



ONCE TIED INTO the *Garpen's* mooring-line, the skipper kills the engine and, with relief, I leave my spot in the wheelhouse to rejoin the rest of the team on the dive-deck to absorb the next briefing.

My only complaint about this Finnish Baltic trip or, to be precise, the boat, is of the diesel fumes. Of course, the stern of a dive-boat can often be a smoky place to sit, but I struggled to find a fume-free spot anywhere on this hardboat.

For this wreck we choose to dive with a guide – one of two exceptionally experienced and knowledgeable women, Hanna and Nina. The *Garpen* is quite broken up and I doubt whether I would be able to navigate back to the mooring-line, but this pair know the area well from maintaining the dive park's buoys, lines and information blocks.

The visibility is now disappointingly green and snotty so we hug the wreck, close to the seabed. It is shallow at only 7-12m, which perhaps has a bearing on the poor vis.

I struggle to use my imagination on such broken wreckage, if I'm honest, and begin to focus on finding some of the small creatures that live there.

There are very few fish to see at these Baltic Sea dive-sites, just a few skinny pipefish if any. I'm not cold, so go with the flow, maintaining a visual with Hanna.

A compass is essential here if you wish to dive without a guide, and although sending an SMB up is the normal procedure post-dive, in this instance I prefer to make both my and the skipper's lives a little easier by surfacing back at his boat.

For me the *Garpen* was no more than an average experience, though for divers with a deeper archaeological interest it will probably keep them amused for half an hour.

"We are not certain about the wreck's history," I'm told by Päivi Pildanjärvi, one of the two Finnish underwater archaeologists diving with us. "Many details, such as the vessel's structure and the location and time of its sinking, match with those of the *Conservativ*, an English brig said to have been shipwrecked on the night of 25 October, 1847, on the rocky islets near Hanko.

"It is told that the vessel sank to a depth of seven fathoms and only the tips of its masts could be seen, but the captain and five crew-members were saved."

SO OUR PROJECT BALTACAR (Baltic History Beneath the Surface) adventures continue – but not immediately. The rain is with us for most



of day two and the wind has picked up.

I don't usually suffer from seasickness, though just in case I make sure to keep sight of the horizon during our short, bumpy motor out towards Hauensuoli, or "Pike's Gut", named apparently for its likeness to a fish's innards.

We're heading for a narrow strait between the islands of Tullisaari and Kobben, used as a haven for shipping from the 15th century onwards. Seafarers carved their names, coats-of-arms and even short stories into the rocks of these islands, explaining why the area is known as "The Guest-Book of the Archipelago". Some 640 such carvings have been found.

Not only does this area afford us shelter from the wind but it hosts a collection of wrecks, neatly linked by ropes and arrows to ease diver navigation.

It's possible to access them from the islands' shores, so we tie in alongside a jetty to begin our diving day.

We enlist Hanna's guiding expertise again and follow her along an underwater line towards one of two wrecks we're to explore.

Once again, the visibility is poor and I'm reminded of a UK inland site, with



quarry-like rock and silt with us until we reach the Cable Wreck. This relic is named because of the now-disused electricity cable laid over the top of it.

We fin past its remains reasonably quickly, because only parts of the hull are visible and the water clarity is diminishing. Had we been deep, I would probably have thumbed the dive and made for the surface.

We follow the line on to two more adjoining wrecks in similar condition and

finish the dive back at the boat, having taken few photographs.

With better visibility this would have made for a more pleasant experience and, with more marine life, might have kept me submerged for longer.

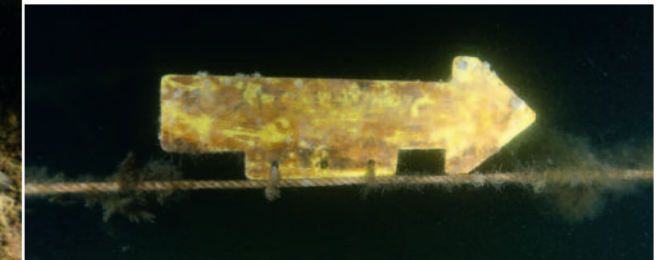
The small town and the people of Hanko are fabulous, so the Finnish chapter of our mission wasn't a wasted effort, but the Figurehead wreck (described last month) had been the standalone highlight. I just hoped that the third and final destination on the itinerary would provide us with something spectacular. Bring on Estonia!

