

Trip Report: Mikhail Lermontov, 11-15th September 2009

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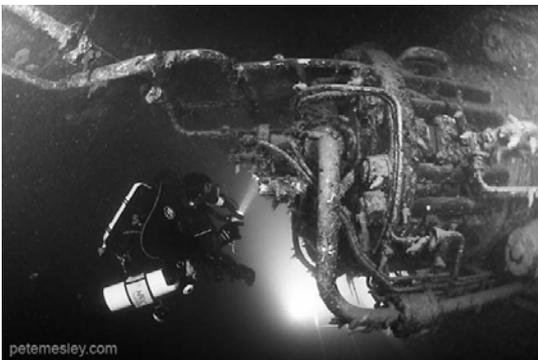
When it comes to the heavy-weights of the wreck diving world the Mikhail Lermontov is up there with the very best. At over 200m long this is one of the largest wrecks you will ever dive, attracting wreck lovers from all around the globe. Located in a remote part of the Marlborough Sounds, in the north-west corner of the South Island, it is not the most accessible dive. But once there, with the port side of the wreck rising to within 15m of the surface, it can easily be visited by divers of all experience levels.



Rumoured to have doubled as both a luxury cruise liner and Russian spy ship the wreck has a dark and mysterious history. Even the circumstances surrounding the sinking are less than straightforward. How could an experienced local pilot have taken the shallow rocky channel that he did? Why was no one in NZ ever charged over the incident? Who were the strange trench coat wearing Russians seen lurking in Picton in the days following the sinking? After more than twenty years, these and many more questions still remain unanswered.

Today the darkness and mystery is provided by the warren like interior of the wreck, which offers divers a serious and exciting challenge. Still full of artefacts, if you are prepared to explore deep enough, the wreck lures you in - but be warned, danger awaits the unprepared. More people have died on the wreck since it went down than died at the time. The interior is silty, walls have collapsed, doors are blocked with debris and scraps of carpet and curtain float aimlessly along narrow and twisting corridors. The inside of this wreck is not for the faint-hearted or the inexperienced.

Unsurprisingly this is a wreck that I have wanted to dive ever since arriving in NZ and first hearing about it. As with all things if you don't prioritise them they have a habit of never happening and so it was for me. After two years in NZ I still hadn't made the time for a proper visit. However, when the opportunity arose to join a trip full of experienced GUE cave divers James and I suddenly made the time.



Organised by Pete Mesley and based aboard Sweet Georgia (Gubby and Alfie you were great hosts – many thanks) the plan was to spend 5 days on the boat doing as much diving as we could fit in. With two compressors and a bank of oxygen cylinders all of our dives were on nitrox, which meant that long bottom times of 60 to 80 minutes were easily achievable.

We started with an orientation dive, visiting both bow and stern, looking at the props, the gash where she hit the rocks and locating the parts of the wreck that would help us to navigate on future dives. After that it was full on penetration dives. We visited the Bolshoi Lounge, the Panorama Lounge, the Library, the

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Cinema, the Post Office, the engine room, swimming pool, bridge deck, officers' quarters, captain's cabin, Neptune bar and more. Each day the penetrations got longer and more complex and each evening the various dive teams compared notes on where they had been and their plans for the following day.

With such a big ship it is easy to stay out of each others way and to keep exploring new parts. It was fabulous! Seldom have I been on a trip with so many experienced divers that was also as relaxed and easy going as this one. Whilst non wreck divers might have felt that our continued preoccupation with various sets of deck plans bordered on the obsessive, we were all in our element. And with Pete providing us with inside knowledge (14 years experience diving on the wreck) all of us were able to do the dives that we wanted to do, without getting frustrated by blocked passages and impassable doorways.



The highlight dive for me was joining up two sections of the wreck that we had explored on separate dives. Entering through the port side windows of the Bolshoi Lounge we dropped down past the bar and through the lower set of double doors into one of the lobby areas. From this we took a passageway towards the Nevski bar, where we stopped to explore. Then it was on through another passageway, through a store room and up to the Post Office. We had to negotiate a couple of tight restrictions and deal with the inevitable silt storm created, but finally we were able to exit about 50m further along the port rail from where we had entered. Of course having put a line in we had to retrace our steps, which gave us a great opportunity to see how well our anti-silting fining techniques had worked. Pretty good, even if I do say so myself.

Finally after 9 very memorable dives it was time to return to port. Although everyone was sad to leave it did give us all a chance to let our gear dry out, fix the small breakages and start tidying ourselves up for our return to normal life. So would I go again? Hell yes and as soon as possible. This is an awesome dive site, with dives to suit all experience levels. It is not a sanitised, sterilised wreck like the purposefully sunk ones (which I still enjoy), but a real, gnarly, dirty, dark, dangerous, vibrant, exciting, stonker of a wreck. This is one that you can come back to time and time again. We will certainly go back and I recommend to everyone to come along as well.