

Trip Report: Mikhail Lermontov, 2-5th April 2010

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Six months ago I did my first dive trip to the Mikhail Lermontov. In my trip report I wrote the following: *'This is an awesome dive site. It is not a sanitised, sterilised wreck like purposefully sunk ones, but a real, gnarly, dirty, dark, dangerous, vibrant, exciting, stonker of a wreck. I will certainly go back.'* Now on my third trip I still stand by those words. I am very excited about getting back inside this beast. I have old places I want to revisit and new places I want to explore. There is a lot I want to do!



Good Friday – Dive 1

Mel was my dive buddy for this dive and we entered the water just after 9.30am, planning to visit a new area for us - the gym and sauna. Compared to our last trip the visibility was very poor, only 2 or 3m and both of us had the same thought – the new guys are going to have problems navigating! We descended down the line to where it is attached on the forward most windows of the Bolshoi Lounge and then headed along the rail towards the stern. Using the entrance to the swimming pool as our reference point we dropped down a deck to the Promenade Deck and then followed the open deck area until we hit about 30m where we tied-off on a railing. We entered the gym through one of the windows and then I tied-off just next to a rowing machine – our navigation was good - and then explored the rest of the room. We checked out the sauna, followed a corridor towards some of the cabins and found a few more rowing machines. After we exited the gym we dropped to the lowest part of the Promenade Deck to look at the area by the Children's Playroom – another new area for us and on our list for a later dive. We ended our dive exploring the remainder of the stern area, finishing by the props.

Dive 2 – I was diving with Mel again and our plan was to do a big exploration of the engine room. We quickly found the skylights, Mel tied-off and we entered the cavernous interior. The visibility was noticeably better inside the wreck than outside, but because the space is so vast and black our canister lights initially struggled to pick out familiar landmarks. It took almost a minute of swimming through inky black space to get to the gantries that surround the huge valves and cylinder heads. This was our reference point and from here Mel explored in several different directions over the following 30mins. The only area we couldn't explore was the lowest part of the engine room as my gas mix was a bit too rich (36%). Unfortunately this lower area is where the machine shop and tool room are located – I guess we'll do them on another dive.

Dive 3 – for this dive I was acting as tour guide for Aidan who was doing his first trip to the Lermontov while Mel guided Dean and Mike. I started by showing him the entrance to the swimming pool, which he had tried unsuccessfully to find on the previous dive and then took him to the engine room. After tying off I went straight in through the skylight and headed across to the gantries by the cylinder heads. Here I turned towards the stern of the ship reaching another landmark point – the two gantries which run side by side - and then headed upwards, exiting the engine room via the bunker station door. Once outside it was clear Aidan was enjoying himself



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– I could clearly see a very big smiley face. After a minute to get ready we headed back into the engine room retracing our steps, with Aidan leading whilst I recovered the line. If you haven't tried recovering a line whilst you head vertically downwards then I'll leave the experience as a little surprise for you.



Saturday – Dive 4

Having got all our gear sorted yesterday we were able to start a bit earlier today - entering the water around 8.30am. Mel was my dive buddy again and we planned to visit another new part of the ship – the shopping and duty free area and if all was well we also wanted to see the Sadko Bar. We entered the wreck at the middle foyer on the Lounge Deck, doing a primary tie-off on the pillar between the two double doors and then dropping down to the spiral staircase for the secondary tie-off. From there we dropped a little further and I located the big glass doors (now lying on their side) that mark the entrance to the shops/duty free area. I tied-off on the door handle and headed aft through the shops. Most of the walls that are

shown on the deck plans have actually collapsed away so the space is quite big. After a short swim I found the entrance to the Sadko bar and dropped in through the dog-leg corridor for a look around. We found lots of deodorants, several crates of soft drinks and plenty of other items – it's great that other divers have left them there for everyone to enjoy. We then exited the bar and continued heading aft. Reaching the aft foyer we started to ascend, tying off on the spiral stairs again. We exited the foyer via the hair dressers as this is easier than the broken window in the foyer. Outside the hairdressers we checked our map to be certain where we had been and then retraced our steps recovering the line. Awesome dive!

Dive 5 – for this dive I was acting as a tour guide for Peter. My plan was to do a whistle-stop tour of all the main areas so that on subsequent dives Peter and his buddy could take the time to explore where they wanted. We started at the engine room, entering via the lower skylight. I laid a winding line through the main area, past the cylinder heads and then out via the bunker station door. As Mel was also planning on visiting the engine room with Steve I left the line for her to recover. Just outside the bunker station door I showed Peter one of the valves left over from the oil salvage work in 1986. Next we headed up to the swimming pool and swam from the main door through to the Neptune Bar. Peter looked into the small bar store room where there are lots of beer cans and then exited straight upwards into the Winter Garden. We cruised along the Winter Garden and I pointed out the hair dresser, library, projection room, cinema and video games. At the middle foyer we exited the Winter Garden but continued swimming forward along the rail until we reached the Bolshoi Lounge. We ducked in past the bar and I did a quick tour through the lounge, pointing out the dance floor and chandelier. We exited once we reached a few minutes of decompression on our computers. A very quick tour of a lot of areas – the next couple of days will show how much Peter remembers.

Dive 6 – for this dive I was leading Astrid who really wanted to see the Sadko Bar after hearing Mel's description following the first dive this morning. Effectively I was retracing my steps from dive 4, although this time I was working in reverse. We entered through the hair dresser and dropped down through the foyer looking for the big glass door that is the reference point. We



dropped into the Sadko Bar as planned and whilst I hovered out of the way in the corner Astrid explored the bar. After exiting the bar we headed into the shopping area and then out via the middle foyer as planned. In the shopping area I found a pile of carrier bags from duty-free, complete with 'Leningrad USSR' writing and a picture of a cruise liner. As they are fairly unique we brought one bag up to the boat for everyone else to see before returning it the following day.