THE FINALE OF MY "test-diver" adventures lands me on the island of Hiiumaa, an hour's car-drive from Tallinn and another 75 minutes by ferry. It's great to be visiting a new country but there is a small problem – the weather forecast

Opposite page: Hanna on the *Garpen* wreck.

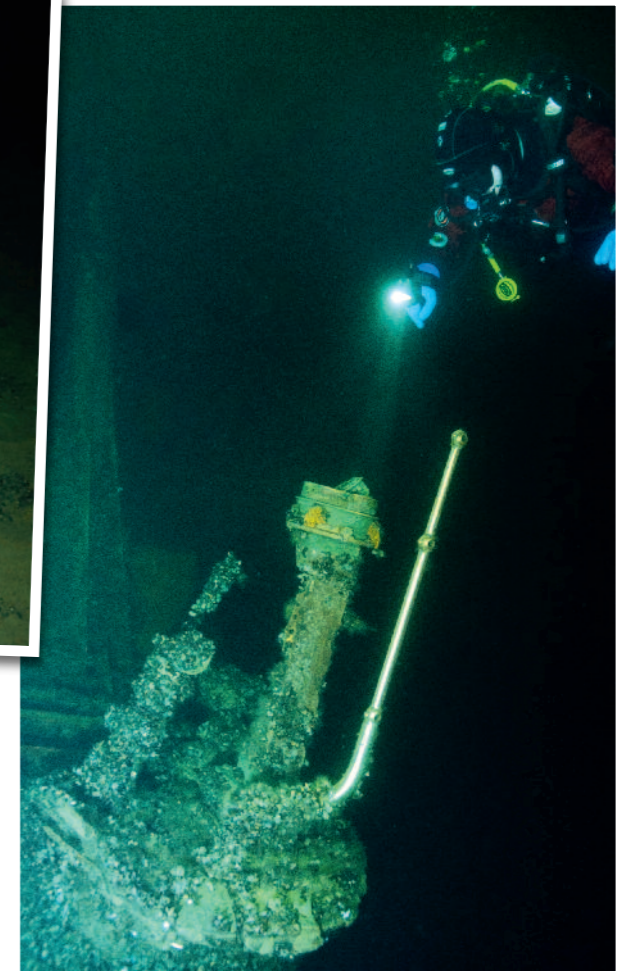
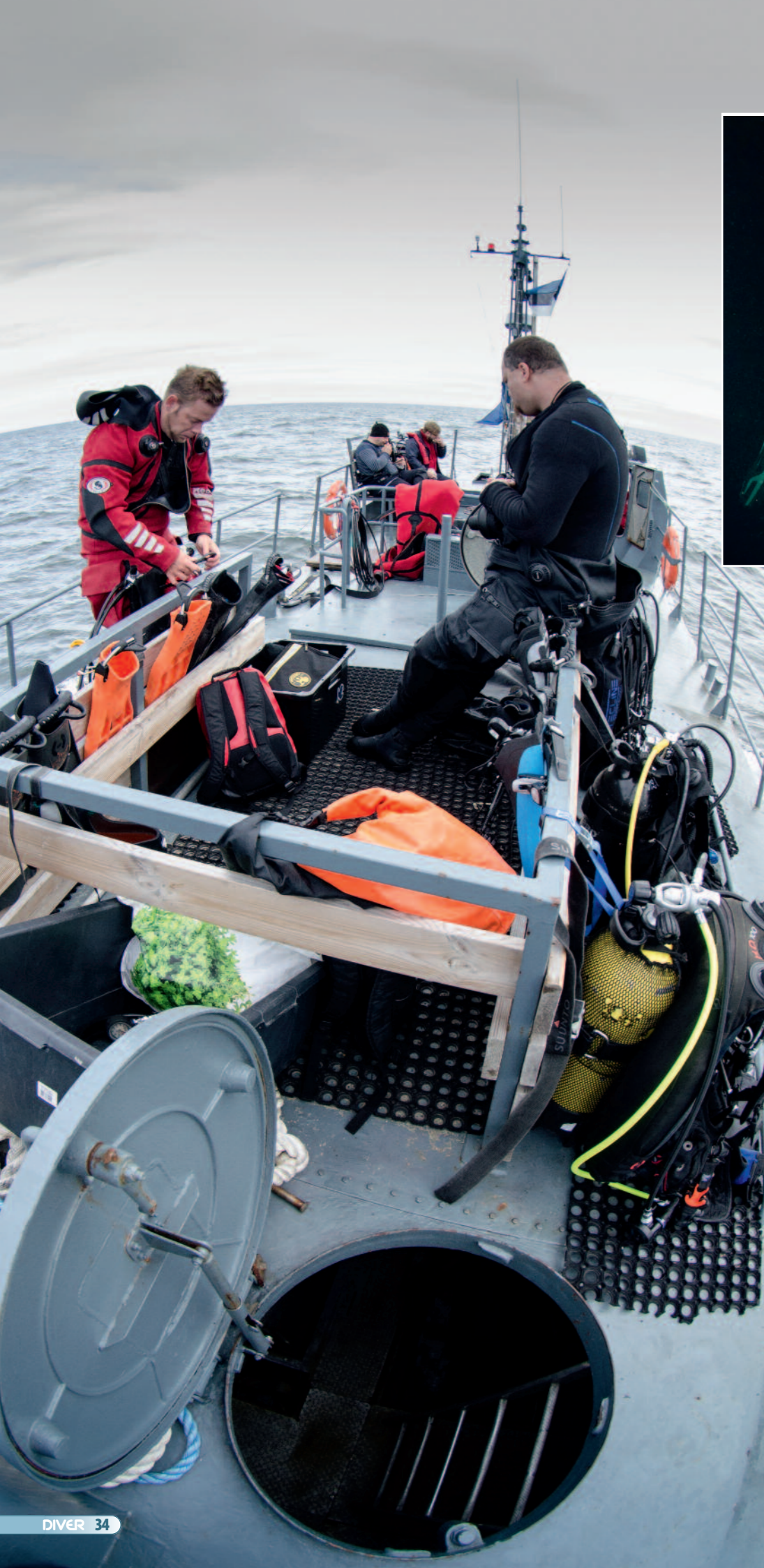
Above, clockwise from top left: Jetty at Pike's Gut; just about visible is a tiny pipefish on the Cable Wreck; returning diver; Susanne checks the *Garpen* info block.

