

Mikhail Lermontov Trip Report: October 2010

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I always think there are two ways to dive a wreck – either you simply jump into the water and see what happens or you have a plan. The unplanned approach works fine on smaller ships such as the Rainbow Warrior, which are easily navigable on a single dive and therefore easy to orientate yourself on. But with a large wreck such as the Mikhail Lermontov the sheer size of the beast means you can only see a small part at any one time. Without some kind of dive plan, which includes a revue of the decks plans, you are likely to spend your dive aimlessly looking at rows of portholes and dark doorways, missing the many delights which lie inside. Unsurprisingly, as this was my fourth trip to the Lermontov this year, I had a plan.

The plan started with my buddies, Mel and James, both qualified cave divers with many dives inside the Lermontov. Together we picked a few key areas we wanted to visit and explore more fully: the main kitchens, the hospital and the remaining areas of the lounge deck which we hadn't seen on previous trips. We also decided we would try to do a complete through trip of the lounge deck from bow to stern, remaining completely inside the wreck and without using the Winter Garden at all.



Racks of plates still lying untouched

Our first dive of the trip was very successful. We laid a continuous guideline from just inside the Bolshoi Lounge all the way through to the Barbers and then up and out through the Hairdressers. We were able to do this as we had spent plenty of time on previous trips becoming familiar with all of the main foyers and the passages between them. On our second dive we tackled the lower corridor from the Neptune Bar to the Barbers. On previous trips we had looked into both ends of this corridor and established it was open but had never passed through due to the large amount of 'danglies' in the corridor. However, most of these have now gone and the passage is passable although very tight and silty. With a line now laid through this passage the complete through trip was possible – something for day 2.

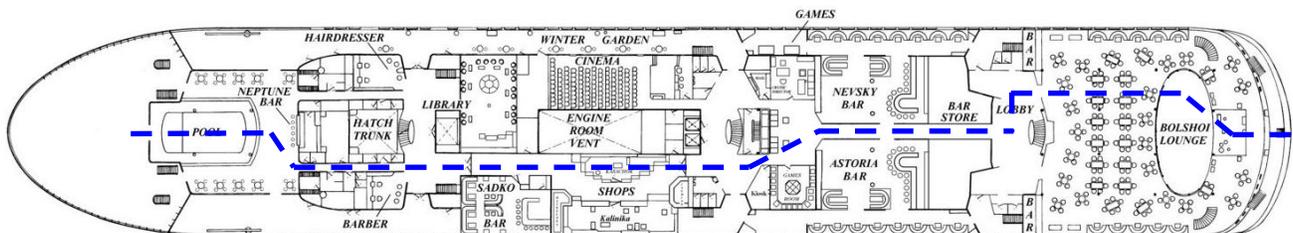
Our through trip started at the middle window of the Panorama Lounge from where we made our way to the dance floor balcony, across to the dance floor and into the Bolshoi Lounge. From here we went through the upper set of double doors into the forward foyer and past the spiral staircase. From here a passage leads off past the bar stores, although the entrance to the passage is partially blocked by a metal beam. James and Mel followed the passage into the Astoria Bar (the wall to the bar has collapsed) whilst I took the opportunity to drop into the lower bar store which also leads into the Astoria Bar. From here we moved into the open area between the Games Room and the Cruise Directors office. Access at both ends of this area is restricted but manageable. Here we paused to have a good look around. Once we exited this area we reached the middle foyer and our second spiral staircase.

From here you drop down slightly and pass into the duty free area. This area is quite open as most of the internal walls have collapsed, but it is still worth taking the time to look around as there are several interesting things to see. As you leave Duty Free you pass the entrance to the Sadko Bar. On our last trip to the Lermontov

in April the small restricted doorway was the only way into the bar, but now a whole section of wall has collapsed and so we took the opportunity to add a loop to our trip, in via the main doorway and out via the collapsed section. Having finished looking around we left the area and reached the aft foyer and our final spiral staircase. From here we dropped past the Barbers and into the corridor which leads to the Neptune Bar and the Swimming Pool. We finally exited through the large door at the aft end of the Swimming Pool with a total run time of 35mins. Part one of our exploration plans was complete.

For the rest of our trip we gradually explored further and further into the kitchen and the hospital. These areas are tighter, darker and less easily accessible than the majority of the lounge deck so the distances we penetrated were reduced. However as these areas are less well frequented by divers we did get to see many more artefacts and small details, all of which helps to bring the ship to life. As is the policy on our trips we did not take any souvenirs but left everything for other divers to enjoy. Importantly for future trips we also made a lot of notes about which doorways were open or closed, which corridors were passable or too restricted and most excitingly found a new access point to the lowest decks.

So what did we learn on this trip? Firstly that even within areas we had previously explored there are still plenty of new details to discover. Secondly that the wreck is changing rapidly (e.g. the Sadko Bar wall) so any plans we make need to be flexible. These changes are both good and bad – collapses both destroy parts of the wreck and open up new areas. Finally we were reminded (as we have been on all trips) of the need to be very careful inside this enormous giant of a wreck. There is a lot of silt, bits of the wreck do fall off, lights fail and whilst you may be very careful with your finning technique other divers can silt out your exit.



