

Dive Report

Ireland (Magharee Islands Co Kerry) June 17th –20th 2005

Although I understood the logic behind Nick's planning – maximise the number of dives and minimise the number of days off work – I hadn't quite realised what this entailed. It wasn't until we were loading Nick's van on Thursday evening to drive up from Totnes to Fishguard for the 2am ferry, that it dawned on me what Nick's plan was, we would travel at night giving three full days of diving, all we had to do was not sleep!

The first part of the trip went very well, we arrived in Fishguard just after midnight with plenty of time to take in the sights and smells of the port. Paul Slemmings celebrated our arrival by cracking open a few beers that he had been threatening to drink since leaving Totnes. No offence to the Norwegians, but the Stena ferry, which plies the route from Fishguard to Rosslare, is a bit of a dump. If it were cleaned up a bit, and with some care and attention, it would make a superb artificial reef.

The pasties under the heat lamp in the bar cabinet looked as if they had been there several weeks. So we settled for a few pints of Guinness and a packet of cheese and onion crisps. Three pints later, and after a couple of hours sleep; we were on the road from Rosslare heading for the west coast of Ireland. It's only about 200 miles on the map but driving across Ireland hasn't changed much since I left my homeland twenty years ago. Six hours later we pulled into Castlegregory, Co. Kerry.

We were tired and hungry so it was a joy to find ourselves in probably the most relaxed dive centre/hotel you could imagine and with the added attraction of a gastronomic restaurant. "You're just in time for lunch" said Mrs Fitzgibbon "the special today is grilled mackerel, just caught this morning". Lovely!

The Waterworld Centre, in Castlegregory, is owned by Ronnie and Pat Fitzgibbon and as we tucked into our fresh mackerel their daughter, Sandra, gave us a briefing about the centre and the diving ahead. "Perhaps you'd like to have a wee nap after lunch and then maybe we could arrange a dive for later this afternoon" she enquired. This was turning into exactly the sort of relaxed diving holiday we had hoped for.

The Magharee Islands (also known as Seven Hogs, although not by anyone we met) are a group of rocky islets just off the Magharee headland on the north side of the Dingle peninsula. The headland separates Tralee bay from Brandon bay and is surrounded by a horseshoe of mountains. The tallest of these is the enigmatic and mystical Mount Brandon, which, as well as being one of the tallest mountains in Ireland, is inhabited by fairies. Strangely enough we never saw the top of Mt Brandon the whole time we were there, on the day we arrived the sea and sky collided in an extraordinary palette of dark greys and blue-black, but even

on the clearer days the summit was shrouded in mist and cloud. It would be easy to believe that the top of Brandon was the realm of all sorts of mythical beasts and gaelic hero's, and this possibility we discussed over several pints each evening.

Whether you believe the myths or not it is certain that this is one of the most beautiful coastlines in the world. It evokes a sense of melancholy, a timeless sadness, something in the way the peat covered mountains curve into the sea, or drop from sheer cliffs, silent and still except for the breaking waves below, the call of seabirds and the advancing shades of light as the Atlantic fronts roll in. The sense of sadness is heightened if you know a little about the history of the west of Ireland, especially in the famine years, which were heaped with death and desperate immigration. I'm sure this was in our thoughts as we walked along the cliffs and stopped next to the outline of the old stone cottages abandoned at this time.



Nick and Paul on Brandon



5 Mile Beach

The Diving

“Relaxed diving” that’s what we wanted and that’s exactly what we got. It wouldn’t be a good location for techie/reckie divers, we didn’t do any dives below 25m, but around the islands the marine life was superb. We got our gear together and loaded the van each morning at a civilised 9am, then had a spot of breakfast before walking the 100 yards down to the small harbour to load the rib. The islands were a short ride away and we were able to do two dives and be back for a late lunch. The rest of the day we could go walking along the beautiful long beaches or just sit and watch the light dance across the sea as the clouds swept in from the west. As if by magic each evening the clouds cleared and we were treated to a long sunset as we made our way to the pub for a couple of dark ones.

The marine life was similar to Devon, just a lot more of it and seemingly bigger. Nick and I were hovering above the kelp on our second dive when the biggest

dogfish (Bull Huss) I have ever seen swam beneath us and settled for a photo call. Then just to add to the scene a conger eel swam over and seemed to check out the dogfish before leisurely swimming away. We also saw quite a few lobsters, 2 or 3 on each dive, and big crayfish, which I have never seen in Devon. Around the rocks Tom Pot Blennies shared ledges with rows of prawns furiously feeding, on seeing this Nick patted his stomach appreciatively and made a gesture of breaking open heads and dipping into chilli sauce. Another highlight was a beautiful scorpion fish perfectly camouflaged reddish pink and yellow against the seaweed and sponges.



Scorpion Fish



Large Bull Huss Dogfish



Lobster coming out to play



Bigger than the average crayfish

The visibility was at times superb, especially at the start of the dive known as “the Gully” on Inishtooskert, when we descended into an overhanging cavern and made our way along a boulder-strewn gully. The only down side on some of the dives was the amount of kelp, but once you got in amongst it the marine life was superb. On one dive we came across a rock face, the base of which looked as if it had been scoured daily by the sea, it was so smooth with what looked like man made circular holes about the size and smoothness of large cooking pots, testament to the winter storms along this coast. Yet even here lived beautiful Snakelocks and Dahlia anemones securely buried into the bare rocks.

I was surprised by the lack of tidal currents around the islands. When we asked about slack water times at the dive centre they just laughed. I suppose that because the islands are so exposed to the wide Atlantic, with no channel or headlands to funnel the water (as we have around Devon) the tidal energy is dissipated into a slow heave and trough. Instead of tidal energy we experienced the energy from the oceanic swell coming in from the Atlantic. Even on a calm day, and below 20m, you could still feel the push and tug of the ocean.

In all we did six dives, five around the Magharee islands and on the last day we made the longer boat trip across the bay to dive beneath the cliffs of Mount Brandon. Although this was not the best dive; the swell was strong enough to stir up the bottom and made swimming a matter of fin like fury and then grab on to something immovable, it was the most memorable. As we kitted up beneath the towering cliffs of Brandon, with seabirds overhead and a big sea lifting our rib, I thought this is really crazy. I looked across at Nick, Paul and Viv and guessed that they must be thinking the same thing judging by the big stupid grins on their faces.

In all it was a great trip, relaxed diving in good company. I would definitely recommend the location to anyone looking for good marine life or photographic diving, especially if you have the family with you and want to spend plenty of time out of the water.

Report Johnny Gowdy. Pictures Nick Booth