**Taking the plunge**

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**GO IRELAND:** The best way to leave the madding crowd far behind is to go diving off our islands, writes **Éibhir Mulqueen**

ARRIVING on Inishbofin on a perfect summer's evening is like stepping into another realm. The visitor is immediately struck by the silence on the "island of the white cow". It's not a perfect quiet, but the general absence of traffic and the presence of yachts anchored offshore add to the tranquillity. The island, which is about 10km off Connemara and has a permanent population of about 200 people, is a combination of the old and the new: to the right of the harbour entrance is a 17th-century Cromwellian barracks; to the left, new anti-coastal erosion works have the appearance from afar of tiered stadium seating.

During the summer the island is not short of people. A new deep-water pier has recently been built, and an airstrip is in development, both of which will increase the island's accessibility. This weekend, Kilkee Sub Aqua Club is visiting, Croí (the West of Ireland Cardiology Foundation) is doing a sponsored run, there is a wedding party around, and smaller groups are arriving off boats or the ferry from Cleggan. All contribute to the bustle.

When underwater you are as far from this madding crowd as it is perhaps possible to get. It is a world of gentle bubbly noise, hand communications and the sound of your own breathing. It is also one of the last great wildernesses. And how much there is to explore.

An unspoilt island in the Atlantic is, in a way, a mirror image of its undersea self. Everything of the charm of Inishbofin - its birdlife, including a precarious corncrake population, its windswept, wild landscape and perfect sandy beaches - is mirrored below the surface: there are precious lobsters that have escaped the fisherman's cage, even more rare crayfish, crabs peering from every ledge and cod, pollack and dogfish going their meditative way. There are enchanted forests of kelp and any number of varieties of seaweed thriving in the pristine waters.

The Kilkee club brought its own rigid inflatable boat, or Rib, along with 11 members, to explore the island's dive sites. There are nine popularly-known ones, some exotic sounding, such as Sunfish Rock and the Stags of Bofin, and others with an Irish lineage - Glassilaun, Dooninaheena and Davillaun.

For a weekend trip the choice of dive sites can be a little overwhelming. A comfortable limit is two dives a day, but, even at that, two bottles of compressed air per member per day make for a fair amount of preparation beforehand - and a lot of lugging during the day. Add the remainder of a diver's equipment - a belt weighing up to 25kg, a buoyancy-control jacket and breathing apparatus, mask and fins, a torch, a packed lunch and a dry change of clothes - and the weight of luggage is the equivalent of that for a long voyage. Veterans of Egypt and other exotic locations fondly recall the porters who are only too willing to do the donkey work.

Having settled in at the Kilmurray Hotel the night before, we dispense with our more humble 25ft craft the next morning, opting to charter Aidan Day, an experienced dive skipper from the island, and his Atlantic 10.5, Skellig Dawn - a 35-foot offshore steel boat with plenty of room on deck for moving around, and a boarding ladder and platform.

After a sluggish start born of the previous evening's late night, we embark from the new deep-water pier for the Stags of Bofin, a series of outcrops at the northwestern tip of the island. With a flat calm and brilliant sunshine, it is one of the rare days that sunburn can sneak up on you. Turquoise waters add to the feeling that we are in southern latitudes.

One of the nice things about diving is that, for most of the year, you are impervious to Irish seawater temperatures.

With about 50kg of gear on us, jumping into the water from the relatively high sides of our boat creates a big splash. Then, submarine-like, we expel the air from our buoyancy jackets and sink below the surface, before turning to swim down into the gloom.

We are immediately struck by the shoals of sprat that are everywhere, staying just beyond our reach as we swim through them. The rich rock formations that are above water continue below, but now we can explore them while moving in 3D, as it were, skirting up and down at will, illuminating caves, caverns and swim-throughs with torches. Sunlight streaming through from above creates wonderful effects of light and shadow and illuminates the varieties of algae, sea anemone and sponge, sea urchins and starfish that adorn the rock.

Half an hour later and we are preparing to surface. There is always a momentary loss of bearings when re-emerging from below, but one of our group is nearby, having commandeered the boat's inflatable dinghy, and we are ferried back out.

