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ICE DIVING

RUSSIA'S BEST DIVE SECRET





A diver surfaces after a successful ice dive, but you just have to ask yourself one question – why? Brrr...

Express. This monster of a train leaves Moscow like clockwork, stopping at a few stations to allow you to get off and stretch your legs. Russia was not prepared for Diving Leisure London! Taking full opportunity of this intermission to partying, 13 Brits would jump off dressed in boots, shorts, T-shirts and Cossack hats and proceed to have snowball fights. Then it was back into our sleeper carriage to party until another break some six hours later.

The Arctic Circle Dive Centre, which is now in its third year of operation, consists of approximately six pine wooden villas built in an Alpine style, which are all set back in a wood around Nilma in Kandalaksha Bay, or the Velikaya Salma Channel. The town consisted of six houses, of which only two were occupied during the winter – and this was by the dive centre staff! The next nearest town is 35km away. Other than the snow-frozen bay, there is nothing but forests and lakes for hundreds of miles.

The accommodation provided by the dive centre is extremely good, the food plentiful and, to top it all, there is a Russian steam bath, known as a Banya, which after a hard day's diving was incredibly relaxing. In true Russian-style, everybody strips off naked and enters a

sauna room. Here the temperature is raised by throwing water on to heated stones until the steam becomes so unbearable you are forced to run outside and roll in the snow. Being naked with your friends could be embarrassing, but being naked with beautiful Russian women was not so bad!

Skidoos are provided to transport you backwards and forwards from the ice dive camps. This has got to be one of the most exciting and pleasurable ways of getting to any dive site. Pulling two carts, the skidoos race from the dive centre out across the frozen bay passing fishing boats that have been trapped in the winter's ice. The skidoo meanders around the rocky, forest-lined shores until suddenly it turns out to sea, racing across the frozen water until it reaches the first of the ice camps at Christoviy Island (Island with a cross).

The mobile camp sites are impressive and absolutely necessary. Made from light wood and built on skis, these would follow you everywhere, even if you were only going five metres to your mina hole (ice hole). Food and hot drinks were available all day in the catering cabin, giving you that extra warmth and energy. The temperature in the water only drops to around $-1-2^{\circ}\text{C}$, but on the surface they can be as low as -30°C , we



Could this be a new Olympic sport?



The mobile diving camp sites

were lucky only experiencing -15°C . Even at this temperature, standing around wet is an unwise thing to do.

Sea ice is formed when the whole of



Divers prepare to jump into the ice hole



Nudibranch under the ice



Even jellyfish can survive the cold

the sea drops to around -1 to -2°C. As the ice forms, the salt content is squeezed out of the water forming pockets of sea water that contain a high concentration of salt. This gives the surface a spongy consistency in comparison to fresh water. Fresh water will start to freeze once the temperature has reached a low enough level. Ice then forms from the surface down, but the opposite in the sea. Two other major differences when considering either fresh or sea ice diving are the environments themselves. The White Sea is subjected to tidal movements which average about one metre at a time. This has the effect of compacting the ice into magnificent shapes under water, allowing different coloured light through the ice at any given place. There are also currents, so you need to know where you can create a mina and it is not just a question of finding strong enough ice!

The other important consideration is the aquatic life itself. Fresh water environments tend to go into a form of hibernation with most plant species dying off and fish burying themselves



Under a layer of ice, a diver examines the coral growth on the rocky bottom

during the winter period, whilst the marine environment continues with beautiful kelp formations, coral growths and anemones of amazing colour. The fish life is also abundant with plenty of wolf eels to confirm the reef's healthy status quo.

The two main areas of diving are Cross Island, with the various locations scattered around it, and Bio Filter Bay, which is some distance away and across the channel from the main site.

BIO FILTER BAY

Bio Filter Bay is approximately 30 minutes Skidoo ride across the sea to a rocky cliff face on the far side of the channel. It was a relaxing ride until somebody pointed out that the depth of water below us was at least 55m!

Around the base of the cliff is a belt of solid ice one metre high and one metre thick. The frozen sea rises and falls against this belt with every tide. The belt acts as a kind of bearing allowing the frozen sea to move effortlessly up and down. The sea, whilst appearing flat on the surface, has amazing ice formations under water, all around the cliff face. The shapes are incredible, sometimes allowing shafts of light to break through from the surface, other times areas will show incredible colours of glowing yellows and greens, even soft blues. At the base of the cliff approximately six-eight metres below the surface is a kelp forest which grows around the rocks and rises up to the ice. Below this ledge the depth drops away to a sandy bottom 16 metres below in the darkness.

The scenery is absolutely stunning, brilliant white ice, to ice with a hint of

blue, stretch out above you. Ice formations descend down the cliff face to meet the rocks where a kelp garden grows, stretching up to an amazing display of lights. To photograph this scene is actually a difficult challenge as each image fails to tell the whole story of this magnificent panoramic view. A stark contrast between the brilliant white and darkness a few feet below makes lighting a difficult choice. For me, this was the best of all the sites encountered and must go down as one of Russia's best kept secrets. I have known groups of divers to spend their whole time just at the Bio Filters, mesmerised by the tranquillity that awaits you each time you slide through the ice hole.

CROSS ISLAND

Cross Island was our main destination for most of the diving. A small island that no longer plays host to a cross and now only consists of a collapsing hut, which is used as refuge by lost travellers and by divers for barbecues at night! Around the island are a number of dive sites, all offering a variety in topic and terrains.

