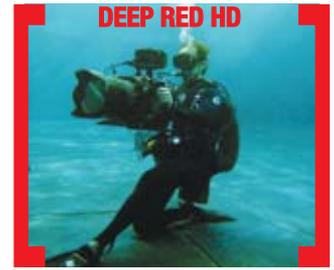


DIVER



ICEBERG ALLEY

ROYAL OAK REMEMBERED

DIVING INNOVATION

NOGI AWARDS

ESCAPE TO FIJI

MIR Odyssey





■ Good buoyancy skills are important when you're dancing with an iceberg in perpetual motion. Photo: © Darryl Leniuk – www.darrylteniuk.com



■ Photojournalist Polina Reznikov on location in Newfoundland's Conception Bay. Photo: © Larry Cohen – www.liquidimagesuw.com



■ Icebergs offer a sight and sound show unique in the diving world. Photo: © Photo: Darryl Leniuk – www.darrylteniuk.com



■ For a great dive vacation just add ice! Photo: Courtesy OceanQuest – www.oceanquestcharters.com

■ An icy form sculpted by the elements. Photo: © Larry Cohen – www.liquidimagesuw.com

Adventures In Iceberg Alley

Text by Polina Reznikov

A thunderous crack shatters the dive, sending a shock wave through the very core of me. Instinctively, I glance at my buddy, Darryl. We'd been instructed what to do and immediately dive down, fining hard. In deeper water we level out, pushing away from the immense structure. Another visual check and I see we're both making headway. We know our dive is over now. Protocol demands we surface. Turning, I check again for my buddy. But in a fleeting moment, he's vanished. Simply disappeared. Ascending, I rotate, looking up, down, all around, but he's nowhere to be seen. I break surface and see our inflatable speeding toward me. I turn, rapidly scanning but all I see is the iceberg towering in the distance, the water between filled with chunks of ice that have splintered from its ever-changing form. Darryl is nowhere in sight.

was in the North Atlantic off Newfoundland – Canada's eastern-most extremity. The locals say it's the land of 'four seasons in one day' and in North America it's the first landfall of the rising sun. Pronounced 'Nufin-Lánd', this former British colony was a holdout, joining the Canadian confederation as the country's tenth province as recently as 1949, after much debate and two referendums. Today, Newfoundland-Labrador is home to about half a million people, mostly of British & Irish heritage. During my visit I stayed in St. John's, the capital, a picturesque city amid a rocky landscape dotted with fishing villages, countless ocean inlets and towering cliffs.



■ An elongated island of ice migrates southward, slowly disintegrating as it goes. Photo: © Polina Reznikov – www.polinareznikov.com

The diving here is diverse. I mean, you don't return home from too many destinations with iceberg dives in your logbook. And for a lot of divers, especially those who weather subzero winter temperatures, planning a vacation to dive in 39°F (4°C) water isn't exactly dealmaker material. But I couldn't wait. My first night at Ocean Quest Adventures I was still staring out the bedroom window at 4 a.m. imagining my iceberg rendezvous.

I didn't have to wait long. Ocean Quest owner Rick Stanley had been tracking the icebergs and weather and so on day two, I arose, inhaled my breakfast hop-skipped out to the truck, RHIB in tow... ready to go. For me, this experience couldn't come soon enough.

Iceberg Capital of the World

'Iceberg Alley' runs all the way down the Labrador coast to Newfoundland's southern shore. It's the best accessible iceberg theatre in the world and these lumbering giants put on a truly memorable performance. Here you have a ringside seat on a parade of 10,000-year old ice sculptures as they migrate ever so slowly down the coast from Baffin Bay, which separates Greenland from the Canadian Territory of Nunavut. Between 400 and 800 of them make this one-way journey every year. They drift majestically, sometimes one by one or in clusters, obscuring the horizon with their precipitous, frosty forms. A true spectacle of nature, they evoke images of enchanted castles, turrets reaching the sky. Where else in the world can you lie back on a grassy cliff top and watch cathedrals of ice float by?

Influenced by their size, shape, currents, waves, and wind, icebergs travel at about 0.4mph (0.7km/h). Bobbing about, they tumble, scrape, and break, gradually melting and deteriorating as they progress southwards. This natural shape shifting occurs as 'berg bits' and 'growlers' calve off into the sea. These chunks of ice – and some are as big as a house – can be hazardous, but more critically this fracturing causes an iceberg to roll around until it finds a new centre of gravity. Then, for a time, it becomes stable again.

