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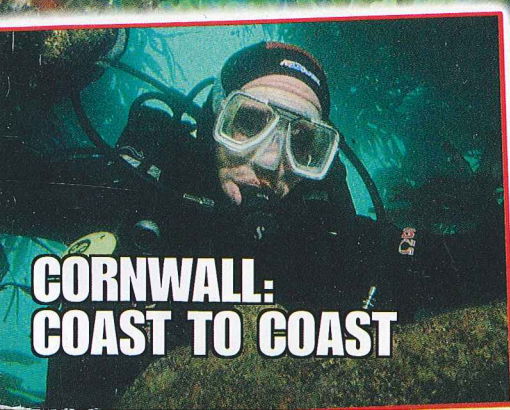
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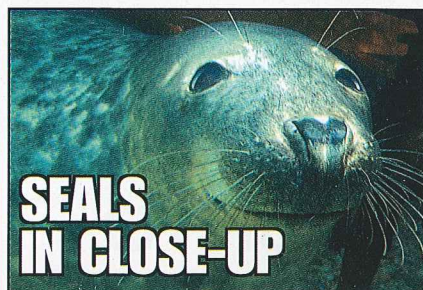
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CORNWALL

north & south

The county the locals call Kernow is narrow enough for divers to nip across as the weather dictates. **John Liddiard** enjoys some nice 'n' easy shore-diving on both coasts

STRANGER ON THE SHORE

I ARRIVE AT TOWAN HEAD in Newquay early in the evening. It's just a quick stop-off to scout things out before I dive tomorrow.

Some divers are about to enter the water. They seem to know what they're doing, so I ask their advice.

It turns out that I'm in the right place for a shore dive. Their regular evening shore dive is on the south coast, at Porthkerris on the east of the Lizard peninsula, but with a brisk south-easterly blowing for the past few days and looking

set to continue, they have switched to the sheltered north coast.

Porthkerris I know well, but Towan Head is new to me. It splits Newquay in two, with the larger half, the harbour and Newquay Bay to the east, and the smaller part of town and Fistral Bay to the west. A mile of sand facing into the long Atlantic groundswell at Fistral beach is the stretch famous for surfing.

It's a nice evening, and I am tempted to join them, but laziness gets the better of me. I plan to spend the day here tomorrow and will have plenty of time to dive then. I sit on the rocks and watch, enjoying the late sunshine.

Next morning, I time my arrival to make the most of the tides, and begin by diving on the east side of the head by the old lifeboat station. Yesterday evening, the local divers had dived the other side because of the tides, but they had recommended this side where, they told me, seals sometimes play with divers, and seahorses have been spotted.

