

Stairway to heaven



by Peter Rowlands

A two and a half hour flight from London there is a dive site which must rank in the world's top ten. The visibility is in excess of 50 metres - guaranteed - and in theory one side of the dive is in America and the other is in Europe. Welcome to Silfra cracks, Thingvellir, Iceland.

Silfra is a dive into the earth's crust where it is very gradually splitting apart. The resulting cracks are filled with glacial water which melts and is filtered through the volcanic rocks. It is pure fresh water in an area with virtually no marine growth or life producing water clarity easily in excess of 50 metres. As if the visibility were not enough, the topography is not far from unique underwater.

Any downsides? Well, yes. The water may be crystal clear but it's only around 2°C and you have to walk all your equipment at least 50 metres over varied terrain. This is dry suit country for sure and you are unlikely to be able to go more than 30 minutes underwater before your hands stop co-operating and your brain loses its power to concentrate. It is physically very hard work but diving here is like nowhere else and the discomfort is but a fleeting irritation compared to the sensory overload this dive will produce.

It all started with an e mail from Charles Hood, senior correspondent at Dive Magazine here in the UK. How did I fancy a press trip to Iceland for 5 days in April? Like most things with me I said "Yes" without giving it any thought. It was only when I checked on the internet and found that the seawater temperature was around 5°C at this time of year that I realised I hadn't done a dry suit dive for a couple of years and even then it was in Cornwall in July when the water was a balmy 17°C.

Iceland Express is a low cost airline which has increased tourist numbers in Iceland significantly.



(Top) A panorama of the inland lakes and cracks at Silfra where the continental plates drift apart by 2 cm per year

*(Left) Little and Large at the diving platform at the beginning of the dive
(Below) A panorama of three shots at the lagoon at Silfra Cracks. The water is crystal clear with in excess of 50 metres visibility.*

Nikon D70, Subal housing, Nikon 10.5mm fisheye. F5.6 on Auto. Preset white balance. Available light





The diving in Iceland is very similar to the UK except the waters are colder. Nikon D70, Subal housing, 28-70mm lens, 2 x Inon Z220 strobes. 1/125th @ F11

They fly from London Stansted, Frankfurt and Copenhagen to Reykjavik on a daily basis. Well I say Reykjavik but actually the airport is in Keflavik which about 30 miles away but this is really handy because the dive center is in Keflavik!

The Dive Center was founded and built up by Tomas Knutsson, a go getting Iclander who has been diving these waters since the 1970's. He runs a very efficient centre and caters for small groups with varied itineraries. We had just four days to

sample the local dive sites which is obviously not enough but it gave us a taste of the diving which can best be described as similar to UK diving but with usually more marine life but much colder water. Most of the dives are from the shore but, weather permitting, inflatable and hard boat dives can be arranged.

On my first dive I managed to go for 30 minutes before my hands told me to get somewhere warmer or they were thinking about falling off. Fortunately I was not alone as



both Charlie and Tomas's hands were giving them the same ultimatum.

