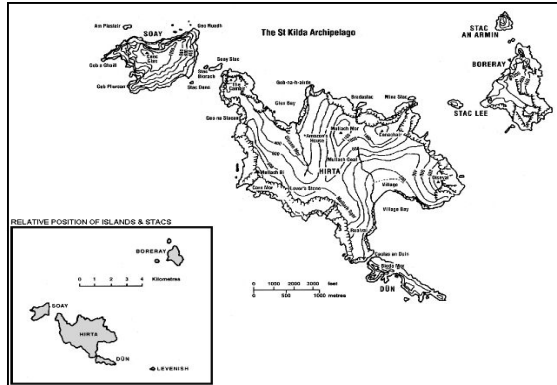


## St. Kilda - Diving on the Edge of the World

By Kim Smith

Gordon and I recently returned from a trip to Scotland where we did a week long dive trip to the St. Kilda Archipelago. The planning for this trip started about 2 years prior when fellow kiss diver, Steve Millard, was visiting us in Vancouver to do some diving. He managed to convince us that our first ever dive trip away from home should be to Scotland on an all Kiss Re-breather charter. Can you believe it? We actually said yes. Although I must admit, I was dreaming about warm blue water, sandy beaches and hot hot weather, I was looking forward to seeing Scotland and meeting the other Kiss divers. There we were two years later, getting ready to dive in an incredible remote location located about 100 miles off the west coast of Scotland.



Map of St Kilda provided by Northern Lights Charters

The St. Kilda Archipelago was at one time Great Britain's most secluded community. Thought to be populated for centuries, the community here lasted until 1930 when the villagers requested to be relocated to the mainland. Today St. Kilda and the marine environment surrounding it is a World Heritage Site. The site is composed of about 225 square kilometres with the islands at the centre.

We went out with Northern Light Charters, <http://www.northernlight-uk.com>, which is based out of Oban on Scotland's west coast. Northern Light Charters is run by Mark Henrys and Hannah Thompson. Hannah runs the office and meets her guests at the start and end of each trip while Mark is the Skipper. The vessel we were on is the Hjalmar Bjørge. Also known as Halmar George! She is a 75ft ex-Norwegian ice-class rescue vessel which was converted by Mark and Hannah to a luxury charter vessel. She takes up to 12 guests plus the crew.



Mark Henrys, Skipper of Hjalmar Bjørge - Photo by Mike Steinbrecher

We found Hjalmar Bjørge to be very comfortable. There are 6 double suites which all have their own sink, 3 toilets and 2 showers. The guest cabins are warm and roomy. Good thing as we had four large suitcases and 4 small bags. (some rooms have more room than others, so if you are coming from overseas, try to book one of the larger suites). With only 12 guests on board, I found that there was no waiting time for showers and washroom facilities. Also, everything was very clean and modern.

The main deck holds the saloon which seems to be the main meeting and dining area. On our trip, it was also our photo viewing area as many people had brought digital cameras and lap top computers. We had slide shows every evening. It was great! We were quite impressed with the meals. It was certainly nice to sit down after a dive and have a gourmet meal served to us. Thanks Heather and Rachel! We were never disappointed.

As I enjoy being out on boats almost as much as diving, I found the best part of Hjalmar Bjørge to be her wide open front deck. There is a central bench where dive gear is set up with other gear stored below. Lots of room to prepare dive gear or just sit back and relax.

The first dive was the following day at Neist Point on the Isle of Skye. Afterwards we started our journey to St. Kilda. We were in for a treat. There were schools of dolphins bow surfing our vessel. It was incredible to see them fly through the water, jumping and rolling. I was amazed; I had no idea we'd be seeing dolphins on this journey. The Common Dolphins came to visit a couple of times and we were rewarded with a visit from the Risso's Dolphins, too! Mark seemed to be amazed as he had never seen this type of dolphin bow surf before. We must have been quite a site, with everyone at the bow, leaning over the rail to get a better look, snapping pictures. The dolphins seemed to know that they were putting on a show.



Later that day we reached St. Kilda. The islands impressive forms are the result of volcanic activity. They have a wild, raw beauty which is captivating. They are home for thousands of sea birds. We saw Gannets, Puffins, Fulmars, Guillemots and many, many others. It was certainly impressive to look up and see hundreds of birds in flight. I'll never forget it. We also had a chance to see a Minke Whale while in the islands.

Approaching St Kilda - photo by Mike Steinbrecher

Diving St. Kilda started later that day. In total, 9 dives were done in Kilda. Having dove for many years in the cold waters of British Columbia and Washington State, I expected the diving to be similar. The first thing I noticed is that the water was quite a bit warmer than home. That was nice! Also, the visibility we had was fabulous. At home in July we are lucky to get 5 metres. In Kilda we had 50 metres of visibility, on some dives. It was really something to look around underwater and see so many Kiss divers. There were times when I looked around and thought, "wow, Gordon made all of these!" This good visibility let us see the fantastic rock formations underwater. They were just as impressive under the water as above. In fact, more so. On every dive there were caverns, caves, tunnels and arches to see. And all covered in marine life. On many of the dives we also had seals swimming and playing with us. With such good visibility, it was great to watch them swim around the rock formations, through arches and check us all out. They were certainly curious.