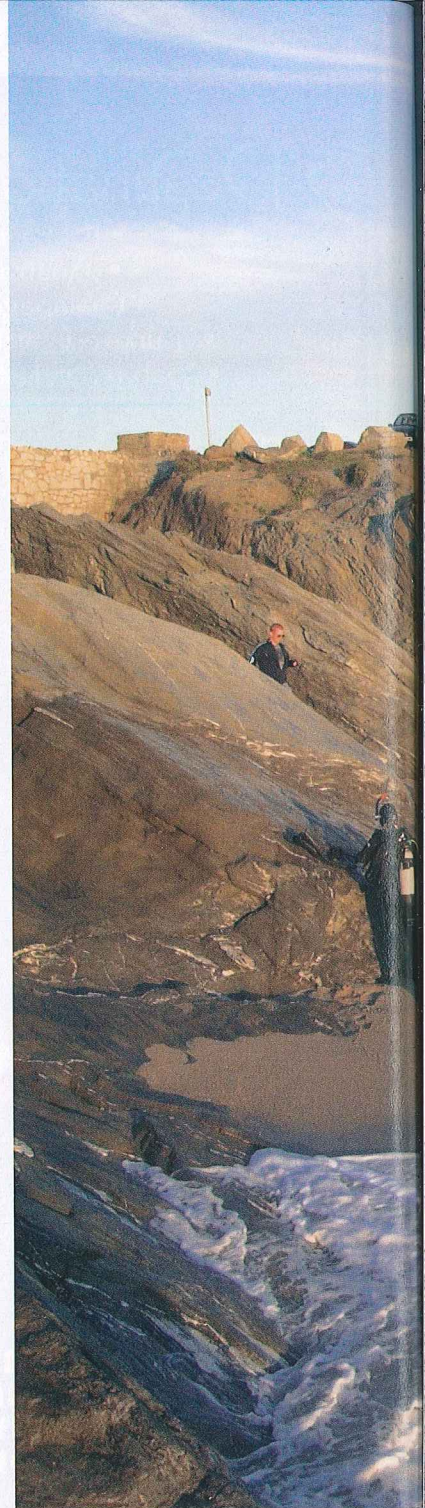
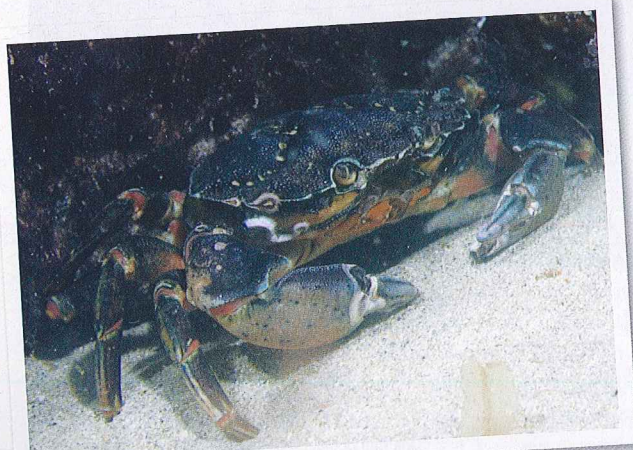
THE TIDE HAS BEEN DESCENDING for a couple of hours when I get in, a good time to dive as there is still plenty of water over the rocks. More importantly, the current is flowing out to sea past the outfall further out on this side of the headland. It's all supposed to be sterilised and filtered, but I still like to be upstream of any effluent.

I work northwards towards the headland, slipping between patches of reef on a seabed that mixes shingle and sand. Navigation is easy, with a barely noticeable current and the sun.

Visibility is not at its best, but is good enough for me to enjoy the dive and easily maintain buddy contact – if only I had one with me. When kitting up I had asked the man in the ice-cream van to zip me into my drysuit.

It's a typical shallow forest of seaweed, like a giant open-water rock-pool with most of the more interesting life hidden in cracks below the kelp and other weeds.