Easter Sunday – Dive 7

Although the clocks officially changed last night we didn't want to waste any daylight so we left all the watches and clocks as they were, effectively set to our own personal Port Gore time-zone. So when we entered the water at 8.30am on our watches it was actually 7.30am for everyone else. Mel and I were diving together again and our plan was to have a look at the 'Dolls Room' also known as the Children's Playroom, pretty much where we had scoped out on dive 1. We headed across to the pool, dropped down to the gym, followed the deck area around to the outside of the playroom and then started looking for an entrance. 30mins later we were still looking for an entrance, having found a new way into the gym, a dead end area, a half open door way that could only have been passed by removing our tanks and numerous other false leads. We had even explored most of the starboard walkway, which is now a very dark and quite a tight area wedged against the sand. It was all very frustrating, especially when we knew exactly where we were and could identify the window looking into the room but just couldn't find a way in. Eventually when we got to 10mins deco on our computers we called off our search and headed up. Determined not to end a dive completely unsuccessfully we checked out the entry to the Leningrad Restaurant before we started our final ascent, ensuring that we could find the line we had been told about – part of another big dive planned for tomorrow.



Dive 8 – time to act as tour guide again, this time for Steve who also really wanted to see the Sadko Bar after hearing about it from both Mel and Astrid. As before we entered at the middle foyer on the Lounge Deck, dropped past the spiral staircase and headed into the shopping and duty free area. As planned I returned the



shopping bag from the previous day and then headed on past the Sadko Bar, tying off at the glass double doors further along the passage before returning to the Sadko Bar. I put a cookie on the line and then used a jump spool to line into the bar and allow Steve the chance to look around. On exiting the bar I retrieved the spool but left the cookie as reference for Mel on her next dive – she would also be acting as a tour guide for the this same dive for Peter. On reaching the aft foyer we had a look into the barbers and also along the corridor leading towards the pool – although it is theoretically passable it is full of danglies and looks very nasty. We exited up the aft foyer and through the hairdressers, leaving the line tied off for Mel's dive.

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Dive 9 – this was another chance for Aidan to have a proper tour as he had missed most of day 2 with ear problems. We did a big circuit of the Bolshoi and Panorama Lounges and then went onto the Nevski Bar. We completed the dive with a tour through the cinema – another big smiley face from Aidan.

Easter Monday – Dive 10

The final day of this trip and Mel and I had a last big dive planned. We dropped into wreck via the middle foyer on the Promenade Deck. At the spiral staircase we dropped down a level and then entered the Leningrad Restaurant – one of the darker places on the wreck. On entering the restaurant we ascended toward the top forward corner – so far we had been following an old line. At the corner we put a cookie onto the line and then jumped off into the kitchen area with Mel leading/laying a new line. Mel passed the scullery which I had a quick look into and then she lined off into the Cold Galley. Here there are lots of fridges, cupboards and other kitchen paraphernalia – no one could mistake this place for anything else. We exited the Cold Galley and dropped down the corridor towards the Main Galley. Mel entered via a serving hatch and then dropped downward. I stayed higher up so that we didn't get in each others way. On reaching 40 minutes inside the wreck we decided that it was time to retrace our steps. We exited the kitchen and then spent a further 10 minutes having a look around the Leningrad Restaurant – which felt far friendlier and less dark after so long in the kitchen – although still a serious dive in it's own right. Finally we exited the restaurant into the aft foyer, using the spiral staircase to drop down a deck to the Atlantic Deck before exiting the wreck completely. Awesome dive.

Dive 11 – the last dive of the trip and after 10 fairly strenuous dives most people wanted a rest – only 3 of us still had enough energy to dive, myself, Mel and Aidan. Mel lead a tour, using the stern line to descend to the wreck and then entering the swimming pool. After a good look around we exited the pool area using the door by the Neptune Bar – entering the winter Garden. A short swim brought us to the hairdressers which Mel guided Aidan into whilst I stayed in the Winter Garden. From the hairdressers Mel swam into the aft foyer and then into the library, admiring the pile of books in the doorway. Mel and Aidan then exited the library into the Winter Garden and then exited completely. Dropping down a deck we entered the walkway on the Promenade deck so that Aidan could have a look into some of the cabins. We swam the length of this walk way exiting when we reached a window just below the up-line from the Bolshoi Lounge. A great last dive on a great Lermontov trip.

After-thoughts

11 dives in 4 days is a lot of time in the water, especially when the visibility was only around 2-3m outside of the wreck and the temperature was 12 degrees. But the upside of such an intensive series of dives is that everyone has lots of time to learn their way around the wreck and do a good mix of guided and un-guided dives, both of which are important. Guided dives are great in that they can take people to new places and speed up the familiarisation process, but un-



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guided dives are really the only way that you learn to navigate the wreck. The other thing to remember about guided dives is that although as the guides we may make the dives look simple, they can be quite challenging and not everyone can be guided everywhere. The only way to be sure that you can visit everywhere you personally want to visit is to combine the right training with the right equipment and plenty of experience. When considering whether you are ready for a particular dive it is not simply a case of 'Can I successfully complete this dive?' You also need to think, 'Will I still make it out of the area I am visiting if something goes wrong?' If the answer to question 2 is no then you are not ready.

Personally I got to see several new places – the gym and sauna, the Sadko Bar, the shopping area and the kitchens. I may have missed out on the Children's Playroom and the machine shop and tool room, but with several more trips planned for this year I will get to these places – and more. That's what's so amazing about this wreck – it's huge and pretty much intact. Exploration will go on and on.