



## DIVING NOVA SCOTIA

BY PETER ELLEGARD



### Louisbourg, Nova Scotia

Having left Britain in an early-May heat wave to sample the diving scene in Nova Scotia, a blinding snowstorm raged as we landed at Halifax. What was I letting myself in for? Would the water be as cold as the weather? I had been invited to dive Canada's little-explored Atlantic coast by John Davis and Rick Haupt, a pair of eco-evangelist divers who, incensed by the destruction of Nova Scotia's rich underwater heritage by plundering wreck divers, set about establishing a tourist industry based on eco-friendly diving. Through their 3-year-old Halifax-based company, Eco-Nova, they have encouraged local communities, devastated by the decline of the fishing industry, to regard the shipwrecks on their doorstep as a valuable resource. And they believe that the area's undersea riches will make it a popular holiday spot for divers from countries such as Britain. For the shipwreck aficionado, Nova Scotia is indeed like heaven on earth. Its 7500km of coastline boasts more than 4500 wrecks - one of the world's highest concentrations. One project undertaken by Eco-Nova is opening up these wreck-rich waters to divers. Through the Archaeological Shipwreck Search Programme, run in conjunction with the Nova Scotia Museum and Parks Canada, Eco-Nova is attracting divers from all over the world to help find and catalogue historically-relevant shipwreck sites, under a look-but- don't-touch policy.

The baton has already been taken up by the British Sub Aqua Club. Vice-chairman Chris Allen and George Brown, Expeditions Adviser, spent a week in Nova Scotia in the autumn of 1994, looking at the area's potential and giving advice on how to build up diving there. While under water themselves, the pair had some memorable fun with a playful beluga whale. A BSAC expedition followed, and it proved so successful that George Brown is planning a bigger one this summer. Many of the wrecks have British connections because of Nova Scotia's historically strategic importance to the once-mighty empire and the shipping routes which supplied it. One of the most important wreck dives in Eco-Nova's programme is that of an 18th-century, 64-gun French ship-of-the-line, the *Celebre*, sunk in a naval battle with the British off Louisbourg in Nova Scotia's far north. The wreck is the focus of an international workshop on field techniques in underwater archaeology. The 238-year-old site has been opened for limited numbers of sport divers to dive under strict supervision, and for students to be able to undertake underwater and classroom courses to attain Part II certification for the training scheme developed by Britain's Nautical Archaeology Society. Sadly, I was unable to dive on the *Celebre* for, having flown up to Louisbourg with Rick Haupt, we couldn't get close to the site due to an ice floe drifting over it. We did, though, enjoy looking around Louisbourg's fortress town, reconstructed to show life in the colonial New France of 1744. Two members of the last BSAC Expedition were luckier in their diving, getting to explore the cannon-strewn *Celebre* site. I did, though, take the plunge off the historic port of Lunenburg, with its quaint, narrow streets and delightful Fisheries Museum of the Atlantic, which includes the wonderful *Bluenose II*, a floating replica of the famous schooner depicted on the back of the Canadian dime. Diving with John Davis and staff from Jo's Dive Shop aboard their custom-built dive boat, we made the first dive of the year on HMCS Saguenay. This is a decommissioned Canadian Navy destroyer, which became Nova Scotia's first artificial reef in June 1994. It forms the centrepiece of the Lunenburg Marine Park. It was before the diving season normally began, but my companions were keen to see how the 100m vessel had stood up to the winter. My memories of diving in Britain, including Scapa Flow, did nothing to prepare me for the cold. Even wearing a thick woolly bear and sturdy drysuit, the shock when I tumbled into the water took my breath away. While others photographed and videoed the wreck, my buddy and I explored it close-up, venturing into the helicopter hangar among other places. The creeping cold made me feel increasingly numb and, at one point, I grabbed a rail and began doing chin-ups to get my circulation going after almost 40 minutes at 21m. My hosts assured me that, by summer, the waters warm up to at least a couple of degrees above freezing. I think they were joking.... The first of a series of artificial reefs planned for Nova Scotia, the Saguenay attracted 700 visiting divers in its first season. What they find is typical visibility of 20m and a ship being colonised by hydroids and other marine growth. The area also offers rock walls, kelp beds and fish species such as lumpfish and wolf fish. While the cod, pollack and haddock may have all but disappeared, you stand a good chance of spotting porpoises, minke whales and even the odd beluga.

The Eco-Nova team are constantly searching for undiscovered sites off the Nova Scotia coast. Last summer, they located the WWII casualty British Freedom and the U-Boat which sank it, having teamed up with the Bedford Oceanographic Institute and the Canadian Navy using mini submarines.

According to Rick Haupt, there are many areas of virgin diving territory still to be discovered and surveyed. He is convinced that Eco-Nova will sell diving packages to Britons as well as the German and Swiss diving groups who have already visited the area. Perhaps the last word should go to George Brown, of the BSAC. "I think the British will increasingly want to go to Nova Scotia," he says. "The 15 divers we had on the expedition ranged from Sports Diver to First Class Diver, and they all found it challenging and a beautiful place to visit. The diving is very similar to what we have in Britain, with the challenge of diving from hard boats in relatively rough weather and in a semi-cold environment. From a BSAC expedition point of view, the potential is phenomenal and that's why we are going back again."

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