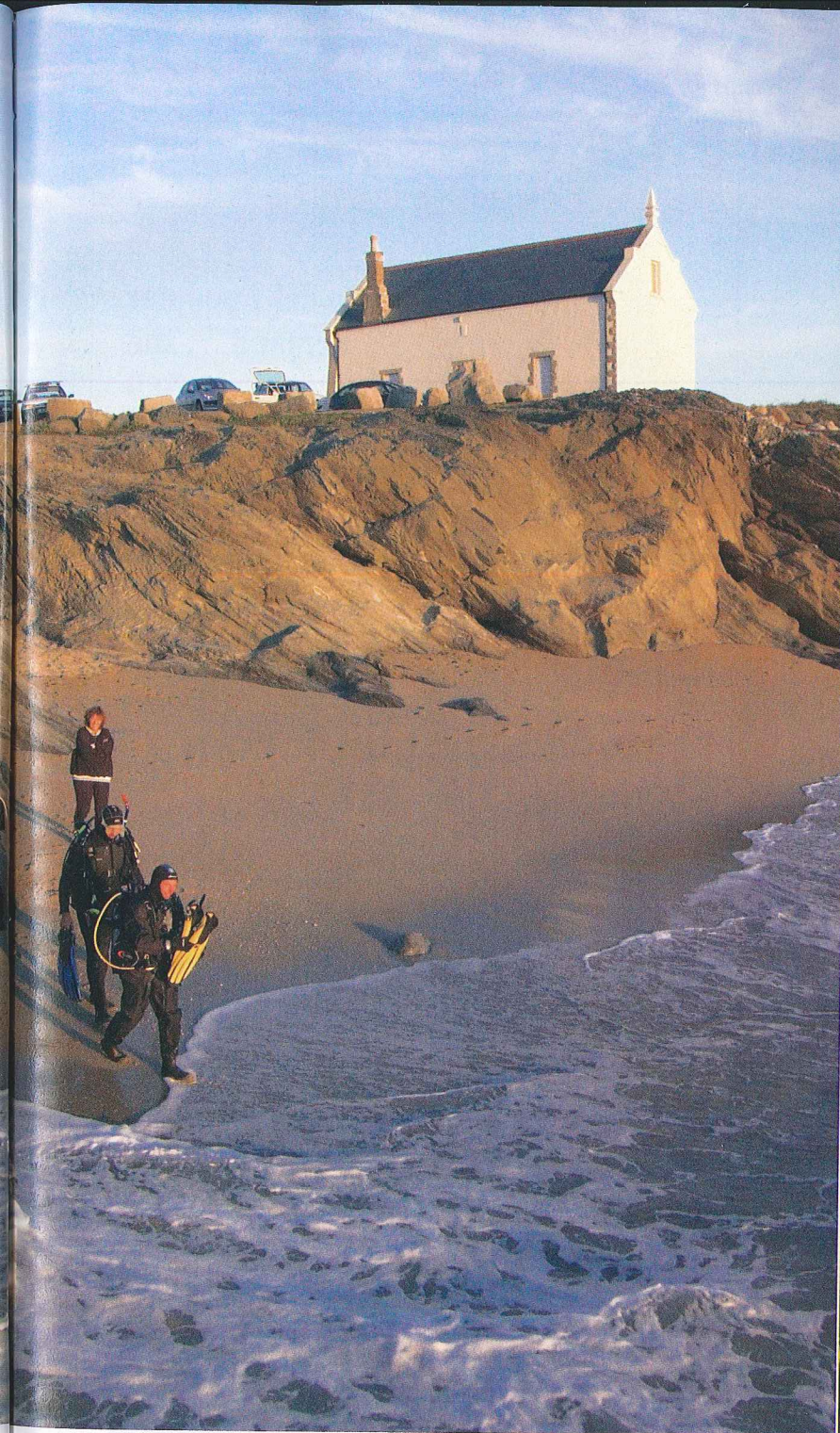
Below, from top: Cornwall is famous for its crabs – these are the shore and edible varieties.



Velvet swimming crabs, shrimps, edible crabs and anemones are all easy enough to find, though less easy to photograph. The cracks are so well back into the rocks that there is nearly always something to obstruct the best camera angles.

I spend plenty of time looking for seahorses, but with no luck. After an hour at less than 10m, I find the right gully to end the dive. The old lifeboat slip was the best point at which to jump in, but the local divers had directed me to this gully, as it leads into a section of rocks more suitable for exiting.

Crossing shallow kelp, I feel my feet getting tangled, then turn to see a seal tugging at my fins. I have been so intent on the dive that I have forgotten about seals. I swim back out to see if it wants to play, but it is off along the cliffs.



A group along the bay is cliff-jumping, and will surely provide more fun for a seal than a single diver.

Back in the gully, the scramble up the rocks isn't too hard. Even so, with a camera in one hand I'm glad I decided to leave my rebreather in the car and dive with a nice light 10-litre open circuit.

A retired couple on holiday have parked beside me. Turns out he was a Navy diver 50 years ago and is happy to help unzip my drysuit and chat about how diving has changed.

The other side of the headland is Little Fistril beach, a small cove off the end of the main surfing beach. Access is easier, just 25m across the car park and down some steps to the golden sand, but the tide is still receding.

It will be a much better shore-dive late in the afternoon when the tide is back in. I settle down for a lazy day, enjoying ice-creams while watching my kit dry.

AFTER A COSY SIESTA, I spend an hour walking round the headland. The tide is ripping past the end, making it clear that shore divers really do need to stay back on either side and not swim this far out. Diving right on the headland should be limited to boat dives.

On the west side, the tide is returning across Fistril beach. Little Fistril will soon be cut off from the main beach, marking the easiest time to begin a shore dive. The surf is barely a ripple.