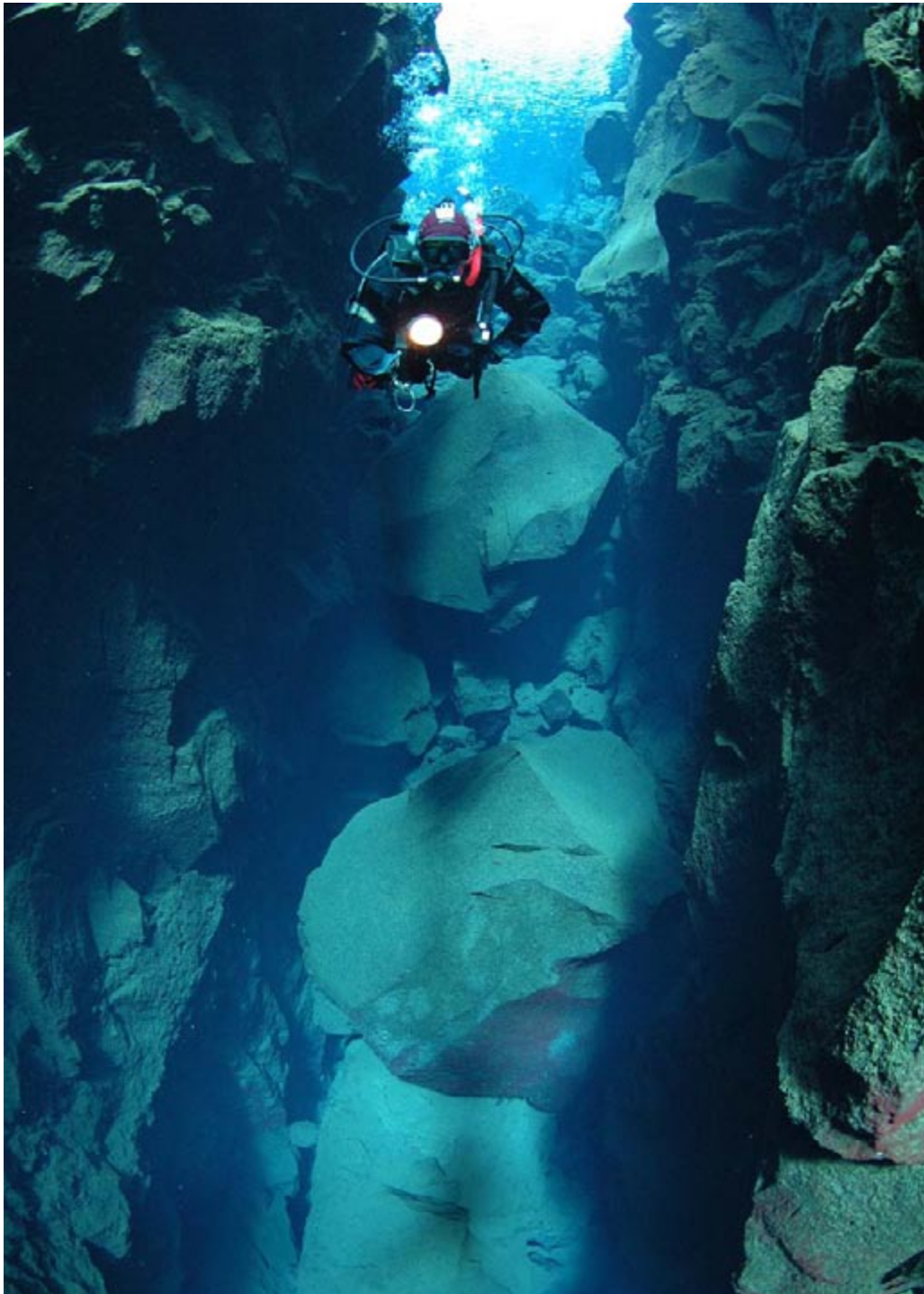
As it has been a while since I either shore dived or had to wear a dry suit (I need an 18kg weightbelt!) my body was threatening to join my hands by the end of the first day (that's how it should be said properly, by the way. Not 'by then end of 'day one'').

After a couple of pints of Guinness in the evening in the compulsory in every town abroad 'Oyrish' pub and an excellent seafood meal in one of the many excellent

restaurants in Keflavik we both agreed that the diving had more marine life than the UK but at nearly 6° colder it was offering little encouragement to spend good money getting more marine life in colder water. "Ah well, we're here now" we said. Let's see if it gets any better tomorrow. Little did we know what was in store.

Wednesday dawned and Tomas was in a good mood. In recent years he had tenaciously formed a local PADI Project Aware activity which had expanded successfully in his "Blue Army" - a group of local volunteers who clean up beaches and remove tons of scrap tipped into the sea at various vantage points. His "Blue Army" had taken on another sponsor that day who provided much needed funds to continue and expand the campaign. Unknown to us, Tomas's good mood was also caused by the inner knowledge that he was about to blow our diving socks off with today's diving. Silfra cracks is just over an hour's drive from Keflavik. We loaded the Toyota Hiace with everything we needed for the day including a small flask which we presumed was Tomas's coffee. Little did we realise that this flask would help us last the maximum time in the water which was 2°C.

We had heard Silfra cracks was a great dive but we just weren't prepared for just how great a dive it



(Top) A sample of pure fresh water from Silfra Cracks was the perfect addition to our nightly celebration with a glass of Laphroaig

(Left) A diver is essential to give a sense of scale.

Nikon D70, Subal housing, Nikon 10.5mm fisheye. F5.6 on Auto. Preset white balance. Available light

is. Our anticipation wasn't dampened by having to lug all our gear about 50 metres to the access platform. We were intimidated by the thought of the water being just 2°C. That's just 2° from when it starts to solidify, remember.

All fears melted away as we looked down into the still water at the beginning of a 5 metre wide crack. It was perfectly, perfectly clear. I had never seen such clarity.

As we slipped into the water,

despite a good dry suit and undersuit, hood and gloves it still took our breath away. The pain on our unexposed cheeks (face cheeks, that is) was headacheingly intense. Fortunately this soon faded as we started our dive swimming along the narrow, boulder strewn crack. Our eyes widened as we took in the enormity of the scene but I'm sure I heard Tomas chuckling into his demand valve. He knew we were being blown away with the starter course and he had a main course



(Above) On a calm sunny day the dazzling colours and rock formations reflect in the still surface water

(Left) Charlie Hood with one hand on America and the other on Europe. Both shots Nikon D70, Subal housing, Nikon 10.5mm fisheye. F5.6 on Auto. Preset white balance. Available light

up his sleeve which would top that several fold.

