

## *Scuba School Ltd – By Divemaster Adam Ward*

Farness Investigation my experience may differ from yours

Picture this, it's a cold Saturday morning (8am) I am grimacing ( having wrenched my back at 6:30 am, lifting weight out of my car on the harbour) as I try and get comfortable as I try and pull on my dry suit on an open decked boat that is rolling and swaying over moderate waves of the North Sea (an ocean that inspires exotic images such as Oil Rigs and the final scene of Get Carter, grim in other words) Why? Why am I doing this why did I not stay in my nice warm bed instead of opting to be drenched in cold sea spray on an equipment cluttered deck. This place has about as much in common with diving the warm turquoise waters of Sharm as Kansas has with Oz

The reason can be answered in one word **SEALS! I want to swim with seals**

After leaving the harbour it was a mere 20 minutes of bumps and roles until we weighed anchor at the Farne Isles and to every one's joy the seals were there in force with several of them coming out to inspect the boat but most just snoozing on the rocks ( I really didn't realise how many there were and much they howl) The Captain of the boat was a friendly and capable man who did not mince words but was happy to take the time to show a land lubber like me around the features of his boat this included a divers lift ( Great!!), and the latest addition an indoor toilet, this pride of the boat , upon closer inspection sat in the bow amongst the ropes and fishing tackle, and looked like a hastily improvised commode from an early 80's Protect and Survive pamphlet , but with the luxury of a curtain rail for modesty but sadly no curtain Hmm' I can tell from the look on Andreas face she is less enthusiastic about the toilet arrangements than I am, well I suppose we are all friends here and divers have little shame and any way I am here to see seals and there are now quite a few of them milling round the boat and some are quite big... really very big.

"They look friendly I commented to the Captain, "Are they ?

"Friendly enough" he said" Just remember this is their island, they are wild animals, oh and they have stronger bite than an adult lion, so let's hope there's no silly buggers amongst you and treat them with respect" "Oh ok"

Wild animals with a powerful bite that's reassuring, this place is starting to look a little more wild and foreboding , not quite Skull Island or the Farallons, but some were you might expect film white sharks for example.

So what other large creatures do you get showing up here?

"Oh all sorts, We get Minke Whales in the summer "

"And what are they like?

"They stink I mean really bad, Stinky Minkeys we call'em"

"Oh, right anything else? Any large predators perhaps?

"On occasion we get orcas but they are quite rare.

Do you ever see any sharks? White sharks for example?

"In all my time I have sailed these waters I have never seen any White Sharks or anything except Baskers

Ok that's good to know"

Of course there's always a first time for everything, its not like the North Sea's a land locked ocean and global warming can bring strange things up here"

" Really ?, thanks for that .

"I suppose round here you see all sorts of aquatic life in its natural environment"

I do, from Sun Fish to Porpoises and quite a few Dolphins as well"

I imagine that Dolphins are quite special" The Captain looks at me with incredulity as he answers with sincerity

"Dolphins are just a gang A\*\*\*HOLES and thugs they make every other creatures life around here a total misery they are apex predators and they have the smarts to know it and abuse it as well !

OK? Eat that Sharm this is U.K. diving honest and straight as it comes.

" Well thanks for the vivid and colourful descriptions " fully reassured now its time to get wet.

Once the 20 of us had managed to get set up (apologising as we constantly bumped into each other) and work out just how much weight we actually needed to sink in the North Sea while wearing a Dry suit and Once all the diving couples had completed their pre dive arguments there was just the formality of suffering at least one dry suit flooding before we were truly ready to descend as a group. Breath out squeeze nose blow all ear drums and down we go, WOW!

From the moment I went down I could tell that this was going to be a very different dive from the ones in Sharm The water was cool but not freezing the viz was about 5 meters and the bottom just 3 meters below was covered in a thick ominous blanket of Kelp that moved like a living entity (spooky) but no sharks to be seen anywhere except for the big ones at the back of my mind but also no Seals either, Bugger!!