The ice-cream van has packed up, so I co-opt a pair of mums who have been

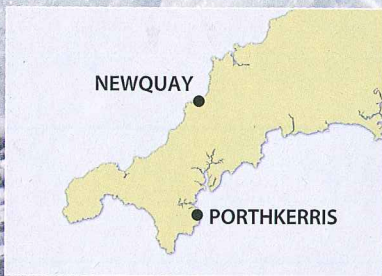
building sandcastles with their toddlers to zip me into the drysuit.

With a long sandy beach, I anticipate a fair swim before I get to the interesting bits. Nevertheless, I duck under water as soon as it's deep enough. If I have sufficient air, I would far rather swim under water than on the surface.

It comes as a shock that even at 2m, where the spring tide has covered a beach that was high and dry for the past few hours, there is plenty of marine life about.

Shannies sit on grey rocks poking through the sand. Have they swum in with the tide, or did they find small pools hidden beneath the rocks while the tide was out? At 3m I have similar thoughts about a scorpionfish camouflaged among the seaweed. In shadows

Clockwise from above left: Entering the water for a shore dive at Little Fistril beach at Newquay; spider crab, compass jellyfish and scorpionfish.



scoured below the rocks, small anemones have waited the tide out, all scrunched up. Now they're open again. Crabs would just have buried themselves in the sand.

Further out, the rocks get bigger and the seaweed denser, giving way to floating strings of bootlace and more traditional kelp. At 9m I am below the low-water mark. A shoal of silver sea bass circles the top of a rock. Still on open circuit, I hold my breath while positioning to intercept them.

Yesterday's divers had said that the reef below the old lifeboat station was the better dive, yet I enjoy Little Fistral more. Perhaps it was because the seal didn't stop to play, or because I didn't find a Seahorse. Or maybe it's just nice to be in sparkling good visibility as late afternoon sunlight twinkles above.

An hour and a half later and back at the car park, some other divers have arrived. One helps unzip my drysuit and I help them kit up. They ask me about the diving conditions. While cautioning them that this is the only time I have dived here, I thoroughly recommend it.

PORTHKERRY IN A WETSUIT

JUST BACK FROM A TRIP to the Mediterranean, I take a bold decision when packing for Porthkerry. Rather than dig out my drysuit and other UK kit, I'll take the stuff with which I have been travelling. A 7mm wetsuit is

widely reputed to be enough for the UK, though it's 25 years since I last did it.

It's a lazy option that keeps the amount of kit small enough to scrounge a lift in a friend's car instead of having to take my own. One bag for dive kit and one for the camera, then an extra bag with some warm, dry clothes. After all, this is a drizzly day in England.

I wonder when the rest of the club will notice, as I kit up and walk down the beach. I get lots of comments about the lack of a rebreather, but only one diver notices the wetsuit.

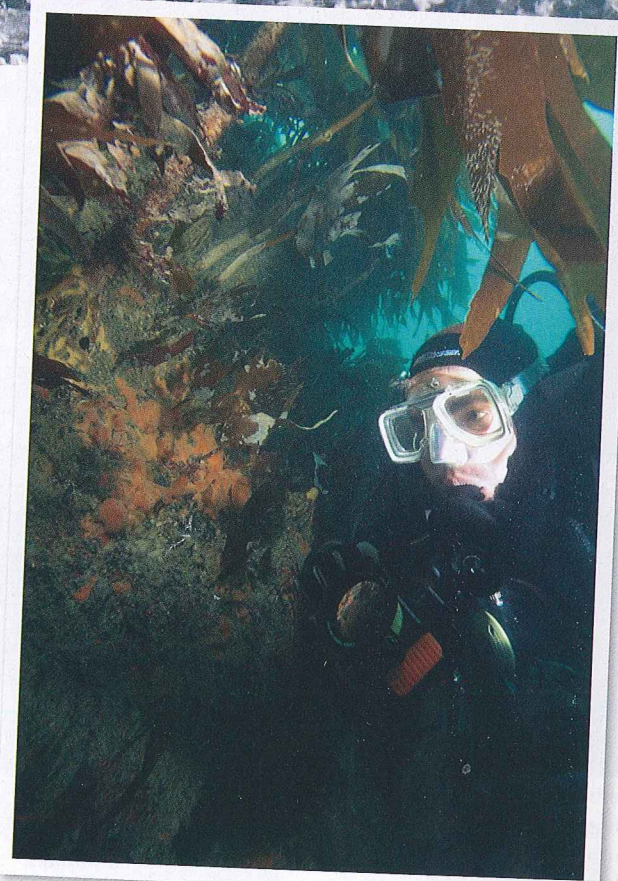
WITH A MODERATE WESTERLY WIND blowing, I can see the white horses foaming offshore.