Below, from left: The Cable Wreck; dive-park arrow on the line to a wreck.



In the second and final part of his three-country exploration of the Baltic Sea and its uncanny powers of wreck preservation, **WILL APPELYARD** continues his diving in Finland – with Estonia planned to provide the grand finale

# FROZEN IN TIME pt 2



for the diving weekend ahead looks terrible.

We have explored wooden wrecks in Sweden and Finland in all kinds of states, from a simple pile of wood through partially visible vessels to a 17th century ship with two masts and decking intact.

We have experienced near-freezing but clear water, total darkness and at times almost zero vis. It has been a varied and mostly exciting diving experience for me.

**T**HE ESTONIAN wreck itinerary, beside the Swedish and Finnish schedules, offers some relative youngsters for us to dive. We are to explore war wreckage, up to four ships dating back to WW1 – should that weather forecast prove to be inaccurate.

I've become quite fond of this crew. The other test-divers, mainly Scandinavians, have stayed the course through the three trips, with a couple of additions along the way. We're taking over most of a former distillery, now a hotel, in a quiet village on Hiiumaa Island, about 30 minutes' drive from where our dive-boat is stationed.

*Deep Explorer* has its own history as a Swedish landing-craft, since converted into a serious-looking dive boat, yet maintaining its military façade and benefitting from a double diver-lift at the stern.

We meet for breakfast at 7am awaiting instruction, with a view to loading the boat for 8.30-ish ropes off. But an enthusiastic Egert Kamenik, guiding the Estonian dive operation alongside the lovely Terje Meos, tells us to stand down. High winds from the north will keep us off the sea today.

Instead we explore the island, said to be (perhaps) one of the oldest in the world, formed by a meteorite impact 450 million years ago.

