singing and of course much drinking and partying.

In the Faeroes' bars it is possible to buy a tower of beer. This comprises a four litre column of beer placed on the table with a dispensing tap to allow a group to share a round of drinks in a novel style.

We dived five different sites around the Faeroes, experiencing a mixture of caves, walls and drift dives. The diving itself was warmer than Iceland and the fish life was similar to Scottish diving, but with sightings of cold water wolf eels still quite common. Local Faeroese divers gave us a very warm welcome, as did everyone encountered on the islands, and they gave many helpful tips about their favourite dive sites.

As with Iceland, the Faeroes have a huge unexplored potential for both scenic and wreck diving. Anyone considering diving here should make contact with the local club, via their website: www.kaving.fo. The site itself is written in Faeroese but an email sent in English will get a response.

A further 24 hours of travelling towards Scotland was made in spectacularly calm conditions. The sea was unbelievably flat and this must surely have been a one day in 10 year event.

We took advantage of these conditions to make a stopover at the remote

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enjoying a tower of beer
(photo: Brian Watson)

island of Sula Sgeir, positioned some 50 miles to the north west of Cape Wrath. Due to its isolation this site is very rarely dived and we were looking forward to seeing what it had to offer.

A pre-breakfast dive on the south west face gave superb visibility diving, but with the downside that the kelp extended well below 30m. There was a profusion of fish life, anemones and nudibranchs and the friendliness of the dogfish made it clear they were unaccustomed to divers.

On approach to the isle of Lewis we had an encounter with a family of five orcas, two adults and three calves gave us a wonderful display as they swam alongside the boat. This was simply an unforgettable experience for all onboard.

The remainder of the expedition was spent diving more familiar scenic and wreck sites around Lewis, Skye and Mull before arriving back in Oban. Diving Iceland, the Faeroes and Sula Sgeir was an amazing experience and an excellent service was provided by Mark Henrys and the crew of *Hjalmar Bjorge*.

For further details contact www.northernlight-uk.com or phone Hannah on 01631 740 595.



male adult orca (Dawn Menzies)

The divers on the expedition were:
 Colin Bennett - KISS rebreather diver
 Iain Davis - open-circuit diver
 Chris Edge - KISS rebreather diver
 Mark Henrys - skipper / KISS rebreather diver
 Dawn Menzies - open-circuit diver
 Steve Millard - KISS rebreather diver
 Ekki Schepanski - KISS rebreather diver
 Mike Steinbrecher - KISS rebreather diver
 Mark Wainhouse - KISS rebreather diver
 Brian Watson - open-circuit diver

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