

Summer 2023 **OCTOPRESS**

Wellington Underwater Club Newsletter

Topics

- About Duckling
- Club Scooters
- The Italian Job
- Russian Reconnaissance
- Meet the committee

Upcoming Trips & Events

Monthly WUC Dives: The Committee are each taking turns to organise monthly club dives in the first weekend of each month; register your interest by email or on the Facebook site and let us know if there's a spot you really want to explore, .

January 7 2024

Long term forecast looks promising – register your interest on the Facebook event. Location will be advised nearer the time, based on conditions.

February (Date TBC) 2024

Summer 2023-2024

Welcome to the Summer edition of Octopress, finally getting underway again with a new editorial team and quite a new-look committee. The weather hasn't been overly summery yet but Wellington Underwater Club members are regularly scuba diving, training, and photographing underwater locally, nationally, and internationally.

Successful club trips to the Mikhail Lermontov shipwreck took place in May and November (more on May trip later) and members and groups of members have travelled to various Aotearoa diving hotspots, as well as Tasmania, Canada, Vanuatu, Niue, Bikini Atoll, Phillipines and many, many more in pursuit of diving experiences.

About Duckling

WUC members regularly arrange trips to off-shore dive spots on Duckling, with owners and WUC members Gerald and Elizabeth. Minimum qualification for diving off the boat is Advanced Open Water. Divers need to bring all of their own gear and equipment, and must carry a reel and SMB. Duckling takes four divers for each two dive trip, and trips require a full boat. Destination and timing is weather / tide dependent. To join WUC members on Duckling, email Gerald & Elizabeth at duckling@technicalhorizons.co.nz



Duckling on Lake Taupō - Regan McGillicuddy

Club scooters

The Wellington Underwater Club committee has made the tough decision that our underwater scooters have reached their use-by date as club loan equipment is concerned. The scooters have after-market batteries and have reached a point in their life cycle where our resident expert in lithium ion batteries believes that we can no longer vouch for their safety given a lack of local expertise to maintain them regularly. We will provide updates when we figure out an appropriate way to manage their disposal or sale.

Octopress contributions

We have had some fantastic contributions from WUC members for Octopress recently.

Please email photos/stories/underwater updates/planned trips/memorable dive sites to judyormandy@hotmail.com or alison-grant@xtra.co.nz for us to share in the club newsletter.



Wellington City - Regan McGillicuddy

The Italian Job

Diving There and Back Again... Passing by the Land of the Rising Sun!

By Dario Spallotta

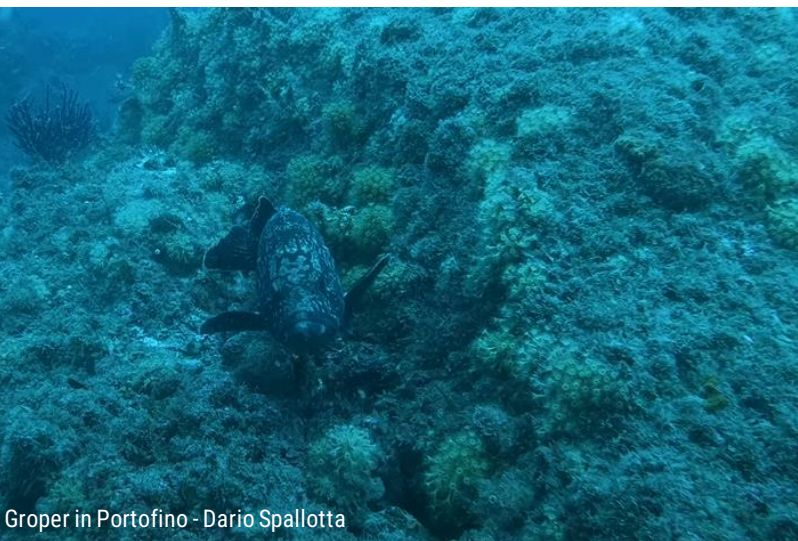
The Portofino Lighthouse as seen from the boat - Dario Spallotta

One of the side effects of being a diver is constantly checking whether the location we're traveling to has some nice diving spots that we can explore. That was the exact symptom I was affected by last month when traveling home to Italy to visit the family (that was the official excuse). And since I had planned to stop in Japan on the way back to New Zealand, why not make it a mini-tour of different diving centres around the world? It sounded like a great idea, and it worked out partially.