The northern half had been populated by Swedes since the 12-13th centuries, but many inhabitants fled during WW2 to escape the Soviet occupation.

The weather is difficult to predict at Hiiumaa, often doing the opposite to what's been forecast.

To our relief the next morning Egert gives us the green light to dive, while warning us that the sea might be lumpy.

**T**HE WATER LOOKS GREY, the boat is grey and the clouds are grey. Not the sort of image you might find on a PADI poster proclaiming that "diving is fun", but I summon the energy to remind myself that it is.

The dive-sites around the island are all one to two hours boat-ride away, so a comfortable sea state is essential.

The sun remains in the sky well into the night in June, so if there is one thing on our side, it's time.

Despite our fears, the sea appears quite flat. Half an hour after ropes-off the grey clouds break up to reveal blue sky and warmth. So diving is fun!

After several dives in the Baltic, I have

worked out that you can't gauge visibility by simply looking over the side of the boat. This sea is a mystery as far as vis predictions go, but Terje assures me that because the water moves here with a slight current, visibility should be good.

It's quite a leap into the water from *Deep Explorer*, and from the moving boat there's no real possibility of having my camera handed down to me.

The wreck of the *E Russ*, a cargo steamer built in 1909, is our first call, and at long last I'm in the water.

As predicted by Egert, the first 3m of water is densely green and visibility perhaps less than 1m. The light begins to fade as we descend, my breathing settles – and then the magic happens.

Past that grotty 3m, the soupy layer suddenly stops and all around me divers begin to fall from a "sky" of green cloud into dark, yet very clear, water.

Although the light levels are low, I had not expected such great visibility. Laid out in front of me, an enormous structure sprawls along the seabed and at least 25 of its 90m length is within sight.

We had been briefed to follow Egert

but, reaching 32m and surrounded by lights, I lose him. Several divers are dressed in similar drysuits, and with the cold, depth and my regulator beginning to freeflow, I decide to move closer to the wreck to mentally reorganise myself.

My buddy Susanne and I swap glances, exchange shrugs and, with groups of divers spread out to our left and our right, struggle to decide who to follow.

We are diving air, and with nearly 34m of depth to deal with we need to make a decision that affords us a decent amount of bottom-time. On top of this, my dribbling freeflow is becoming more constant, something of a concern and a distraction from my photo-based tasks.

**T**HERE IS POTENTIALLY plenty to see on the *E Russ*. Sent to the seabed on 15 September, 1919 by a floating mine, she was carrying almost 50 cars, wooden carts, motorcycles, food, tobacco, clothes, boots, medication, 102 barrels of booze, candles – it might be quicker to list what she wasn't carrying. Much of this stuff, save for the perishables and salvaged items, is still recognisable on the wreck today.

I was fully expecting to see, if not obstructed by poor visibility, a broken, flat mess of metal on the seabed, with two boilers the only obvious feature, but the *E Russ* remains boat-shaped.

Above, from left: On the *E Russ* wreck; naval mine on the *Akula*; the submarine's conning tower.

Opposite page: test divers aboard the *Deep Explorer*.

Below left: A touch of fatigue after the dive?





Above: Susanne with a propeller on *Akula*.

## FACTFILE (Finland)

**GETTING THERE** ▶ Fly to Helsinki and get a train the 80 miles on to Hanko. Will flew with Norwegian Air and back with Finn Air.

**DIVING** ▶ Sukelluskoulu Aalto organises guided trips mainly at weekends but during the week by request, sukelluskouluaalto.fi/en. The Atlanta dive-boat without guide can be booked with Hanko Diving, @Hankodiving

**ACCOMMODATION** ▶ Hotel Boulevard near Hanko Marina, hotelboulevard.fi

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ Surface algae tends to bloom at the end of July/early August, so the best visibility is September-November and March-May.

**MONEY** ▶ Euro

**PRICES** ▶ Return flights from £88. Return train to Hanko 36 euros. Hotel from £35pp per night (two sharing). Two-dive boat-trip 89 euros. Weekend trip with overnight accommodation (two sharing) 249 euros. Dive-guides for two or more divers 80 euros pp a day.

