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ONE LOCH CAN GO A LONG WAY

A night-time dip in Loch Long hooked **Nick and Caroline Robertson-Brown's** interest, and a return trip proved what a rich hunting ground this is for divers of all levels

Photographs by **NICK AND CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN**





Various blennies and gobies were found



Common crab

We got married in Arrochar, on the shores of Loch Long in Scotland, over 11 years ago, so it holds a very special place in our hearts already, but we had never dived in any of the Scottish sea lochs before. We had also been past this area on our way to dive the wrecks in the Sound of Mull, admiring the amazing scenery, with mountains dropping right to the water's edge, but we had never pulled over and got in the water. That was until the latter part of last year, when we completed the first of the 3 Deeps Challenge at a dive site called Finnart in Loch Long. This was a night dive, in the very early morning, as we were in the water at 6.30am, in complete darkness, and had to rush through the dive to be on time for the rest of the challenge. But even with this limited first taste of what the Scottish lochs had to



Seastars litter the seabed



The supports were full of life

offer, we were hooked! On this morning-night dive, we explored the remains of a concrete pier that had been blown up and had sunk to the seabed. The structure is now covered in life, with anemones, sea squirts and peacock worms covering the sides of the demolished pier and you can find dogfish and squat lobster hiding in the crevices. As we set off towards England, and the next dive in the challenge, we both looked at each other and decided we had to return as soon as possible to spend some more-relaxed diving time in this area.

Impatience got the better of us and, in fact, we came back the very next week - and this time we had three days to get more acquainted with the many dive sites that are available to divers along Loch Long. We stayed in Arrochar, which is a picturesque village at the very top of the loch. Loch Long translates as 'Ship Lake', although it is also indeed very long, at 20 miles from its tip in Arrochar to the sea. Arrochar is nestled on the shoreline, opposite a rugged mountain called The

Cobbler (or Ben Arthur), where there is magnificent walking and views for some above-water images. It is a perfect location to be based as all the dive sites, on both shores, are just a short drive away. There are also plenty of local eateries to keep you fed and watered. Try the Pit Stop for a quick break, hot drink and snack between dives. Arrochar also has an excellent (and licenced) village hall, where groups of divers can meet up and hold events.

Loch Long is a sea loch. This means that it is connected to the sea, has tides and all the marine life you would expect in shallow waters around the coastline, but in a sheltered lake-type environment. As plenty of cold rain water rushes down the mountains into the lochs, fresh water sits on top of the salt water in the first half metre or so, forming a halocline/thermocline that you cannot fail to see as you descend on your dive.

For our first dive, we chose to have a look at an old pier that used to be part of a torpedo testing range in World War Two. There



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

Loch Long, Scotland

How to get there

Loch Long is situated about a 45-minute drive from Glasgow along the A82, which offers some of the most-beautiful scenery you could care to drive through. Pass along the side of Long Lomond and head for the small village of Arrochar.

When to go

You can dive in Loch Long throughout the year. The winter months will see temperatures drop dramatically, but there is still plenty of marine life to see. As most of the loch is sheltered from the worst of the weather, it is a great choice when the wind is blowing elsewhere. In the summer months, when the sea water has warmed up, locals insist that you regularly see basking sharks, whales, dolphins and seals!

Dive centres

There are dive centres in Glasgow and Oban, and air fills can be obtained at a local campsite that offers this facility in the summer months.

“Seals also like to make a visit to investigate divers and in the summer you can even get basking sharks”

Expect to pay

Free shore diving around a number of sites just a short drive from your base in Arrochar.

Where to eat and meet

The Village Inn in Arrochar offers an excellent range of beers and food to keep you going in the evening after diving. Make sure you also try The Pitstop for hot drinks and snacks between dives at lunchtime. While the village is not huge, it has a good range of shops, accommodation and eateries that will keep any diver happy.