In New Zealand, the word "Portofino" probably makes you think of an Italian restaurant chain, but in reality, Portofino is one of the finest and most exclusive harbours (nevertheless, "Portofino" means "Fine Harbor") hidden between the cliffs of Italy's northwestern coast. There, I could finally visit the Portofino Divers centre (which being GUE certified was even more attractive for a new GUE fellow like me) and had two dives around the beautiful Lighthouse area of the marine bio-park. I was very excited because it was my first dive ever in Italy, and I was extremely curious to see how the underwater environment differed from the one down under. On a more philosophical level, it was like rediscovering my own country thanks to the experiences I had somewhere else, far, far away.

As I jumped in for my first dive, the cold made me immediately think of the Wellingtonian waters, while the visibility, even if objectively good, was like the North Island during one of its worst days. After fighting a strong current around the lighthouse wall, my buddies and I could start relaxing and focusing on the environment around us. I was very impressed by the schools of barracudas and the huge groupers quietly hovering at the bottom, with their clearer dotted patterns resembling old and tired soldiers, still in charge of guarding the marine treasures.

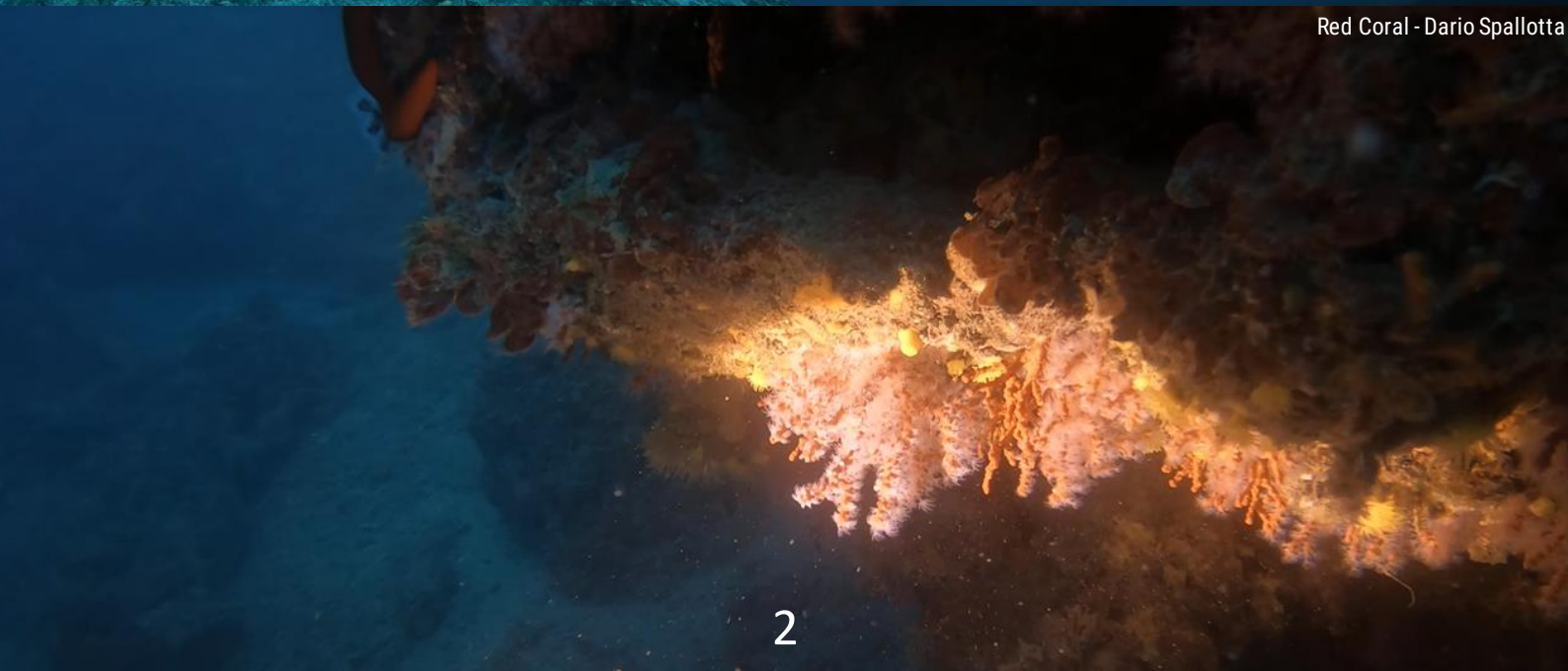
Even if not as fishy as New Zealand's, Portofino's underwater world hosts a wide variety of environments: forests of purple soft coral Gorgonians, many different types of sponges (i.e., Crambe Crambe, Crella Elegance, Chondrilla Nucula, just to name a few), and the very distinctive red coral. In search of the latter, we ventured down to a depth of about 30m, as it only grows below that level (and only 1mm per year!). With my extremely competent guide helping, I was really fascinated by the tiny red branches and seeing the coral in its natural environment.



