

Snorkelling the Wrecks

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photos by Mike Davis

Even in August, the waters of Georgian Bay off the Bruce Peninsula are cold without a wetsuit. At Colpoy's Bay north of Wiarton, there are no swimmers, only a few fishers and kayakers. Dan Mahoney of Chatham has come north for the weekend to snorkel some of the underwater shipwrecks in the area. In his wetsuit, he finds the core part of his body stays warm although his face, arms and calves get chilly. Mike Davis has joined him to photograph the wrecks.


“When you’re swimming around looking for wrecks, it’s like seeing a ghost,” Mike says. “First you see something vague and blurry in the distance. As you swim closer it gets clearer and bigger until you’re right over it and can see it in all its grandeur.”

At first they swim around a part of Colpoy's Bay looking at bits of underwater lumber with nails in them, which they've seen on another trip here. When they surface, I ask if they're going to look at the other wreck further north and closer to shore. They stare at me, knowing that I've never been here before. “What wreck, where?” they ask.


I tell them that earlier that morning, as I was strolling on the Bruce Trail that hugs the shore, I overheard two women in kayaks nearby. Their voices came distinctly across the crystal clear water. “Look at the wreck right below us!” said one of them.

I made a mental note of the place on shore closest to them, assuming that Dan and Mike would snorkel here. When it appeared that they didn't know of this wreck, I showed them where the kayakers had been.


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The doctor's not on call: Dan Mahoney, a surgeon in Chatham, snorkels some wrecks at Lion's Head on a free weekend.




The wreck of the City of Chatham lies at the bottom of Colpoy's Bay north of Wiarton.



The lower hull of the City of Chatham is visible in shallow water near the shore in Colpoy's Bay.



Mechanical parts of the passenger ship City of Chatham remain frozen in time.



A wrecked tugboat lies in 15 ft. of water off Lion's Head.

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A rowboat with rocks inside lies on top of the Lion's Head tugboat.



Dan Mahoney approaches the bow of a 140-ft. sailing vessel at the bottom of the harbour near the beach at Lion's Head.



A wrecked sailing vessel lies close to shore at Lion's Head.



Crystal clear water gives a reflection on the surface of the water over a wreck at Lion's Head.

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Here was a wreck indeed. According to Dan's guide book, *The Great Lakes Diving Guide* by Cris Kohl, this might be the flattened lower hull of the City of Chatham (coincidentally Dan's hometown), a passenger ship about 136 ft. long, built in Toronto in 1888. It had been moved in 1921 and stripped for rebuilding, but that was never done.

Our next stop is Lion's Head where there are several people

swimming off the public beach. Dan and Mike snorkel close to shore and examine the remains of what the guidebook calls probably a sailing vessel about 140 ft. long.

Swimming further out in deeper, colder water, they find another wreck unidentified by our guidebook but described as a tugboat. There is also a possible rowboat that sank or was deliberately sunk on top of the tug.

Famous for Diving

Bruce Peninsula is said to have some of the best scuba diving and snorkelling sites in North America. Particularly off Tobermory, in Fathom Five National Marine Park, numerous shipwrecks in clear water attract divers and sightseers from all over.

There are two reasons for so many wrecks to be located here. This part of the Great Lakes was

a significant shipping route in the 19th to early-20th century for timber, food and other supplies. The second reason is the Niagara Escarpment continues underwater here.

"The bay has teeth," says Scott Currie, a friend of Fathom Five park. "There are shoals and rocks that grab ships in windy weather, especially in November. A lot have gone down in October and

November when captains tried to squeeze in extra runs before the end of season. In those days they used to sail closer to shore, where there are treacherous reefs. That explains why there are so many lighthouses in the area."

Recreational scuba diving and snorkelling is popular here as well because the waters of Georgian Bay are oligotrophic, or poor in plant nutrients, so there aren't

a lot of suspended solids. This makes for crystal clear waters that parts of the Great Lakes are known for, and what makes it possible to see wrecks from above the surface of the water.

If you're keen to dive or snorkel the wrecks, Currie recommends getting information from one of Tobermory's many dive shops or Parks Canada Visitor Centre. You can go off shore,

join a scuba charter company excursion or even take a glass-bottomed boat tour.

One of Currie's favourite wreck sites is the Wetmore, a steamer ship that sank in shallow water off the west side of Russell Island in Fathom Five park.

"It was wrecked in 1901 during a storm," Currie explains. "There are cool features still intact, like the boiler, anchor and

chain. And it's suitable for all levels of diving."

When asked what to do and not to do when visiting wrecks, Currie's response is similar to the rule for conservation areas and the Bruce Trail. "Don't damage or remove anything," he says. "Leave everything as you found it, for the next 150 years. But do make the effort to go and see these artifacts." **EV**