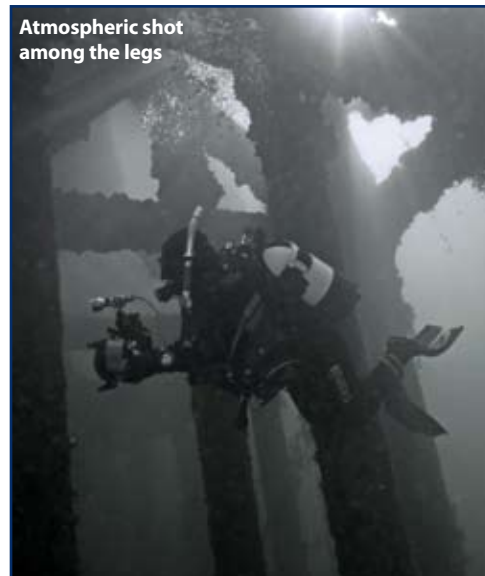
Loch Long makes a fine destination for some UK shore diving, and its sheltered location means it is always an option if the weather has blown out your original dive location.



“Our short visit only allowed us to get a taste of the diving in this area and we plan to go back as soon as possible to take in some more of this great diving location”

are plenty of areas to pull in your car, gear-up and simply walk down a path into the water. We found a suitable entry point and dived towards the pier, coming across hundreds of tiny nudibranchs in the areas of kelp that clings to the silty seabed. Once at the pier, we discovered that the wooden legs are completely covered in mussels, with myriad starfish feeding on the open shells below, creating a carpet of shells beneath. In the winter months, you will see common whelks laying huge mounds of eggs, and all year round there are many species of crab also taking the pickings on offer here. Anemones also find space to create their home on the pier structure. We dived it as the autumn leaves were just starting to fall, creating an orange carpet on the water surface, illuminated by that great northern sunlight above us. It was a great start to our short break and now we were keen to go back to Finnart to see if it was as good in the daylight. It did not

Atmospheric shot among the legs



Conger eels

disappoint. We chose to stay above 18m on our first day, but you can certainly go deeper. In some areas, the seabed slopes gently to the depths, but there are also wall dives where rocks plummet to over 50m deep.

As the weather was glorious, we decided to take a late-afternoon drive up to Oban, through some of the most-spectacular scenery you would ever care to see. We filled our tanks while up at Puffin Dive Centre, but there are nearer places to get air fills! Nearer locations to get a fill include Glasgow or Inverary. To finish off a perfect day's diving, we ate at The Village Inn, which is a lovely pub with good food and excellent beers from the local micro-brewery - great refreshment after a day in the loch.

For our final two dives, we decided to dive a site called Conger Alley. This is a popular site for local divers, with plenty of marine life. The dive has easy parking and access to the water with a path leading right down to the water's edge. Once in, you navigate to a boulder reef covered in sea squirts

and anemones to hunt in the crevices for congers. It takes a while to get your eye in, but we did eventually find some! The marine life found in this area is prolific, with blennies in every crevice, wrasse and pollock darting around, as well as conger eels and huge scorpionfish. Go deeper and the seabed turns to mud and silt, but here you will find firework anemones and sea pens in the darker, deeper water.

While we were there a whale was spotted in the loch, but alas it did not come and see us while we were diving. Seals also like to make a visit to investigate divers and in the summer you can even get basking sharks.

Our short visit only allowed us to get a taste of the diving in this area and we plan to go back as soon as possible to take in some more of this great diving location. Dive sites with alluring names like The Caves and Tunnels still have to be discovered. There is plenty of diving in other lochs nearby too, and with Oban and Lochaline further north, this area could keep you busy for weeks at a time. If the sea conditions are rough, then this is a perfect place to find shelter and still get some great diving in, even if the weather is against you elsewhere.

Arrochar is almost the perfect village for divers, with plenty of accommodation available. While it is very busy with walkers and people on tours in the peak season in summer, come here out of season and you will get great deals and plenty of choice. There are campsites, caravan parks, B&Bs and hotels to choose from. With a couple of pubs, and the Pit Stop café, there is no difficulty in finding somewhere to meet up and discuss the days diving over some food and drink. ■