Then it's on to Inishshark, a smaller island whose population, numbering 26 families in the 1890s, finally left in 1960 after a series of mishaps and tragedies depleted its number. Now the island is given over to sheep.

Much of the old pier and slipway remains - they were built, a commerative plaque informs us, by the Office of Public Works in 1937.

At this point in our adventure the dinghy again comes in handy, bringing us and our dry clothes and picnic lunch ashore.

Inishshark's deserted village of tumbledown cottages, a schoolhouse and a church lend it a desolate air. Three hours later we are picked up again and it's off to our second dive location, Buachaill Rock, a sea stack rising about 50m out of the water on the western side of the island.

We again limit our dive to about 20m, peering in at crabs and lobsters snug in their shelves. The plankton presence is greater than on our first dive, making for murkier water, but it is still an enjoyable experience.

That evening, after the gear has been washed down and the air bottles left for refilling at our hotel, we dine at the island's Dolphin Restaurant, which is part of the Bord Iascaigh Mhara Seafood Circle. Restaurateur and native islander Patrick Kyne tells us that Inishshark lamb is the finest to be had anywhere, the stress-free location providing the perfect environment.

Returning to our lodgings, temptation in the form of Day's Bar lies in our path, but the promise of a session at our own hotel is an incentive to return sooner.

The next day, and a little groggier, we again dive at the island's western end, before squeezing in a final dive at the opposite end of the island en route to Cleggan, the mainland and the weekend's close.

**Dos and don'ts of diving**

• Do a training course with a recognised organisation, such as Padi or CFT.

• Do check the local terrain and conditions if diving or snorkelling in a strange area.

• Do ensure you have a basic fitness standard.

• Do appoint a shore marshall who knows when you are due to return.

• Dont dive or snorkel alone.

• Dont dive if you're unwell.

• Dont dive with borrowed or unfamiliar gear.

• Dont be pressurised into going beyond your limits.

**How to go about becoming a diver**

• There are two routes into scuba-diving: you can join a club or you can get qualifications at a commercial centre, such as one run by Padi (www.padi.com).

• The Irish Underwater Council (www.cft.ie) is the main club-based organisation in the Republic. It offers members a structure of ongoing training and qualifications gained through dives, lectures and boat-handling.

• BSAC (www.bsac.com) and SAA (www.saa.org.uk) are the organisations active in Northern Ireland.

• Scuba gear is expensive, but it will last well if looked after properly.

• If you want a once-off experience you will be able to rent equipment for a supervised dive at a Padi centre. For a list of centres, see www.scuba.ie/centres.

• Otherwise, you can progressively build up your own equipment, starting with a wetsuit, mask and snorkel, fins and weight belt.

• You may be able to borrow, or rent, the more technical gear for a while, but, invariably, you will prefer using your own.

• A buoyancy jacket (BCD) and a regulator (for breathing air) with depth and air-contents gauges are also essentials. A compass and a dive computer, which will monitor you while you are underwater, are also recommended.

• All told, a full set of diving gear will cost a minimum of €500. See www.sport extreme.com, or any of dozens of online stores, for a sample list of prices, but you may prefer to buy locally for correct sizes and the after-sales service.

**Where to stay, and where the nightlife is**

**Places to stay**

The island has three hotels.

• The Doonmore Hotel, 095-45804/45814, www.doonmorehotel.com, Inishbofin House Hotel, 095-45809, www.inishbofinhouse.com. The Dolphin Hotel, 095-45991, www.dolphinhotel.ie.

• There is one hostel, the Inishbofin Island Hostel, 095-45855, www.inishbofin-hostel.ie.

• There are also BBs and self-catering cottages on the island. www.inishbofin.com

**Entertainment**

Evening entertainment is centred on the island's four bars - the three hotel bars and Miko's, at the old pier. Inishbofin has a reputation for traditional music, and sessions are a regular feature in the bars.

**Go there**

A passenger ferry runs regularly from the fishing village of Cleggan, which is a 10-minute drive north of Clifden. See www.inishbofinisland discovery.com.