

Often fished but rarely dived, Connemara loughs are bog diving territory at its best

RIGHT: Killary fjord, Connemara
BELOW: Tube worm feeding



Text and photos
by Jerome Hingrat

Sliding into brackish water riddled by a seasonal down-pour might not be everybody's idea of a week-end in the Wild West...but for the frustrated winter diver that I am, there is sometimes nothing like the peaty waters of Connemara.

The region of Connemara on the West coast of Ireland is famous for its scenery and fishing. It has inspired many artists and attracts tourists every year from all over



Ireland's Connemara





Connemara

the world, in particular the United States, Germany and France. The town of Clifden, in particular, is a popular place for fishing—sea and fresh water—golf, and hill walking. With a low density population, wild scenery and friendly people, it is one of those places where you can truly get away from it all.

Connemara loughs are like proverbial watering holes: there is no shortage of them. Water is not exactly a rare commodity around here, above and below, out of the heavens it comes in every colour, salted, fresh, not so fresh or with a seasonal Guinness tint. In late summer, a plankton bloom and peat water conspire to create visibility averaging chowder-like conditions, at best. To cap it all, clouds of jellyfish pulsating by don't help improve the visibility. What a contrast with the clear waters of the Atlantic nearby!

Fed with seawater and fresh water from nearby rivers, sea loughs can bring together an odd mixture of life resulting from the interchange with the sea. A slight current is noticeable with the tide and water clarity can improve. It is a great spot for watching passing shoals feeding by. Shoals of garfish and rainbow trout are not uncommon. Depending



on their relation to the sea, some loughs seem deprived of any visible life, others are just teeming with it. With sea loughs, a layer of brackish fresh water sits over the layer of salt water. In the summer, as the sun filters through the surface, the water takes on an eerie post nuclear glow. The surface halocline acts like a filter and blocks off daylight, soaking up whatever sunshine dares find its way over Connemara.

Mysterious Shallows

Moving along the shallows reveals a sandy bottom of broken shells and gravels. Not the typical mud plain. Beyond the shallows brings you into deeper waters, and in some areas the slope falls sharply into 20+metres. With limited visibility, many dwellers are camouflage experts and blend in with their environ-

ment, it takes a while to adjust and spot them. A lot of these mud hoppers are more curious than their sea counterparts, they will come out to gawk at the tourists, stare and hop out of reach.

In places, tubeworms have congregated in huge numbers and developed into full-grown reefs. Clumps of red, orange, yellow and white serpula (tube worms) are fanning themselves in a gentle current. This is the closest I've

seen to a live underwater Christmas tree. Sitting on a hard base of white tubes, they really stand out against the muddy lough bed. At feeding time, with the reefs in full bloom, the bottom suddenly comes alive.

These reefs are very much alive and support a variety of animals. The colonies of tubeworms act as a magnet for several species and diversity is the order of the day. Sleepy edible crabs are found



LEFT: Detail view of Tube worms
 CENTER: Blennie camouflaged in the shallows
 RIGHT: Diver over reefs of tube-worms (serpulids)



Connemara is a savage beauty.
—Oscar Wilde

nestled among clumps of tubeworms. Starfish and brittle star sit atop or in the centre of the reefs when they're not crawling their way across clumps of colourful umbrellas.

Further along, the reefs are covered with strings of sea squirts in the shape of



LEFT: Starfish in bog water
TOP INSET: Nudibranch
BOTTOM INSET: Curious blennie
UPPER RIGHT: Clifden, Connemara

Connemara



light bulbs. In places, various weeds and sponges appear to smother the colonies of serpulids, each species competing for space. It seems that the tubeworm colonies have been themselves colonised.

Fish

Fish are not lacking either. Blennies and dragonets are hopping along the muddy bottom, rock cook and wrasse hover around feeding. Blennies are not used to divers and faced with less predators than in the sea. In any case, they show real curiosity, attracted by the whirr of the auto focus - a few oblige by posing. May coincides with nest building for wrasses and the reefs are a busy hive of activity where wrasse can be seen carrying along seaweed twigs. Further along, the reefs have eyes. Scallops are glued to the reefs. Some are

attached to glowing pieces of orange sponge or wedged in a crack. Smaller scallops and mussels are buried in many places. They can be hard to spot and it's only after getting close that you'll make out their tiny eyes. Another striking residents are nudibranchs sliming their way across the reefs.

Further along, three lobsters have found a home at the base of a large clump of tubeworms. One of them pops out of its den wielding a pair of claws like garden shears. But they're not all the stay-at-home variety. We turn around to face an even bigger specimen trampling the muck. Amazingly, the wily old beast keeps a steady course. I have to make way as he retreats into a hole hindered by two oversized claws. Eat your heart out Popeye! If the size of these animals is an indication of the nutrients available, then

the grub here is five-star.