Grouper in Portofino - Dario Spallotta



Barracuda - Dario Spallotta



Red Coral - Dario Spallotta



The Italian Job continued:

The second dive was no less interesting. As I grew more confident with the local currents and visibility, I spotted more groupers (huge ones!) and barracudas, anemones, different types of sponges, and fields of Posidonia. After the dive, I visited the Portofino natural park, and it was interesting to see the diving spot from the Lighthouse cliff, closing the loop and meditating on how beautiful those waters were just a few hours before. As I departed from Portofino, I felt very grateful for the wonderful experience the Portofino Divers provided, with their competence and care. Definitely a place to come back to (especially if you are a GUE diver)!



The trip was not over, though, as Japan was waiting for me. Atami, in the Shizuoka prefecture, just one hour (by bullet train) south of Tokyo, is home to another GUE community that I really wanted to meet. But because of the Golden Week (when literally everyone is on holiday) and a very rainy day, I had to cancel the dive and realize that the sun was only in the name of the Atami main beach. I opted for a walk instead, through the bay and up to the castle from which you can see Atami in all its cuteness. The trip was not over, though, as Japan was waiting for me. Atami, in the Shizuoka prefecture, just one hour (by bullet train) south of Tokyo, is home to another GUE community that I really wanted to meet.



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However, Atami was not my final destination. During the last days in the Land of the Rising Sun, my companions and I were extremely lucky to be hosted by a very special friend who lives on the remote Island of Okinoerabu, 7 hours by ferry north of Okinawa. Even though SCUBA diving was not feasible due to budget and logistics, we were able to do some freediving in different sites around the main town. It was probably the best underwater scenery I have ever seen so far: over 20 meters of visibility, coral everywhere, white-tip sharks, sea snakes (lots of them!), cuttlefish, and of course... beautiful sea turtles! Following them underwater was simply magical (and also useful for stealing competent tips about peak buoyancy!) observing them eating or gracefully gliding away over the sandy bottom. It was

a completely different experience from Portofino: technical versus physical, a fancy civilized location versus a remote and wild island. The diverse diving experience was over, but as I returned to New Zealand, blessed and enriched by all that I saw, I couldn't stop thinking about when I would visit those places again and, of course, when the next adventure would be.



Russian Reconnaissance

The plane trip is a game-changer for the Lermontov; while Ben spent four or more hours catching the interisland ferry, shopping for supplies in Picton and making the three hour washout-riddled drive out to Lermontov Lodge, the rest of us worked to pay for our dive addictions. Less than two hours after leaving Lower Hutt at the end of the day, our Cessna was landing on the narrow bush-bordered slope of the Port Gore airfield. From there, the lodge is a ten minute boat trip, so well before dinnertime we were settling in for four days exploring one of the world's bigger and more complicated shipwrecks. We'd diligently planned a ferry trip back to avoid decompression illness, but at a maximum altitude of 714m, we flew no higher than the peak of the Tirangi Road, which makes a return flight a great prospect for maximising dive time on future trips.

