



Regular UK divers might take it for granted, but for those more accustomed to warmwater ways the prospect of exploring home seas can seem daunting. The solution? A relaxed entry at the shallow end, says **PENELOPE GRANYCOME**, who has been enjoying a weekend at Portland

Easing into UK drysuit diving for a relationship built to last

A **LOCKDOWN SURE IS** a wake-up call to take nothing for granted. As the UK blinked open and dive-centres returned to life with stringent regulations and new booking systems, avid coldwater divers flung themselves back into the water at the first opportunity.

Meanwhile many holiday-divers, thwarted by the challenges of international travel and quarantines, might have felt at a loss for a diving fix and disappointment from postponed trips.

However, as we see so often in this magazine, our UK waters abound with history, marine life and thrilling discoveries to be made.

Even when drysuit-trained, the rigour and increased task-loading of actually using one in the sea can be intimidating.

Fears of bad weather, long drives to sites, lugging of gear, dreadful vis and shots of big blokes wearing a whole dive-shop and twin-set out at sea can make the whole thing seem a stretch too far.

Nothing, apart from comfort, is gained by staying in a comfort zone, however.

Having dived only in the UK's inland lakes and quarries (and once at sea in a wetsuit) the notion of suddenly going deep in my newish drysuit in an uncontrolled, unfamiliar environment alongside experienced divers had always made me nervous.

So it was a blessing to join an "Intro to UK Diving" weekend with Dive Beyond of Portland along with a small group and instructor James from Aquanaut Scuba, giving us the chance to develop our UK sea-diving skills on shallow dives without feeling intimidated.

WE WERE BASED at the Aqua Hotel next to Dive Beyond, where a pontoon allowed easy boarding of the RIB. No onboard kitting-up was required – that was all done first along with buddy-checks.

The plan was to do two dives a day with a nice long surface interval allowing time to debrief and unwind.

As we might expect, dive and boat-safety briefings are mandatory, both before boarding and onboard, and are provided by the skipper, whose word is god. Best of

all here, our RIB had a ladder!

One of skipper Dev's protocols, beside his instruction to hang on for the exhilarating speed across the harbour, was to hand up weights after a dive but to leave our BC and tank in the water attached by a D-ring to a line from the RIB. Much easier to climb back on unaided, retrieve the unit once on board and stow. Less work for the skipper, and less potential for awkward Covid contact from being hauled in!

First dive was on the Dredger, just outside the harbour wall in Balaclava Bay. At only 10m, protected by the breakwater so with little current and beneath a glassy surface that day, it was a perfect site for novices to check weighting and acclimatise to a cool green sea world.

There was plenty to see, with a cuttlefish putting in an appearance between metal fragments jutting up from this wreck lying in two parts. The slight swim-throughs

upright just inside the breakwater. We kept as a group down the shotline, following James in poor vis, but as the dive progressed the vista opened up, with a striking view of the bow and down through decayed areas of deck into the holds. A penetration dive would not be recommended at this stage because of silting. Squat lobsters and lumpsuckers could be seen on the wreck.

A **FTER A DELICIOUS** evening meal and jollity at marina restaurant The Boat That Rocks, we were ready for Sunday and a drift outside the harbour walls. No guide or mollycoddling here. Each buddy-pair would decide who would deploy a DSMB, with the other ready in case of separation or issues.

My buddy and I enjoyed a calming 40-minute drift at around 15m with no problems other than putting too little air into the DSMB.

Dev highlighted this back on the RIB with his phone shot of a not-quite-upright sausage.

He explained how the wrong colour, lack of proper inflation or type of DSMB could mean going unseen by him or other boat traffic. This life-saving skill should be prioritised in training.

Last up was the Landing Craft, lying at 7-15m and testimony to the rich WW2 history of the area. Castletown was

a major D-Day embarkation point for US troops and the Portland Harbour breakwaters, completed in 1905, provided the Royal Navy with one of the world's biggest man-made harbours.

The history extends to the spectacular Portland Mulberry Harbour Phoenix units (now replete with human statues) and Portland Castle nearby.

With our new confidence we all want to go back to explore the harbour area and further along the Dorset coast, perhaps at greater depth and in more challenging conditions. "It whet my appetite for more exploration," said Paula, one of the divers. "So different from tropical waters!"

* Intro to UK Diving Portland weekends can be booked at divebeyond.co.uk, or through aquanautscuba.co.uk



required awareness of sharp metal as well as the note not to stray away from the plan and risk being caught in tidal flow.

The need for divers to carry their own DSMBs and be proficient at deploying them was reiterated by Martin of Dive Beyond, Dev and James from the start. Even on "easy" dives situations can change rapidly and separation can occur.

No relying on a guide or regular buddy here, if that's what you're used to!

A whirlwind of a RIB journey back blessed us with dolphins playing in the harbour and exclamations of delight from us all in the warm September sunshine.

Next up was the *Countess of Erne*, perfect for going a little deeper and a great introduction to UK wreck-diving. A former paddle-steamer that came to rest as a coal hulk in 1935, it lies intact and