Macro life

In June, nudibranchs and sea hares enlaced in amorous embrace have colonised the reefs. They are obviously thriving in this environment. It is difficult to imagine all these animals surviving on the muddy lough bed. The reefs provide a habitat for these species that would probably not be found here otherwise. Watching these animals will test your buoyancy and breathing control. Serpulids are extremely sensitive to any light, noise or vibrations. The slightest disturbance and the colorful beasts retreat in a wink. Unlike critters that dart away and never reappear, the serpulid worms are soon out again. They cannot leave the reefs, they are the reefs, and I must have aged taking photographs of them.

feature

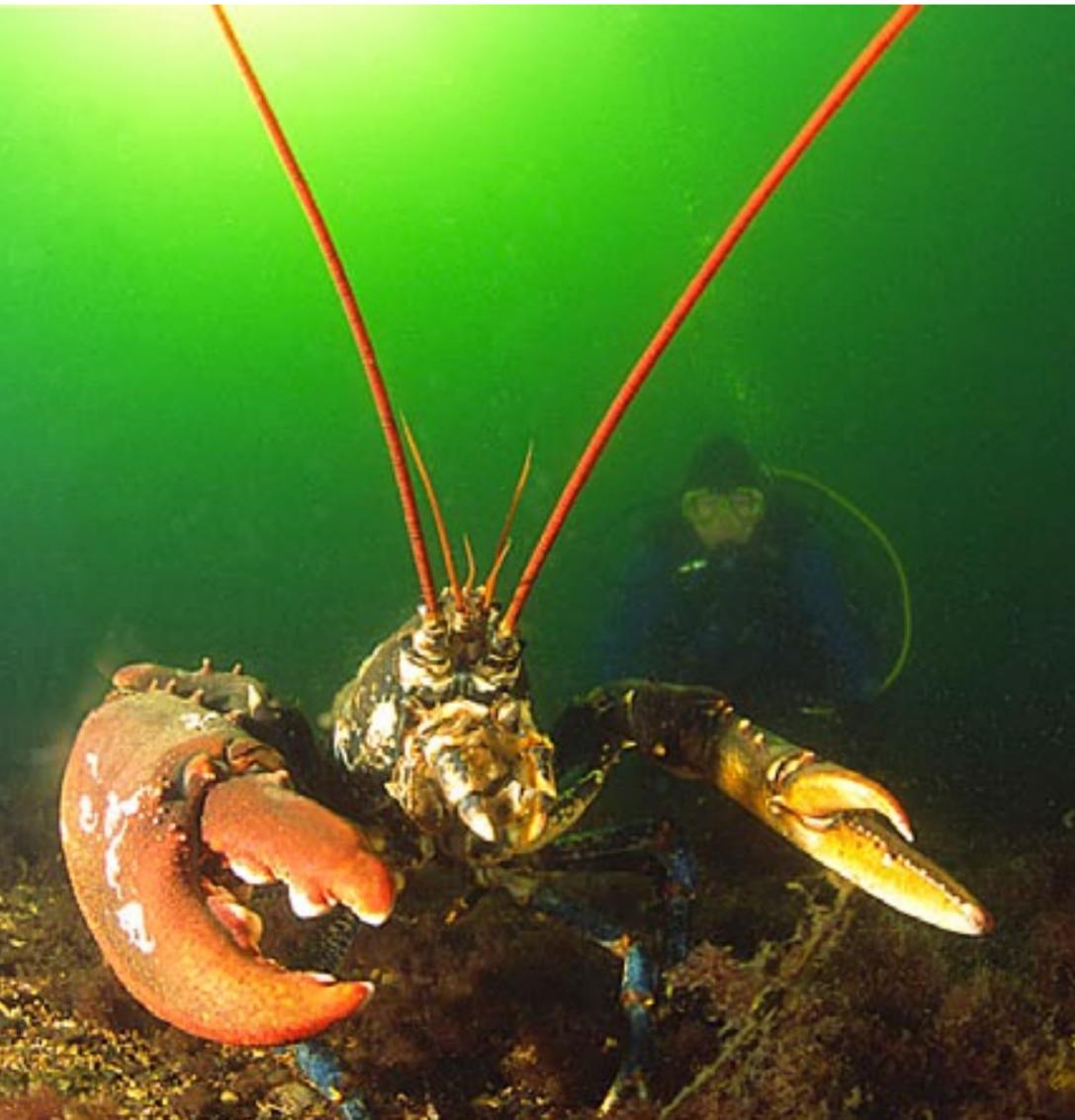
Deeper, the atmosphere can be downright spooky. Light penetration is minimal and on cloudier days, almost non-existent. Past 20 m, we might as well be diving in a tunnel. A halogen torch cuts through the first meters of water shrouded by plankton and particles. Looking up, the surface is a faint glow. On a sunny afternoon, we hit 25 m of complete darkness in the centre of the lough. I had never been on a night dive in the middle of the afternoon before. Definitely one for the logbook.

In contrast with the colourful reefs seen only a few minutes earlier, the

RIGHT: Split view of bridge and shallows
BELOW: Portrait of a lobster with diver

bottom is a plain of mud. The lightest fin kick raises a cloud of soot-like dust. The kind of particles that stay in mid-water and take all summer to come down.

