

Breaking new ground in Beirut

BY GEOFFREY PATCH



Those that know me understand (and often despair!) at my ongoing need to explore new places and take on exciting new challenges. So it was no great surprise to my family and friends when I mentioned that I intended to pop across to Beirut for the weekend to dive on a couple of wrecks just off the coastline known as the 'Paris of the Middle East'.

The trip had been arranged by Mike Dalton from the 'Kuwait Mantas' (BSAC 1045) to dive the "Souffleur", a Vichy France 'Requin' class submarine sunk on 25th June 1941, and the 'Alice B', a cargo ship with a rather colourful past!

The trip was of great interest to me as

a) I had not dived on a submarine before and
b) the wrecks were in Lebanese waters, lying at ~38m some 5km off the coast and would provide me with an opportunity to visit Beirut. Hence, I could satisfy two objectives in one trip!

So it was in early October that my dive buddy Brendan from Sharjah Wanderers Dive Club (BSAC 406), his long-suffering 'dive widow' wife Rowena and I headed off to Beirut on a warm Sharjah Thursday evening. The plan for the next day was to conduct the first two dives on the "Souffleur", followed by a late afternoon dive on the "Alice B". With the wrecks being at the

limit of recreational diving depths we opted to dive with 30% nitrox (oxygen enriched air) and 80% nitrox (i.e. 80% oxygen) pony bottles. The 30% nitrox would help us to extend our bottom time by reducing the amount of nitrogen that our blood stream would be absorbing under pressure and the 80% oxygen mix, which we would swap onto at ~6m during the controlled ascent, would accelerate decompression by 'flushing' our system to expel nitrogen more quickly and hence avoid decompression related problems.

Captain Marwan from NISD (National Institute for Scuba Diving in Lebanon) steered the dive boat with eight other like-minded divers out of the Solidere Marina and into the slightly choppy waters of the Mediterranean. Thirty minutes later and about 5km offshore, we homed in on the GPS coordinates and then switched our attention to the echo sounder to locate the wreck. The size of the wreck and Captain Marwan's experience made it relatively easy to find and a buoy was dispatched to mark the entry point. Conditions were good with broken cloud cover on an otherwise pleasantly warm day, although the north-westerly wind was stirring the sea's white horses to make an occasional appearance. After Suzy (the NISD dive master) had secured a line on the wreck the first wave of divers consisting of Brendan, Brian Darvell from BSAC 1045 and I geared up, did our pre-dive checks and entered the warm waters. The "Souffleur" is a designated war grave due to the loss of 52 lives when the vessel went down. A further life was lost (drowned) from a group of six that were on deck at the time of being torpedoed and swam for shore. So it was with this in mind and a sincere sense of respect for those who lost their lives that we descended the shot line. Although the waters were clear and





we sensed that visibility was good, nothing could be seen until reaching the 25m mark when suddenly the aft section of the 78m long submarine lying some 10m below burst into view. The aft section lies on its starboard side at about a 40 degree angle with the conning tower clearly visible and intact.

The hull is in remarkable condition considering its 70 year incarceration below the waves with little in the way of marine growth. The engine room can be seen through a tear in the hull just behind the conning tower and the outer hull is exposed in places revealing the buoyancy tanks. After exploring the hull

deliberately sunk (allegedly!) for insurance purposes in 1980. The ship sits proudly upright on the sea bed and is in exceptionally good condition. Several access points allow penetration for the experienced diver to explore the internal areas of the ship, with corridors and hatchways connecting the cargo area, engine room, accommodation and bridge. It should be noted at this point that wrecks are potentially hazardous areas and should only be entered by properly trained and equipped divers, although the 'Alice B' would be an ideal wreck for training purposes under the guidance of a qualified instructor.

When in the water, the neutral buoyancy and zero current helped to relax body and soul during each dive. However, back on the boat between dives, the bite-sized pizza and delicious Lebanese pastries kindly provided by Suzy for lunch combined with the rolling Mediterranean sea compelled some of the participants to make certain offerings to appease sea gods!

The wrecks really absorbed most attention during the dives, although a large marble

ray was seen cruising around the submarine along with a metre long pipe fish and many reef fish frequented the inner areas of the 'Alice B'.

Beirut itself is a lively city, framed by hills that lead down to a marina strewn coastline. Although tired after the day's exertions the dive group headed into downtown Beirut to enjoy a typical Lebanese buffet at 'Al Balad' in the wonderfully restored Nejme Square area. With time to spare before our return flight on Saturday evening we took the opportunity to explore some of the other wonders of Beirut. Francis, our taxi driver and unofficial guide drove us into the hills to visit Jeita Grotto (www.new7wonders.com), a finalist in the 'new 7 natural wonders of the world' competition and a worthy contender alongside Bu Tinah Island. Jeita Grotto is a magnificent system of caves, stalactites / stalagmites and hidden pools that would not be out of place in a 'Lord of the Rings' movie set and is well worth a visit if in Beirut.

So, a hectic, non-stop weekend but one with great diving, mouth-watering food and wonderful experiences - a city that I certainly hope to revisit.

Geoffrey Patch

Dive photos courtesy of Brian Darvell

"Souffleur" Requin class technical information:



Type	Submarine
Displacement	974 / 1441 BRT
Length	78 metres
Complement	4 officers + 50 men
Armament	1 3.9" gun. 1 13 mm AA. 10 21.7" torpedo tubes.
Max speed	15 / 9 knots (surfaced/submerged)
Engines	Diesel / electric, 2 shafts
Power	2900 BHP / 1800 SHP (surfaced/submerged)

up to and beyond the conning tower the cross-section of the submarine was revealed where it had broken in two as a result of the torpedo strike from HMS Parthian IV. Turning our attention from the opening we could just see the faint shadowy outline of the forward section approximately 15m in the distance. A short swim brought us over the forward section, which lies squarely on its port side. What looks like large accumulator cylinders, probably for buoyancy control, lie adjacent to the wreck on the sandy sea bed, and the skeleton of the starboard hydroplane is still intact. Close monitoring of depth, time and air consumption told us that it was time to make our way back to the shot line for a controlled ascent, knowing that we would soon be back to explore the wreck further on our second dive of the day.

After an equally successful second dive, we headed back to Solidere Marina to change tanks and burn up the required surface interval between dives. Refreshed and rested, we set out for the 'Alice B', a freighter also lying just a few kilometers offshore in ~37m of water. Apparently, the ship was used for gun-running during the civil war and was



trip details

Flights - Sharjah to Beirut return, Air Arabia

Accommodation - Hotel Mozart, Hamra (just 100m from NISD base)

Dive operator - National Institute of Scuba Diving in Lebanon (NISD)

NISD contact - Walid Noshie, telephone: 961 1 739203, www.nisd-online.com

BSAC 406, Sharjah Wanderers Dive Club, www.bsac406.com

BSAC 1045, 'Kuwait Mantas', www.kuwaitmantas.com