During this process two things can happen; and if you're out on the water you don't want to be too close when either occurs. Breaking ice can really churn up the surrounding sea creating a disturbance easily capable of capsizing a boat. And as ice breaks off, the 'berg can tilt, causing underwater 'spurs' to suddenly break the surface with the potential of catapulting a boat into the air, slamming it into the sea, and submerging it as the iceberg resettles. Understand that this can happen in an instant. No warning, no nothing!

The icebergs around St. John's weigh in at about 100,000 to 200,000 tons, and are the size of a 15-storey building. They can be extremely destructive, occasionally grinding into the ocean floor, crushing everything in their path. Seamen navigating Iceberg Alley have always given a wide berth to these magnificent but unpredictable behemoths. Icebergs are treacherous, especially for the ill prepared – *RMS Titanic* is the ever-lasting testament to that! Almost a century later her story lives on. And it calls attention to the submerged mass of an iceberg, which can be anywhere from about 50 to 99 per cent of its overall size. The variation is largely due to the amount of air that is trapped in the ice, thus affecting its buoyancy. An average iceberg will be about 80 to 90 percent beneath the surface.

Cerulean Creature

It was mid June and the weather that day was gorgeous; azure skies and calm waters. The ideal time for an iceberg experience around St. John's is springtime through early summer. We'd been told there were five icebergs in the area and a sightseeing introduction was on the schedule. Before jumping aboard the RHIB we zipped into toasty flotation suits. A 15-minute ride and we were on the open ocean. Spotting an iceberg in the distance, I started grinning and couldn't stop. As we got closer I became overwhelmed. It was a spectacular scene of exquisite crevassed ice; a luminous, cerulean creature with a scaly back and serrated edges, sculpted by long exposure

to the elements. It loomed over us. At the waterline, the ice gleamed aquamarine against the glistening white that rose vertically to the sun. We marveled at this unearthly edifice, at its extraordinary beauty. We seemed so insignificant next to this natural wonder. It was humbling.

We gave the iceberg several turns in the RHIB, at a respectful distance. Then we headed off to the next 'berg just a few minutes

away. In all, we located and observed five icebergs in a seven-mile (11km) radius. Photographs may capture their ethereal beauty but getting up-close in person is the only way to experience the majesty of icebergs.

And the good news was that we'd be returning in the next few days, when the conditions were right, to explore the underbelly of one of these creatures.



■ So how many iceberg dives do you have in your logbook? Photo: Courtesy OceanQuest – www.oceanquestcharters.com



■ The underbelly of an iceberg is a work of art, Polina discovers. Photo: © Darryl Leniuk – www.darrylleniuk.com

Nature Of The Beast

Rick's a master when it comes to evaluating weather and sea conditions. And he knows a diveable iceberg when he sees one. The 'bergs we'd viewed days before would have undergone changes in the intervening days so they had to be re-assessed. Rick was looking for specific features. A 'tabular' 'berg, being broader and flat is generally more stable than one that is domed or wedge shaped; these can roll over more easily. Other necessary attributes of a diveable 'berg include smooth contours, no overhangs, no cracks.

With the selection process complete we began gearing up for our first dive. No special equipment is necessary; however, there are recommendations that include the obvious: be a competent diver with the skill that comes from a degree of experience. Water temperatures of 39°F (4°C), make a dry-suit necessary. For comfort, a single tank is best and pre-breathing your regulator is discouraged to minimize free flow. Good buoyancy skills are important. Rick's detailed dive briefing covered guidelines for safe ascents and emergency procedures. He told us not to go completely under the iceberg. They're floating after all and that's risky. Surfacing, he said, should be well away from the iceberg – at least 250 feet (80m). Although rare, an iceberg can 'calve off' during a dive creating a hazard for the diver below. In the event of hearing a loud boom, we were instructed to dive deep, fining away from the 'berg before ascending and swimming continuously through the safety stop. The idea here is to avoid being hit by falling ice, should a break occur while you're in the water. We understood, finished donning our gear and back-rolled into the icy water.