Back to the shallows, sun rays passing through the surface weeds create ghostly silhouettes. After persistent rain, water droplets float on the surface trapped in an oily film. Run off from the land give the surface a milky appearance. Within the last five meters, the separation line between the layers of sea and fresh water becomes visible. A horizon line runs below the surface. Looking up from 10 metres,



the surface seems to have doubled up into two layers. Crossing the layers is like going through an optical illusion. I wonder if I haven't gone cross-eyed. A bit like looking through a magnifying glass that won't focus...After heavy rain, the halocline can be seen up to 5 metres deep.

Dive Center

The nearest dive centre to Clidfen is Scuba Dive West on the Renvyle Peninsula in County Galway. It is a family run PADI five star dive centre established for many years. It is located on the banks of Ireland's

only fjord, Killary. It is an ideal base to dive and discover the islands of Clare, Inisboffin, Inisturk, and the many wonders of Connemara.

www.scubadivewest.com

Jerome Hingrat is a professional underwater photo-journalist from Brittany. His photographs and articles have appeared in a wide range of publications, including SportDiver (UK), Océans (France), Subsea

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(Ireland) among many others. His work focuses on destinations and subjects ranging from the Amazon to the Indo-pacific to underwater Ireland. www.jeromehingrat.com ■





fact file

Connemara, Ireland



Map of Ireland designating Connemara region

History Connemara's history stretches back thousands of years. Local archeologists have found Bann spearheads in Streamstown that are 7,000 years old. The spearheads are evidence that the people of that era were nomadic hunter gatherers. A change from the nomadic lifestyle to that of farming communities is shown in artifacts dated later.

Celtic tribes arrived on the island of Ireland between 600-150 B.C. Norsemen began to invade the area in the late 8th century. The invasions were finally ended when King Brian BORU defeated the Danes in 1014. In the 17th century, English invasions began and started more than seven centuries of Anglo-Irish struggle of fierce rebellions and harsh repressions. Guerilla warfare was sparked by a failed 1916 Easter Monday Rebellion. In 1921, it resulted in independence of Ireland from the UK for 26 southern counties while six northern (Ulster) counties remained part of the United Kingdom. Ireland withdrew from the British Commonwealth in 1948. In 1973, it joined the European Community. Since then, Irish governments have sought the peaceful unification of Ireland and have worked with Britain to halt terrorist groups. A peace settlement for Northern Ireland was approved in 1998. Its

implementation has met some difficulties in recent times.

Government Republic

Geography The country is located in Western Europe, west of Great Britain. It occupies five-sixths of the island of Ireland in the North Atlantic Ocean. Terrain: mainly level to rolling interior plains surrounded by low mountains and rugged hills as well as sea cliffs on the west coast. Coastline: 1,448 km; Elevation: lowest point - Atlantic Ocean 0 m, highest point - Carrauntoohil 1,041 m; Natural resources: natural gas, peat, copper, lead, zinc, silver, barite, gypsum, limestone, dolomite; Environmental issues: water pollution from agricultural runoff, especially of lakes.

Capital Dublin

Economy With growth averaging a robust 7% in 1995-2004, Ireland is a small, modern, trade-dependent economy. Once the most important sector, agriculture is now dwarfed by services and industry. Industry accounts for 46% of GDP, about 80% of exports, and 29% of the labor force. Exports remain the primary engine for Ireland's growth, however, the economy also benefits from a rise in consumer spending, construction,

and business investment. GDP is 10% above that of the four big European economies per capita and the second highest in the EU behind Luxembourg. The Irish Government has implemented a series of national economic programs over the past decade designed to curb price and wage inflation as well as reduce government spending, increase labor force skills and promote foreign investment. On 1 January 2002, Ireland joined in circulating the euro along with 11 other EU nations. Agriculture: turnips, barley, potatoes, sugar beets, wheat; beef, dairy products; Industry: steel, lead, zinc, silver, aluminum, barite, and gypsum mining processing; food products, brewing, textiles, clothing; chemicals, pharmaceuticals; machinery, rail transportation equipment, passenger and commercial vehicles, ship construction and refurbishment; glass and crystal; software, tourism; Exports: machinery and equipment, computers, chemicals, pharmaceuticals; live animals, animal products

Climate Temperate maritime modified by the North Atlantic Current. Ireland has mild winters, cool summers, constant humidity and is overcast about half the time

Population 4,015,676; Ethnic

groups: Celtic, English; Religion: Roman Catholic 88.4%, Church of Ireland 3%, other Christian religions 1.6%, other religions 1.5%

Currency Euro
Exchange rate: EUR 1 = USD 1.21

Language English is the official language generally used. Gaelic or Gaeilge is spoken mostly in areas located along the western seaboard

Web sites

The Killary Centre
k2@killary.com
Maol Reidh Hotel
www.maolreidhhotel.com

Dive Operators

Scubadive West
www.scubadivewest.com

Deco Chamber

Galway Chamber
Galway Regional Hospital
tel. 00 353 91-24222 ■



Lobster on the run. Photo by Jerome Hingrat



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