So for those of you who aspire to explore inside the Lermontov here are a few tips.

PREPARATION

You shouldn't expect to charge straight into the Lermontov and do a massive penetration on your first attempt. Simply getting your bearings, working out which deck is which, locating significant navigational landmarks and identifying the right penetration points will take numerous dives.

Take the time to study the deck plans both before and after each dive. Identify where you want to go on each dive and then verify that you actually got to each area. If possible talk to other divers who have explored the areas you are interested in visiting, to get information on blocked passages, collapsed areas etc.

Make sure you are comfortable inside wrecks. The HMNZS Canterbury (Bay of Islands) and the HMNZS Waikato (Tutukaka) are both excellent training grounds to ensure you are capable of navigating safely in the overhead environment.

EQUIPMENT

If you plan to go into the overhead environment, especially out of the light zone, you should have at least one back up light source (preferably two backups) and a redundant source of gas. Single tank divers and divers with just one torch should not go out of the light zone. In terms of tanks and regulators I would strongly recommend the DIN configuration rather than yoke.

Make sure you are familiar with all of your equipment and have practiced with it on prior dives. A penetration dive on the Lermontov is not the place to learn how to use new equipment.

Do not take more equipment than you require. An extra stage bottle may seem like a good safety precaution whilst sitting in the comfort of your lounge, but in the tight and silty passages it can become a safety hazard if you are not completely at ease with it.

TRAINING & EXPERIENCE

There is no substitute for experience when it comes to dealing with the physical and psychological stresses of the overhead environment, but training helps. I would suggest that all divers keen to explore inside the Lermontov do some type of overhead environment course – advanced wreck or cave – as these courses introduce many of the skills required for such dives. However, do not assume that 4 or 6 dives on such a course adequately prepares you for diving the Lermontov. Once you have completed your course you need to practice – and then practice some more.

LINE LAYING

Although this is an area which causes some controversy I am a big believer in the use of lines inside all overhead environments. A well laid line is an invaluable aid to safety, providing you and your team-mates with a guided route out of the wreck. However the following points must be borne in mind:

- a) A badly laid line is a safety hazard as it can lead to entanglement or provide a false sense of security. If you plan to lay lines you need to practice with them beforehand.
- b) Being able to follow a line is not the same as being able to lay a line! Just because you have successfully followed someone else's line into a more complicated/deeper part of the wreck does not mean you are capable of laying a line to the same place.
- c) Where possible do not leave lines inside the wreck after your trip is over. If you do leave a line make sure it is tied off at the end and not left floating in space.
- d) Do not go further than you are comfortable with. Don't let the presence of a line encourage you to go too deep into the wreck until you have built up plenty of experience.
- e) Keep checking behind you (or have a good buddy) to ensure you are not silting up and/or pulling the line into line traps (spiral staircases are very tricky).

Remember, lines are like any other tool – no use unless used properly.

“TRUST ME” DIVES

It is always nice when someone else takes up the burden of navigating on a wreck, particularly when they are more experienced than you. Having a knowledgeable and informative guide can speed up the familiarisation process and point out many details you would otherwise miss. BUT, do not turn your brain off and be very aware of where a guide is taking you.

TECH DIVE New Zealand

I often guide people around the ship and it's common for them to try to pressure me into taking them further and further inside. My explanation for turning down inappropriate requests: "What happens if you lose me inside the wreck? Could you get out of the area you want to visit if I wasn't there?" If I think the answer to the second question is no then I'm not taking you there!

WHAT TYPE OF TRIP

The only way to really get to know the Lermontov is to spend lots of time exploring her. Two 30 minute dives every couple of months does not work – especially as you will usually spend your first dive trying to remember your way around from last time. Experience has shown me that prolonged periods on/inside the wreck are far more productive when it comes to really learning your way about. My preferred trip format is now 4 days of diving, with up to 3 dives a day, each an hour long. (To do this you ideally want double tanks with EANx32.)

Additionally I ensure that I go down with a buddy who shares similar interests to me, has a similar amount of experience and similar equipment. There is nothing more frustrating then spending the entire dive taking photographs or hanging about the superstructure when what you want to be doing is enjoying a dive in the Leningrad Restaurant, hospital or kitchen.

CONCLUSIONS

The Mikhail Lermontov has been described by some as a monster – big, scary and with teeth – almost as if it is lying in wait, ready to devour over-ambitious or poor equipped divers. If you watch the video of the original salvage work, especially the interviews with the commercial divers, they all admit to being scared by the wreck. In fact such is its' terrifying reputation certain dive shops actually refuse to organise trips for fear of accidents. Divers have died in the past on this wreck and only recently there was another very near miss.

However, this is still an amazing dive and a must do for all keen wreck divers. With the right attitude, the right equipment, the right experience and the right planning, an extended trip to the Lermontov is awesome. With over 12 decks to explore and chock full of artefacts this monster provides dives to both excite and challenge, no matter what your experience level.

The Mikhail Lermontov is as enchanting as it is dangerous. I will be going back again soon.