**VISITOR INFORMATION** ▶ visitfinland.com; tourism.hanko.fi, merikeskusvellamo.fi/en (Maritime Centre Vellamo)

## FACTFILE (Estonia)

**GETTING THERE** ▶ Direct flights to Tallinn from UK airports. Ferry to Hiiumaa island with Praamid, praamid.ee. The accommodation was a 45-minute drive further on.

**DIVING** ▶ *Deep Explorer* is run by Technical Diving Estonia (Facebook). Guides Terje Meos, @eestisukeldujate klubi; Egert Kamenik, @maremark

**ACCOMMODATION** ▶ Viinaköök (ex-distillery), viinakook.com

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ As Finland.

**MONEY** ▶ Euro

**PRICES** ▶ Return flights from £30, return ferry 7 euros. A double or twin room B&B at Viinaköök costs 50 euros, and diving around 100 euros pp per day (two dives).

**VISITOR INFORMATION** ▶ visitestonia.com

The bow and stern stand proud, parts of the hull are still upright and a fair number of tools lie about the ship's innards, plus boots, car-parts and wooden crates.

This wreck is so huge that it deserves two or three dives to fully appreciate what it's all about. Some nitrox and at least a 15-litre cylinder is required to maximise your time. Tech-divers will have a blast. None of the 27 crew perished during the sinking, so a full exploration is possible.

**B**ACK ON THE BOAT, we mull over our second dive. Should we return to the *E Russ* or cruise for another hour to find the Russian submarine *Akula*?

A difficult decision, because we haven't explored nearly enough of the *E Russ*, but the sea state is on our side to locate and dive a different wreck. So we unanimously agree to move on to check out this sub, hoping the vis will be as good.

With the long travelling distances between these wrecks in Estonia, I can imagine that one might have a tough time at sea. We're lucky today, now with very little wind, and I find a comfy place on deck to while away the time.

The wreck-site is again buoyed with a solid yellow marker, and loosely we agree to follow Egert again.

We will be the first divers in the water but this being an intact submarine, other than some mine damage to the bow and stern, getting disorientated is not a consideration and guiding not essential.

Again the green fog clears as we drop through the 3m layer of soup. The temperature gradually drops and I begin to pump some air into my drysuit to stave off the cold and the increasing squeeze.

Then I leave the line, turn 180° and, laid out as if it had sunk yesterday, is the highlight of our trio of Baltic Sea trips. The best really has been saved until last.

**C**ONSTRUCTION OF THE *Akula* began in a St Petersburg shipyard in 1906. It was a new design concept, created by naval architect Ivan Bubnov with an increased range of action in mind.

The sub was launched three years later and found to be slower than anticipated.

In November, 1911, the *Akula* entered active service in the Baltic Fleet, and the following year transferred to the 2nd Submarine Brigade. It tallied up 19 patrols until, while carrying naval mines on a deployment mission in 1915, a mine sent it with its 35 crew to the seabed.

From the bow we can view at least half of the wreck's 40m length. The visibility is outstanding and, my head roaring with excitement, I don't feel the cold at all.

We stop for a nose at the conning-tower. Looking down to the seabed from there, on the listing port side, we can see four of the dome-like naval mines *Akula* was carrying. We take a tentative closer look, bottoming out at 30m.

The *Akula* has four propellers and I position Susanne by a starboard screw to squeeze off a few shots.


Beside them some explosion damage is evident in front of the rudder. Looking up, I see the lights of the rest of the dive-team coming our way.

Back at the conning-tower, we examine its construction. Much of the metal is not corroded, with one shiny piece standing proud and looking almost immaculate.

I leave Susanne to carry on the dive with the team, having puffed through much of my air in just over half an hour, and head for the mooring-chain to begin my ascent and wait out my short stop.

With one last look back at this magnificent relic, I think about those 35 souls that remain inside and head for that layer of soup above me for the last time.

From Finland to Sweden and on to Estonia, the Baltic Sea has enchanted, excited, exhausted and exhilarated me.

It's been freezing, fun and sometimes frustrating – but that is the essence of exploration and adventure diving. 



PROJECT BALTACAR is a co-operative initiative between Sweden, Finland and Estonia to promote wreck-diving in the Baltic Sea, [projectbaltacar.eu](http://projectbaltacar.eu)