Puffin photo by Mark Henrys

Another difference from diving at home, were the surface conditions. For some of the dives in Kilda we had swells to deal with when traveling to and from dive sites and when getting out of the water. With no islands around to block wind and waves, it can get rough out there. There was at least one time when I was hoping that someone would make the world stop moving.

Gordon and I took the opportunity of this trip to introduce Jetsam's newest rebreather, the Sport Kiss, to our fellow Kiss divers. We had been working on this project for close to two years. While the concept had stayed pretty much the same, the design and materials had changed many times. (That's another story!) This trip was the ideal place to show them as the Sport Kiss was designed to be lighter and smaller than the regular Kiss. Good thing as weight allowances for air travel are getting tighter. We managed to fly with 2 rebreathers and 2 full sets of dive gear, including drysuits and tanks and we were still within our weight allowance.



Kim & Gordon Smith gearing up - photo by Steve Millard



Underwater photos by Steve Millard



Left Photo: Steve Millard, Craig Hunter, Mark Henrys & Gordon Smith looking over the new Sport Kiss. Right Photo: Craig Hunter suits up for his dive on the Sport Kiss. Photos by Kim Smith

It was interesting to see the other divers reactions to this new rebreather. This trip consisted of 10 Kiss divers (including Mark, the skipper), 1 Inspiration diver, one Dragger diver and one bubbler. The 8 divers on the Kisses are some of our earliest customers. In fact, Steve Millard who set up this trip purchased the very first unit that went overseas. One could say he really started something! Four of the group managed to get in the water with the new units. They came out with smiles on their faces and eyes glowing. They found the new units to be very light, have excellent work of breathing, good maneuverability underwater and the weight well distributed as it is close to the back. Also the ease of maintenance was appreciated. After almost two years of working on this unit, it was fantastic to see everyone's reaction. Well done Gordon!

While in St. Kilda, we spent a few evenings visiting the village on the main island of Hirta. Here we had a chance to view the cottages where the villagers lived in the 1800's. Also, there are still around 1400 stone cleitean's which were built for storing food and fuel. It's impressive to see them scattered over the island, especially on the sides of the steep hills.

St. Kilda is home to the St. Kilda Wren and the St. Kilda Fieldmouse. If you look closely at the many stone walls running through the village and on the island, you will see them flitting about. It is also home to the Soay sheep. It is an ancient breed which dates back to the Bronze Age. They certainly don't look like a modern sheep.



The village on Hirta - Photo by Mike Steinbrecher

A few of us decided to walk up one of the hills on Hirta. At the start, it really didn't look that high or that far away. We started off as a large group and slowly people started drifting away. As we started getting to the steeper parts, there were only four of us left, Chris, Mike, Ekki and myself. Slowly Chris and Mike pulled ahead of Ekki and I. It was all I could do to keep going. I was determined to reach the top of one of the hills, if it killed me. And it just about did. I'm sure that my face was the colour of a Cherry Tomato! I think that Ekki felt sorry for me or maybe thought I'd keel over from exhaustion. He hung back and stayed with me as I struggled up. Time is deceiving in this part of the world. When we started up, it seemed like it was afternoon. In reality it was 9:30 in the evening. It doesn't get dark until around 11:30 at night. No wonder I was tired. I was wishing I had gone to the pub with the others!



Photo 1: View on the other side of Hirta. Photo 2: Cave on Boreray where Mike & I had a chance to snorkel. Photos by Kim & Gordon Smith

We finally made it to the top of one of the hills. It was well worth the effort. The view was striking. The other side was sheer cliffs covered with birds and sheep and an ocean that just keep going. As I took in the view, I felt very privileged to have had the opportunity to be there. That view is something I will never forget. Never have I seen anything quite so wild, even underwater.

Our last dives of the trip were done at Oighsgeir, which is one of the Small Isles and also in the sound of Mull on the wreck of the Rondo. After the wavy surface conditions at St. Kilda jumping into calm water was nice. It was very similar to home. It was great to look back on our week of diving and note that all of the rebreathers on board worked beautifully. I've heard some people say that rebreather diving is more gear intensive and requires more work between dives. Not so. Not on this trip anyways. It was also great to be on a charter that was not only rebreather friendly, but had units on board. First a Kiss and now a Sport Kiss.

As the week started to draw to a close, I remembered my reaction to Steve's proposal two years earlier...come and dive Scotland. I knew that we would have a good time and do some good dives. But, it turned out to be beyond my wildest expectations, the diving, the charter and of course, St. Kilda with the sea birds and wildlife. Will we be back? You bet! I would highly recommend this trip to any diver and non diver. The feeling you get in Kilda is that you are on the edge of the world. The wild, pristine beauty is something you'll never forget.



Divers are, from left to right: Back row, Jeremy Quinn, Mike Steinbrecher. Middle row, Heike Weichert, Jonathan Phillips, Scott Maxwell, Mark Henrys, Ekki Schepanski. Front row, Chris Edge, Gordon Smith, Craig Hunter, Steve Millard, Alex Gallego, Kim Smith.