The Descent

We dropped straight down right where we'd jumped in, about 250 feet (80m) away from the iceberg, and began our approach. Peering ahead, a faint wall began revealing itself through the curtain of blue. Details were kind of soft focus but I knew I was nearing the ice. What I didn't immediately realize was that the approaching halocline was distorting my vision. Melting fresh water envelopes an iceberg and so once you're inside about 20 feet (6m) of the 'berg, the mixing of fresh and saltwater creates a disorienting blur for a few feet or couple of metres. Breaking through this layer presented a vista that was nothing short of magnificent. The almost translucent, glass-like texture of the iceberg stopped me in my tracks. Its immense surface was pockmarked... a pattern stretching to the limit of sight. Deep grooves ran vertically as far as I could see, and streaks of radiant blue from the re-frozen iceberg 'melt' coloured its slick coat in every direction. I ran my gloved hand over the surface. I was transfixed: utterly in the moment, absorbing an experience that was unique in my life.

Abruptly, everything was in motion, my bearings were upside down. I felt as though I was being sucked into deeper water, the icy wall rushing past. I didn't know what was happening. Instinctively, I inflated my BC, which reversed my direction and alarmed me so I quickly dumped air, stabilized and regained normal breathing. My buddy had experienced the same sensations and our movement through the water had been more or less in unison. What we experienced was the effect of the iceberg being in constant motion. This iceberg was not 'grounded' so it bobbed up and down, creating an undertow that dragged whatever was in its grip, which happened to be us.



■ A cerulean ice castle rises from the sea. Photo: © Larry Cohen – www.liquidimagesuw.com

It took a few minutes to get used to the constant and disorienting shift because you can't hold on to an iceberg: it's like glass. And another thing, when an iceberg melts it releases tiny air bubbles that have been compressed inside for thousands of years. The effect of these escaping bubbles is like being in a glass of champagne; a playful image but not great for visibility. To these unusual sights you can add a rather disconcerting barrage of iceberg sounds that creak, groan and bang as the sun heats up its surface, and all of its countless cracks constantly contract and expand.

It was at that moment the shattering roll of thunder ripped through the water and me.

As instructed just minutes before on the RHIB, we dived deep and out but somewhere during the ascent Darryl had vanished. As the boat sped toward me I hadn't seen Darryl but, eventually, he had surfaced. Later, he described his experience and it was a bit unsettling. As both of us had finned away from the iceberg he began to feel his headway slipping. His hand made contact with something solid and turning he realized he was still at the side of the iceberg, despite efforts to move away. Eventually we

understood what had happened. As the 'berg lost a chunk of itself, it tilted – probably several times - creating a suction as it regained its centre of gravity. Darryl was caught in that suction and drawn back to the iceberg from which he had to distance himself all over again.

The fallen chunk of iceberg happened to come down right above where we were diving. The chances of such an event happening in the first place are slim. But, clearly, risk is involved, as with any diving. Understanding risks and how best to mitigate them is fundamental in our sport. For me, the 15-minute iceberg dive was well worth it. I couldn't wait to get back in the water with the bergs again and, happily, I got my chance just a couple of days later.

Slip Slidin' Away

Before that next dive, I wanted to get really close and personal with one of these icy creatures, to scale its back. Once Rick had selected a 'berg, I closed up my drysuit, strapped on fins and mask, and slid into the water. Swimming towards it I realized getting on the thing might not be so easy. The sloped entry kept swooshing me back into the water because there was no hand-hold at all. At another spot there was a jagged edge – something to grip – and so I timed my fin stroke 'catapult' to sync with the waves and grabbed the edge. Another push from the waves and I was able to pull myself up to the first ridge and a little more scrambling got me on top of the iceberg's lower shelf. Sitting there, I was exhilarated beyond belief. I watched as an iceberg sightseeing tour boat approached and everyone started taking pictures of me sitting on the iceberg. I wasn't sure whether to be proud or embarrassed. But I sat there with a smile on my face enjoying the moment. When time came to dismount the constantly shifting iceberg I looked for

a slide and enjoyed the ride down. And then it was time to go find another iceberg to dive and everyone was eager to do that!