Shallow Place is a large patch of shelf that gentle slopes up to the island. On top of the shelf is a kelp forest that stretches up to the surface of the ice. The kelp is alive with small crustaceans and fish. This is generally used as a check out dive but is an excellent sight for photography.

Anemone Rock is the main attraction on the island. This is a very large rock resting in approximately 18m beneath the ice. It is covered in orange, yellow and white anemones. In the cracks you'll find wolf eels and large red shrimps. 🐡

TRAVEL FACTS

RUSSIA
WHITE SEA**WHERE IS IT?**

In the far north of Russia, a long haul from Moscow.

HOW TO GET THERE?

You have to fly to Moscow, then take the train out to Chupa, from where it is another three hours by truck.

VISAS

You will require a visa and a Russian invitation before you arrive, so contact a specialist tour operator – such as Dive Worldwide – to sort it all out.

WHEN TO GO?

February, March and April are the optimum times to go ice-diving in the White Sea. Too early in the year and it is just too cold and harsh, too late and the ice is starting to melt.

LANGUAGE

Russian, but English is spoken by the dive centre staff.

CURRENCY

The dive centre uses US dollars (£1 = US\$1.80)

TIME ZONE

GMT +5.

HEALTH

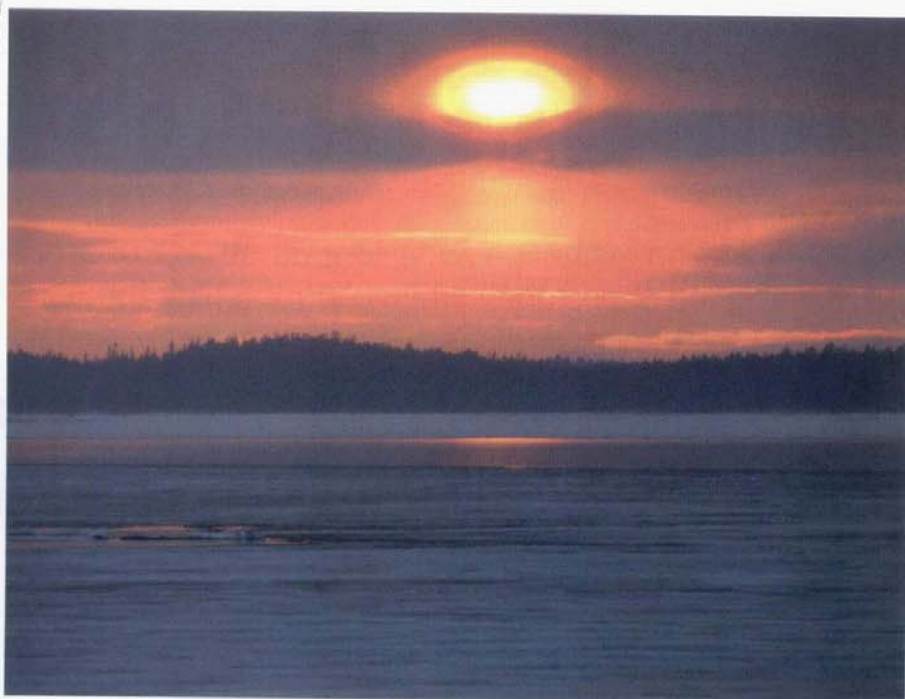
No jabs required.

DIVE CENTRES

Arctic Circle Dive Centre
www.ice-diving.com

TOUR OPERATORS

Dive Worldwide
www.diveworldwide.com



Sunset over a frozen bay in Russia's White Sea

The top of the rock reaches up to within 5m of the surface, providing a dramatic contrast for photographic images. This was certainly the second best sight after the Bio Filters.

USE THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

A word of warning for anybody intending to go ice diving. Your regulator equipment must be up to the job. If your equipment is not brand new, you will need to take a test certificate to prove that it has been serviced. You will be dealing with extreme conditions and equipment failure is something you don't want to add to your task loading. If you are considering purchasing new equipment, then consider something that has been designed for the job, such as the environmentally sealed Scubapro Mk17.

Also, the water temperatures are very cold, reducing your in-water times considerably. If you want to make the most of your diving, you will need sufficient thermal clothing. Multiple layers are far better than one or two thick layers. I personally used four layers of thinsulate clothing under my drysuit. You will need at least two sets of these, in case one set gets wet. If you are wet and on the surface, you will suffer from the cold! While the air is dry and feels relatively warm in comparison to the Alps, it is actually in the region of -15 to -30°C and will give you severe frostbite if you are careless about your body warmth.

GETTING TO THE WHITE SEA

To book the dive centre, it is recommended that you contact a



There's always time to tan!

specialist tour operator, such as Dive Worldwide. You will require a visa and a Russian invitation before you travel and this will be arranged by them, along with the itinerary for your tour. The various diplomatic protocols can often be long-winded and difficult to satisfy and are best left to a professional body.

TAKE THE CHALLENGE AND BE REWARDED

You don't need a massive variety of sites to dive while ice diving, what you do need are dramatic ice formations and an underlying terrain that provides a strong contrast to the ice above you. The rock and the kelp forests provide positive differences, which complement the ice formations. You also need a good selection of marine life and the White Sea has an abundance.

The diving itself is a challenge – it's hard work but it's great fun. The rewards you will have in terms of stunning diving and self-satisfaction cannot be quantified. This has got to be one of the most rewarding trips I have ever taken. ■



RuDIVER Group

Arctic Circle Dive Centre

Ice Diving at the White Sea



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