

Cornwall's King of Prussia

by Mark Webster

To most divers, using a hard boat or RIB as your diving platform is synonymous with moving further offshore normally in search of deeper reefs or wrecks. The suggestion that the boat should be used to reach shoreline sites inaccessible via beach diving might seem a waste to many but for a photographer this prospect has many attractions. The coast of Cornwall is blessed with countless sites which can be spotted temptingly from the top of cliff paths, or perhaps require a long backbreaking trek with heavy kit from a distant car park, many of which offer stunning diving in the right conditions. One of my favourite sites which fits this description is called Prussia Cove, which is nestled on the Eastern edge of Mounts Bay behind Cudden Point in the far west of Cornwall. It is perhaps better known locally and to visiting tourists for its murky past as the centre for the smuggling activities the notorious John Carter known as the "King of Prussia". Legend has it that many of the fine houses in this vicinity were built on the proceeds of smuggled contraband from Europe.

Although this cove does support

a small community, the only access from the cliff top is via a private road which offers only foot access to non residents. There is a small car park at the cliff top but basing yourself here involves a walk of half to three quarters of a mile and then a climb down the rocks to the cove itself. Coming here by boat from nearby Penzance is much the best option! Prussia Cove faces almost due south and is therefore exposed to almost all but westerly and north westerly winds. So this is usually a summer site when the weather is settled and there is no significant swell from the Atlantic. As you approach the cove from the sea you soon realise why this became a favourite landing point for smugglers as the high land surrounding the small beach protects it from the view of all but the most determined Excise man.

Although I would consider this a reef dive as such there are some remains here to interest a hardened wreck aficionado as well. Some UK divers may recognise the name of HMS Warspite, a Dreadnought class battleship built in 1913 which served in both World Wars. In 1947, having been declared redundant, she was



HMS Warspite in her glory days when she served during both world wars.

HMS Warspite stranded in the shallow waters of Prussia Cove where she was partially salvaged in order to re-float her.



under tow to the breakers when she broke away from her tugs in a storm and was driven ashore to be stranded in the shallows off Prussia cove.

Some salvage work was undertaken here before she was refloated and towed further west to St. Michael's Mount where she was eventually



On a calm summer's day Prussia Cove is an idyllic setting and tempting dive location.

broken up over a number of years. Evidence of the salvage work can still be seen on the cliff edge on the western side of the cove where various items of equipment were mounted. Underwater there is a surprising amount to be found from hundreds of ceramic tiles from the galley to pumps, hoses and assorted parts of wreckage. Over the years some interesting finds have turned up including maker's plates and at least one instance of a "man" sized porthole, which used to be on show at the local Penzance BSAC clubhouse. The bulk of this wreckage lies toward the centre of the cove approximately 100m offshore and in 10-12m of water.

The most attractive area for me is on the eastern side of the cove where the rocky foreshore plunges into the sea. This area is riddled with deep gullies, swim throughs and some spectacular tunnels all brim full of life where many happy hours can be spent without referring to your computer. The



The deeper gullies are kelp topped and harbour a wide ranges of marine life. Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan, 10.5mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/60.

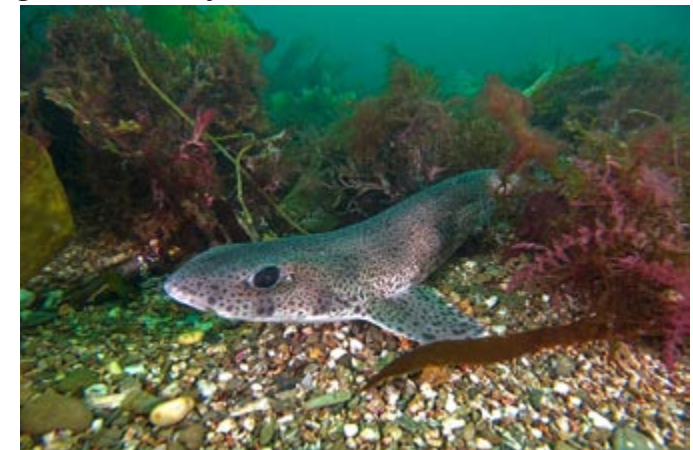
southerly running spurs seen on the foreshore are reflected in the underwater topography as you progress offshore. This productive area extends around the eastern arm of the cove towards a rock "island" with average depths of 6-12m and is totally sheltered from tidal streams. There are occasionally seals here and on the western side of this island there is a spectacular tunnel some 25-30m in length which runs through the corner of the island. As you enter you cannot quite see the exit due to a dog leg but after 10m or so the light from the end appears. This is a large tunnel wide enough for two divers and the occasional seal! The roof is carpeted with red and orange sea squirts and a variety of colourful anemones so take a torch. The tunnel is safe in calm conditions but should be avoided if a swell prevails as depths are only 6-10m and the surge can be quite remarkable.