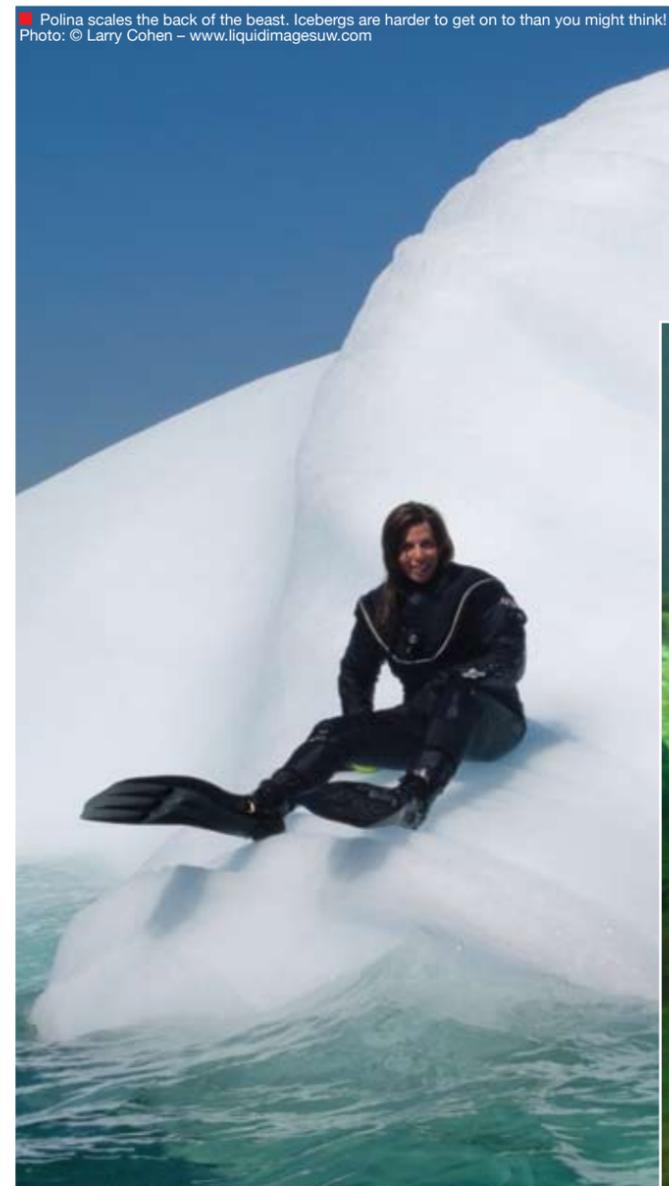
Later, as we were homeward bound I watched a kittywake slipstreaming above, escorting us back to the dock by way of our slight diversion to the bird islands of Wittles Bay. There, thousands of common murre and puffins blanket the rocky terrain when they're not dive-bombing the surrounding waters for tasty fish.

More Than Icebergs

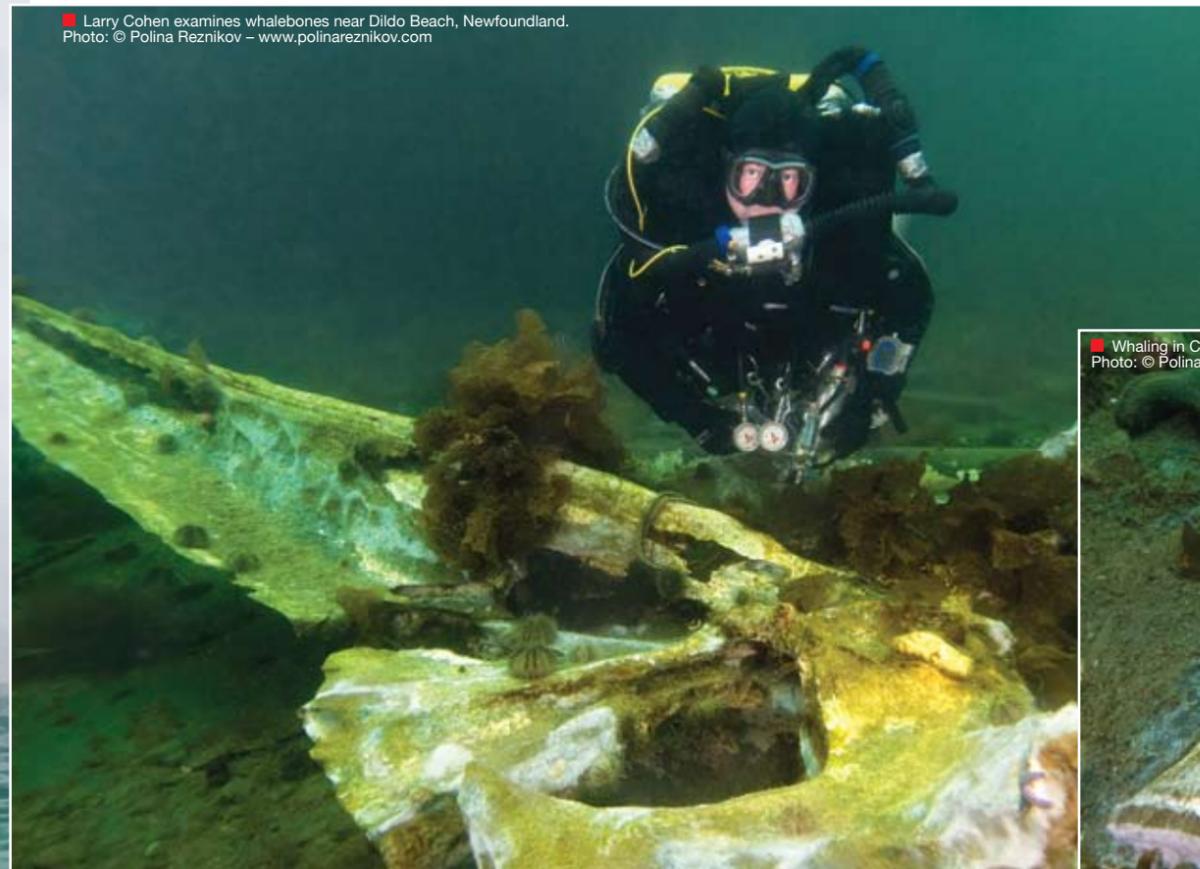
If you're not able to get out to the icebergs, there's plenty else to choose from. Ocean Quest can offer superb wreck diving, for instance. In the chill water around Bell Island in Conception Bay, you can dive on four wrecks torpedoed by German U-boats in WWII (watch CTV's W5 Nov. 7). For something more surreal you can explore a whale graveyard. Canada was a signatory to the 1972 moratorium on commercial whaling. But the industry in this part of the world dates back centuries. During summer months you can also get into the water with whales that frequent these North Atlantic waters. Or, you can dive for scallops, examine clay artefacts from earlier times, or reef dive around Bell Island. There's plenty for the avid scuba enthusiast to enjoy. There's even a vast network of flooded mine shafts and passages beneath Bell Island that might be open to certified cave divers one day.