Oh well we didn't come all this way for nothing so trusting the art of navigation to my worthy dive buddy we set off to find seals, the sea silent and foreboding broken only by the occasional honk from a so far invisible seal and the odd scream from me as I try in frustration to get my camera to focus on shadows flitting past in the murk only to take a photo of empty sea, this is getting tedious and bugger me is it hard to fin in this dry suit, it's harder than I remember it's like something's hanging off the back of my fins!!.....????AHH! SEALS!!!! I turned quickly to see the cheeky little so'n'so hanging on for all he was worth! Quickly I raise my camera to capture the magic of the moment and let off two flashes from the power button, AAAAHHH!!!! I HAVE SWITCHED IT OFF!!!!Well I saw it! It happened! And my buddy and long suffering partner Andrea saw it!! We look at each other before we notice a cheeky Seal shaped head poking out from the kelp mocking us before disappearing back down into the undergrowth. Time to get serious we descend as one into the dark foliage of the kelp to find that the Seal has long gone, but to my surprise swimming under the kelp is a far more interesting scenario than I had envisioned, for one the water is crystal clear and there is more space to swim than you would think, the rocky sea floor is awash with more colour than I thought possible reds purples and greens , there are sea urchins the size of large grapefruits and the whole sea floor is crawling with shellfish large shell fish! Edible crabs as big as any I have seen in the shops, Lobsters over a foot long scurrying for any crevice they can find, Spider crabs , Swimming velvet crabs with bright red eyes and too many prawns and hermit crabs to count! WOW! This isn't Seals but it pretty amazing and worth the 6 hour drive from Birmingham, I could swim through this for the rest of the dive but fortunately the Farnes had one more hidden treat for us to see.

Wedged in a small ravine obscured by Kelp we spot two plump Seals fast asleep ,carefully camera working by now, we get a good shot of these two before they suddenly wake, their spider senses tingling to the sound of clumsy bubbling divers, they give us a resigned look of disdain before disappearing into the Kelp, but we got it on film so time for a quick submerged high five. These seals make it look effortless but they are fast.

The dive concluded all too soon, we were hauled back aboard the boat by the excellent dive lift and the very helpful crew. Everyone was now grinning like a Cheshire cat, we had all seen something different and everyone wanted to go back in. The next three dives continued in this pattern but with the exception of the Seals getting bolder and interacting with us a lot more but at their discretion, One decided to play patter cake with me ( and dear me do they have big claws) while another decided to try and pull Andreas mask off( all caught on camera which is the important thing). There were many other encounters with the seals too numerous to cover in this article, all of them were unique and much treasured and every one came away from our Farnes trip with a story to tell, including one about a couple of Divers (not from our group)who got swept out into open sea by the current ,but sensibly they deployed their SMB and stayed together and were swiftly spotted and pick up by our skipper none the worse for wear highlighting the importance of never diving in the open ocean without your SMB.

What else can I say about the trip, the local town was friendly the food was excellent the parking was cheap but get there early if you want a space. The accommodation was good and reasonably priced and I didn't meet one local that wasn't friendly but with just the right amount of sarcasm in other words my kind of place.

I would also like to add a special thank you to all of the dive group who did everything they could to help load my equipment and support me ensuring that despite my injured back I did not miss a dive, THANK YOU, you all had a hand in making this dive weekend a great one.

No matter where you go to dive or what you see (with or without a working camera) , the people you share it with make the difference between a good dive and a great one and I feel this is where Scuba School wins hands down. I had good people watching my back (no pun intended) and made some new friends from the Redditch branch as well and came home with a smile on my face.

So would I go again? Would I recommend the Farnes ? Absolutely! People may think I am mad but I will stand by my claim that when its good (and it was) the Farnes can give the Red Sea a run for its money, it is a totally different diving experience and we only saw a small part of what the Farnes had to offer, I am told there are numerous ship wrecks and other Islands to explore both steeped in history , not to mention a castle or two. I for one will be back, maybe next time for a whole week , it's a tall order to convince others that the Farnes enjoys the same ambient temperatures as Cairo but I am ready to give it a go.

Summer holidays anyone?

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