Being a shallow coastal site there is kelp here,



Leopard spotted blennies can be a little camera shy and are best approached with a 105mm macro lens. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/125.

Late summer is also time to find sleepy dog fish resting on the seabed. They will hold their ground as long as you make a gentle approach. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f8 1/30.





Even the bladder wrack weed is quite colourful here and can make an attractive composition with a dash of Snell's window. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f11 1/80.



One of my favourite fish, the Tompot blennie, is found throughout the reef system in the cove. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/125.



Another fine macro subject found in the reef fissure is the common prawn which is sometimes found in their dozens packed into a small space. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/125.

but because of the depth and undercut nature of the majority of the gullies it is restricted to the very tops of the rocks. So don't be put off by the site of kelp from the surface, especially at low water, because once you are through the canopy your progress will be largely unhindered. The shelter provided here is ideal for breeding for many species and during the spring

and early summer you will encounter furious activity and juveniles of all sorts. In the kelp canopy watch out for John Dory's and the fifteen spined stickleback mimicking the fronds, scorpion fish of all hues and in February and March the occasional lump sucker jealously guarding its eggs. April and May are good months for invertebrates and it is difficult to

move without encountering hosts of nudibranchs, sea hares and flatworms all weaving their exotic patterns with their eggs. May and June sees the turn of many fish species and the wrasse in particular are very approachable as they seem more concerned with nest building or resting than by this strange creature approaching with a camera. Throughout the summer months

there are also good opportunities to encounter groups of cuttle fish coming together to breed who will allow a touch if you are very patient.

The rock faces of the gullies are carpeted with life some of which is quite unusual or rare. Sponges of all sorts compete for space with sea squirts, both the attractive light bulb variety and the carpeting



In high summer some of the gullies are carpeted in several different colourful species of seaweed which hide pipefish, cuttlefish and scorpionfish. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, GW Magic Filter, ISO 200 f8 1/60.

coral *Balanophyllia regia* (the gold star coral) which are very striking when compared to their Devonshire relatives, or the diminutive Cornish sucker fish.

In the open waters just out of the gullies you will find shoals of sand eels, juvenile mackerel, mullet and packs of hunting pollack. In July and August when plankton can be heavier and glassy calm days are more frequent, it is not unknown to see basking sharks taking a turn through the cove scooping the microscopic food down their cavernous throats. A perhaps rarer visitor at this time of year is the Atlantic trigger fish, which is seen all along this coast as far as Plymouth, and can be quite a surprise when found firmly standing its ground at the end of a gully. These fish are becoming quite common in the nets of commercial fisherman as is the occasional unfortunate entrapment of large leatherback turtles which find their way here from the Atlantic. I have even seen a small electric ray here on the sand, so who knows what you might encounter on a good day?!

strawberry tunicate, which together with colonies of colourful anemones add so much colour that when the water is clear you find yourself comparing it to the tropics. Jewel, daisy, dahlia, strawberry, beadlet, snakelock and probably one or two species of anemones I can't identify decorate this underwater garden in neat flowerbed arrangements. Where they border cracks and ledges you will find all sorts of crustaceans and sedentary fish life who seem to peer hopefully out at you. If you search diligently you should find examples of the rare red Mediterranean cup

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This is a marvellous site for photographers, naturalists, or those divers who just love shallow easy diving amongst an abundance of marine life. It is also an ideal location for a shallow second or third dive of the day for those who have been visiting the deeper offshore wrecks such as the Hellopes, J.A.Park or

the Alice Marie. Whatever your preference there is something of interest here and it is just one of the many "shore sites" along this stretch of coastline which are so often bypassed in the rush offshore.

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