Porthkerry reef is one of those comfortably familiar dives that's thoroughly enjoyable every now and then. Ducking under water as soon as it's deep enough, the cold wet creeps into my wetsuit, but it's not too unpleasant.

Wetsuit design has improved drastically since I first dived Porthkerry in a 6mm sharkskin two-piece. We head out for the canyon that cuts through the reef at the south end.

By the entrance to the canyon is a bowl in the shingle always popular with ballan wrasse. I can just lie on the seabed and watch them peck at pebbles for whatever they have spotted to eat.

In the canyon I pay close attention to the overhang on the left. Deep at the back is a good place to find crabs and anemones. Then it's over the ridge at the end and down to the "Crack of Life", a horizontal fissure into the back of the



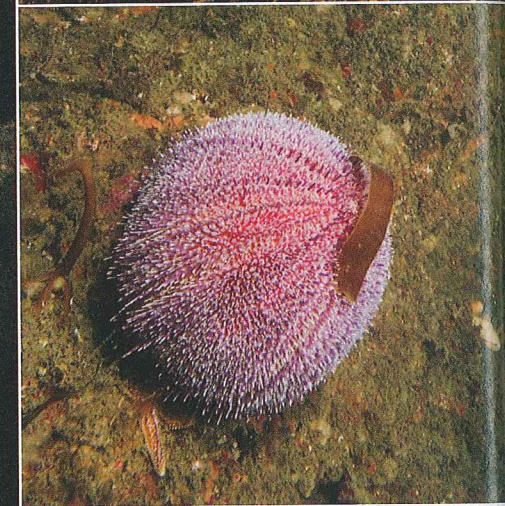
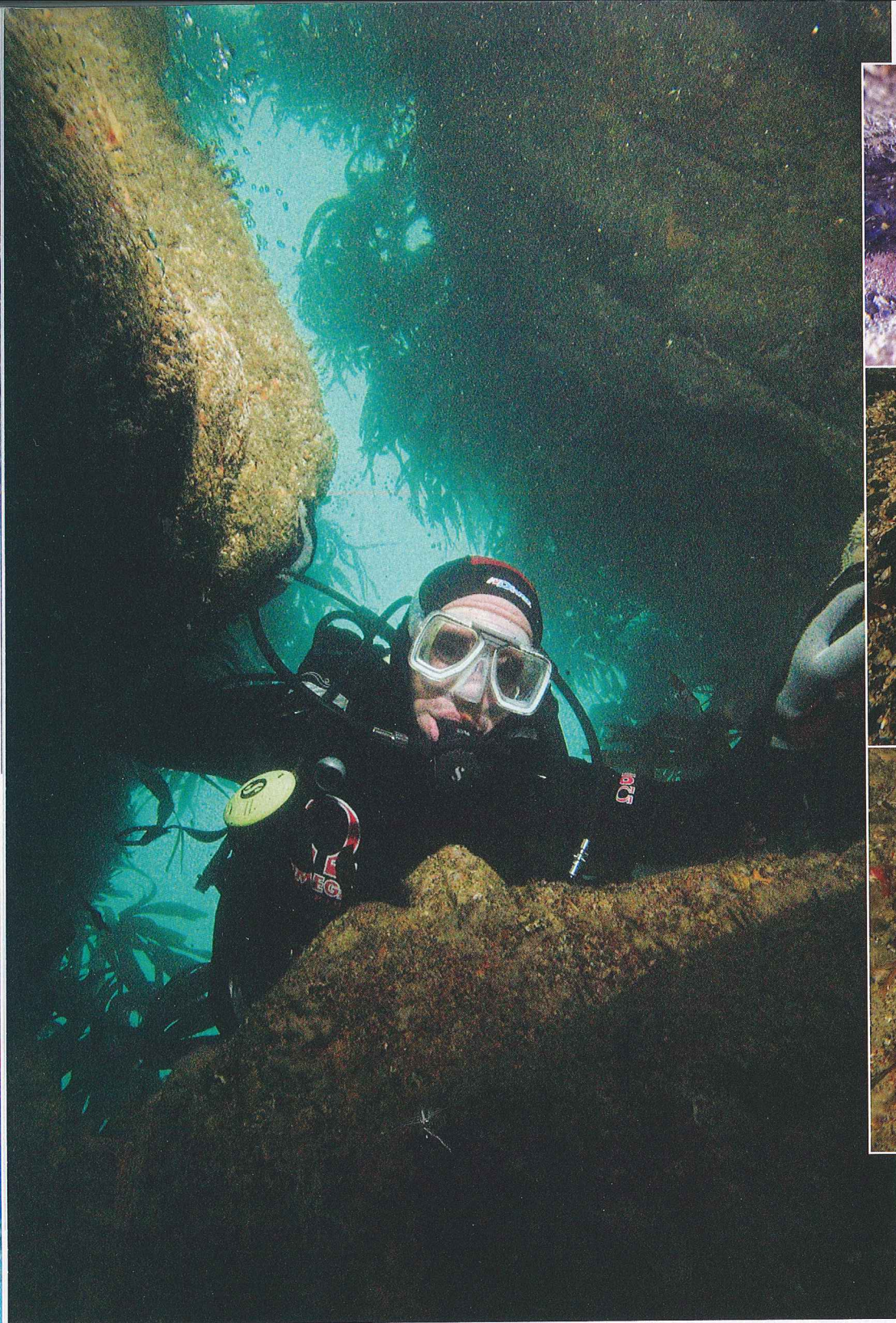
reef that's reliably full of small stuff like shrimps, blennies and squat lobsters. A particularly squashed but narrow orange fish that holds flat to the upper side is a clingfish.