After about 10-15 minutes we went over a series of small boulders and into a steep sided ravine but as we looked forward we could see a steeply sloping sand bank rising up to meet the land. As we were shallow I surfaced to see how far away the land was and was amazed to see it was well in excess of 50 metres. Absolutely unbelievable. This is Silfra Hall.

All the while Charlie and I were clicking away with our 10.5mm full frame fisheye lenses on our Nikon DSLR cameras. The tonal range from surface to 'seafloor' was usually too great for the digital cameras to cope with but as long as we kept the surface out of frame it was mostly OK.

We had planned to finish the first dive at this point rather than swim back into the very slight current. All of our hands were once again



Tomas Knutsson founded and runs The Dive Centre in Keflavik. This is a very well run PADI facility just 5 minutes from the airport. In addition since 1995 he has worked tirelessly to clean up the Icelandic environment under the PADI Project Aware and has formed The Blue Army group to clean the coastline. It has removed over 42 tons of debris dumped in the sea from pier ends and other access points. He has received numerous awards and also runs a youth programme Kids Aware.

revolting (well, you know what I mean) so we surfaced into the pleasant 10°C land temperature and then took our scuba gear off and carried our tanks about 200 metres back to the Toyota to eat and, more importantly, pour the contents of Tomas's 'coffee' flask into our gloves. This was, obviously, just hot water and the effect was orgasmic. We had successfully negotiated with our hands to let us go for another dive.

After another 200 metre walk back with a fresh tank we were well knackered but warm in our dry suits. Suitably kitted up Charlie was the first to dive. He surfaced almost immediately and took the good Lord's name in vain quite loudly. "You've just got to see this" he said

excitedly. We were kitting up next to 'Silfra Lagoon'. On the surface it is a circular area of water bounded by gently sloping land. Underwater as we ducked down we were treated to the most amazing scene I think I have ever seen. The colours were breathtaking, the clarity seemed infinite and the surface reflections were to die for.

Great care is needed to avoid kicking up the fine silt with your fins but fortunately there is a slight but constant outward current which cleans the site remarkably quickly.

Swimming back the way we had come gave us another angle of view to expose yet more shots on. The sheer scale was difficult to capture without a diver in shot so we took it in turns to take shots so we had two divers in

frame. The day was cloudy but the diffused light help keep contrast levels down.

The swim back took about 30 minutes by which time our hands were up to their usual tricks so we were exhausted but extremely pleased to be climbing up the metal steps to the dive platform.

Now at this stage, you have a choice. The first is the most tempting - namely get this heavy gear off my back asap and I'll come back and collect it later when I've changed. The second choice is more painful but quicker in that you keep everything on and tramp back to the truck. It's up to you.

That evening Charlie and I looked at our shots on the laptops and we were pleased with them for a first attempt but gradually we both began to think that we had not maximised the potential of the site and a slightly different dive plan was needed.

The next day Tomas smiled again as we asked him to reschedule the rest of the trip to go back to Silfra as many times a possible.

Charlie had come up with a good idea to maximise our photographic potential at this site. He suggested that on the first dive he would take photographs and I would model and vice versa on the second dive. This would leave the photographer to concentrate on his shots with a

dedicated model. The plan worked very well and all shots in this article were taken on this day.

We also rethought our dive plan to avoid the 200 metre and back tramp with our cylinders between dives. This time we snorkelled out to the best location and then continued our dive with plenty of air left to swim back to the platform.

The cracks at Silfra are without doubt a world class dive site. True, the water is very cold indeed and access is not ideal but this is but a minor negative rewarded by stunning scenery in water which must be some of the purest on earth.

Now I've left this last bit of information til now in the hope that readers will have drifted away and to save Tomas from an avalanche of e mail bookings. Keep it to yourself, but from London you could dive the Silfra Cracks in a weekend! Iceland Express have daily flights from Stansted (and Copenhagen and Frankfurt as well). Their flights start from £68 one way and the flight time is only 2.5 hours.

In addition there is comfortable accommodation at Hotel Keflavik and several good restaurants in the town so there is no need to hire a car unless you want to take in some scenery.

Finally, no visit to Iceland would be complete without a visit to The Blue Lagoon. This is a geothermal Spa where you can enjoy bathing in

water at 35°C and it is known for its positive effects on the skin. It is the most visited attraction in Iceland and is well worth a visit.

And finally finally we went on a whale watching trip on our last morning. This was a two hour cruise looking for minke whales and dolphins. I think they were on holiday that day but we didn't care. We were still basking in the wake of the Silfra cracks.

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