Our group of seven for the trip spanned a breadth of wreck diving experience. Judy and Regan, with seemingly miles of dive reels between them, hoped to find new corners of the wreck; Ben was back for his Tech Diving course after a not-so-dry-suit incident stymied the last attempt; Jeremy, with his recent tropical wreck diving training, was ready to tackle something colder and murkier; Steve and Andy, keen to explore everything available to them without wreck training; and me, Alison, returning to the Lermontov to get my wreck certification and explore more and longer than in my last-minute trip in September 2022.

Fortunately the Mikhail Lermontov, which sank mid-cruise in February 1986, had something for all of us. At 176m, lying on her starboard side, there's plenty of exterior and decks for the inexperienced wreck or cold water diver, and the port propeller is genuinely impressive rising out of the gloom. Potential penetration dives span a wide variety of difficulty levels. Take a simple mosey along the open promenade deck and peer down into the ship's innards through windows and doors, enter and swim straight up through the bridge, or explore the tiled pool or chandelier-bedecked Bolshoi Lounge, all within the light penetration zones of the ship. More experienced wreck divers can embark on dives through the ship's interior and plan deco dives into its darkest reaches. As your skills develop there are plenty of new spots and new routes to discover, or you can opt to re-explore the eerie spaces and objects in ever-increasing detail. If you're a naturalist, the wreck is a home for plenty of fish species, individual and schooling. Invertebrates coat every surface, carpet sharks perch tamely, and an enormous Packhorse Lobster has taken over the helm. Ranging from 13m depth to 40m, below the actual sea floor, the challenge mostly comes from visibility, a complicated overhead environment and nearly four decades of silt.

The scope of the wreck is vast, but eight dives is enough to cross off a number of the better-known spots around the ship, and still have plenty to leave for a future visit. With two of us to train in different courses on this trip, Go Dive Pacific's Justin O'Connor had four training dives each mapped out across three of the four days, with time for us to explore independently as well.

Conditions were fairly balmy on the Friday, with about five metres of visibility. Saturday morning was choppy, with bad weather headed our way, so we got two dives in early and fled for the comfort of the lodge (sadly leaving my camera rig on the silty sea floor after a d-ring catastrophe at the surface.) By Sunday morning surface conditions were perfect, but visibility was barely two metres, "the worst all year" according to Justin. That suited wreck diving certification with its line tying and lost buddy procedures just fine, while the others all fled for the relative clarity of the wreck interior... or tried to.

Steve and Andy quickly found a challenge in making their way to the Bridge; half of their six dives were spent finding the window entrance in the murk at 30-32m depth. Meanwhile Regan and Judy had formulated a grand plan to explore the restaurant deck and find their way to the crew mess. That plan quickly expanded through Saturday and into Sunday once they realised they'd laid enough lines between them to make it nearly possible to traverse that deck aft to fore. Planning ensued to lay the rest of the required lines. Ben, having completed his tech diving course on Saturday, set off with Jeremy to explore the Promenade, Wintergarden and Boat Decks, and somehow also beat Steve and Andy to the Bridge, while I got on with overcomplicating my tie offs and narrowly avoiding losing my reel into the depths of the ship.

It was a happy group indeed that reconvened on the boat after our sixth dive on Sunday afternoon; all goals for the day met despite the conditions. The advanced wreck divers had succeeded in their mission to enter at the hospital, skirt the engine room and pass through restaurant and kitchens to exit at the crew mess, Steve and Andy found the Bridge (third time lucky) and met Captain Packhorse, Ben and Jeremy were delighted with their exploration of the restaurant deck's multiple bars, and I was a newly certified wreck diver.

Come Monday we were down to only four divers and a headache surface photographer, as well as Justin, rather tired from training us, feeding us and keeping us topped up with breathable gases after his boss Brent came down sick. Visibility was mildly improved, but still murky enough that Jeremy and I were chuffed to successfully find and explore the Bolshoi and Panorama Lounges and Nevsky Bars on our seventh dive, and the pool and engine room on our eighth. Our NDLs prevented a thorough exploration of the latter, but finding the entrance and performing a three point turn inside was enough to keep me happy, especially since I'd also succeeded in petting a carpet shark. I surfaced grinning like mad, while Judy and Regan bickered over their respective line-laying techniques, having recovered all their reels.