Now on the back of the reef, we head north and then up the blind canyon to "the Cauldron". As a blind canyon, this collects all sorts of debris at the end, ready to be stirred up by divers.

Get there first and it's clear. Get there after a few other pairs of divers, and it's soup.

Top: The incoming tide at Little Fistral beach has just cut Towan Head off from the main beach. The water is almost deep enough for this to be the best time to shore dive.

Above: Small sponges, bryozoans and hydroids grow on the wall of the canyon that splits the south end of the reef at Porthkerry.



Clockwise from above:

At the top of the Chimney Cave at Porthkerris; shrimp; seven-armed starfish; a sea-urchin grazes on the wall towards the north end of the reef.

Today is soup, so while I look in the smaller cracks for blennies and shrimps, then in a larger crack for a conger, I don't bother with pictures.

Exiting the blind canyon, we turn left and north again. Either the rock has fallen or the shingle has significantly shifted, because the corner here is not the same as it used to be.

Ten metres further on and a little up the back of the reef, a big scour-hole is followed by a short overhanging wall, one of my favourite parts of the reef and peppered with small jewel anemones and clumps of dead men's fingers. Immediately after this is the Chimney

Cave. With just a single 10-litre on, it's the first time I have been able to wriggle through it since I started playing with rebreathers. I go round twice.

The reef gets deeper and the wall builds up as we get to the back of the big rock at the north end of the reef.

Having taken our time to get this far, we're now 40 minutes into the dive and must decide – carry on round to the north beach, or turn back.

I opt for the latter. The tide may not be low enough for the easiest exit at the north beach yet.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm back on the beach. News of my wetsuit has spread,

and cameras are out to record this historic moment.

It's time for another decision. My general rule in a wetsuit is to get changed and warm and dry as soon as I'm out of the water. But that does mean putting on a cold and wet suit later for a second dive.

I'm not that cold. The dive was only 14m deep, so I opt for a minimal surface interval and a second dive as soon as I can change to a full cylinder. Meanwhile, I luxuriate in a warming trick that just isn't possible in a drysuit. I pour a flask of hot water down my neck.

It may have been an enjoyable dive and not too cold, but next time I think I'll wear a drysuit. █

★ *Diving, air and accommodation: NORTH, Chris Lowe, Newquay, 01637 850 930, www.atlanticdiver.co.uk; SOUTH, Porthkerris Dive Centre, 01326 280620, www.porthkerris.com*