There are so many experiences to get on and in the Lermontov. It has gloom and eeriness in abundance, areas of genuine beauty, serious 80s Soviet tackiness, and a bit of the macabre as well. For Wellington and South Island divers, a trip to the wreck is a fantastic option for anyone wanting to get a wreck, deep or technical certification signed off, and the Lodge is a great spot to escape the world (you can just stubbornly refuse to connect to the Starlink internet) and hang out with your favourite dive buddies. Regan was making plans for another club trip in November by the time we left and Lermontov is such a WUC favourite there'll be many more; fly rather than ferry to book your trip!

Alison Grant

Meet the Committee

Regan McGillicuddy – President and Doer of Many Things

Our president's the very definition of a polymath
Though not above a prank with a cray carapace, to Judy's wrath.
Twin tanks, a drysuit and a decompression dive plan is his bent;
He is the very model of a modern dive club president.

We begged him for a bio or we'd have to write one for the scamp.
That's why you have this ditty as he's disappeared on a tramp.
His PLB's intact this time, he's somewhere sheltering in a tent;
He is the very model of a modern dive club president.

Our president can sort IT or plan a dive or cook gourmet;
You hit upon an interest of his then he can talk all day.
Apparently there's two of him, his land-based twin is congruent;
He is the very model of a modern dive club president [Ed.]

Geoff Andrews - Website

In life, I am often in over my head and swimming against the current. I guess that is better than being up the creek without a paddle? Seriously, I find diving a fun and challenging hobby with like-minded friends who are happy to lend me a paddle.

Erin Hewetson - Website

Erin has been a diver since 2017, diving mostly in Australia and Southeast Asia until returning to New Zealand in 2020. She is now studying towards her Masters in Marine Conservation and works part time as a marine mammal observer [Ed. This is objectively the best job on this page.]



A model modern dive club president – Judy Ormandy

Don Peat – Treasurer

Don is an engineer who lives in Porirua. Running his own small business leaves him well-equipped to deal with the club finances. He's been rather slack at submitting a bio. We're alternating between concocting a great story about the money laundering he's about to do with everybody's \$20 club subscription fees... or simply saying, like all of us.. he loves diving.

Judy Ormandy – Secretary and Editor

Judy is an obsessive-compulsive scuba diver who spends as much time underwater as possible, usually attached to a camera. Her diving and travelling (to dive) exploits ensure that she won't be able to give up her day job [Ed: it is in fact very much an all-hours job] any time soon. Judy is tech trained and enjoys ferreting around deep inside wrecks. She is currently super excited about a planned diving trip to Antarctica next year. However, most of her dives are in the shallows of the Taputeranga Marine Reserve and Wellington Harbour and she feels exceptionally lucky to live in such a diving friendly city. Outside of diving, Judy is a slave to Te Whatu Ora and spends far too many hours inside hospital buildings (to pay for the diving.)

Alison Grant – Editor and Facebook Admin

In 2020 I made the unregrettable decision to give up my life as an almost permanently on call case-loading midwife in favour of a more predictable life with actual hobbies (and family, they're nice too.) Learning to dive was a way to spend a week-long Northland holiday and learn a skill for future overseas trips. However, it became clear that COVID was going to prevent much travel, so I idly wandered into the local shop to find out about club dives and buy myself a properly fitting wetsuit for the Wellington winter. Now, around 200 dives in, I have [Ed: so far] walked back early statements that I would only complete an open water cert; never wreck dive; would have no need for drysuits, rescue dive certification, sidemount or nitrox, let alone join a club committee. Fortunately I'm surrounded by whānau and buddies who only mock me a little for such blatant hypocrisy, and are happy to enable and/or accompany me on the many largely local dives I've done since my addiction developed. At present I dive almost exclusively sidemount, even when doing so is logistically ridiculous. I have begun to realise that configuration is the gateway drug to tech, since finding myself tweaking my set up in the garage on a Saturday night, and watching countless cave diving videos.



Inside the Lermentov – Judy Ormandy