Topside, there's also plenty of adventuring to enjoy. You can tramp through the wilderness here without seeing another soul the entire day. Or you can visit fishing villages, as I did. These waterside hamlets with their fishing boats and clapboard homes huddled across rocky hillsides, recall the past when fishing was the lifeblood of Newfoundland. St. John's covers an area of 310 square miles (805 square kilometers) and offers a charm all its

own. Of course, it's the people that really make the experience and, for me, Rick and Debbie Stanley are folks who you sense somehow you've always known. They're warm, welcoming people with a vibrant, spontaneous spirit. They live remarkable lives on this salt sea island they love so much to share with visitors.



Polina scales the back of the beast. Icebergs are harder to get on to than you might think! Photo: © Larry Cohen – www.liquidimagesuw.com



Larry Cohen examines whalebones near Dildo Beach, Newfoundland. Photo: © Polina Reznikov – www.polinareznikov.com



Whaling in Canada is a long dead industry. Photo: © Polina Reznikov – www.polinareznikov.com

Rick's passionate about what he does and works tirelessly to reveal Newfoundland's underwater heritage to the world with his 'take only pictures' conservation philosophy.

They are true Newfoundlanders and let me tell you, these are a people you'll never forget. Wonderfully hospitable, quick-witted and charming, Newfoundlanders excel at showing you a good time. They tell it like it is, or at least how they see it, in a blunt, no-bones-about-it way. They're a happy bunch. With place names like Tickle Cove, Ha Ha Bay and Heart's Delight, you get the idea. They can turn a phrase a dozen different ways, 'hold court' for hours, regaling guests with endless stories guaranteed to infect everyone with fits of side-splitting laughter. And it's just who they are, they love life and I'm not sure they fully appreciate the joy they leave in their wake.

Every adventure has its defining moments, those events that become the vivid memories of a journey, and that evoke the feelings you associate with that time and place. These are the experiences you tell people. For me, this trip was different. I haven't been able to single out one or two memorable moments...there were simply too many. 🍁



OCEAN QUEST: Rick and Debbie Stanley have been running charters in the St. John's area for 11 years. Ocean Quest operates a luxury 4-star lodge, with indoor pool, sauna, meeting and social facilities with state-of-the-art presentation and entertainment equipment; a full service dive shop; a fully equipped 38-foot (11.5m) boat, a 23-foot (7m) rigid-hulled inflatable boat (RHIB) and a tour bus.

For more information contact Ocean Quest Adventure Resort:

www.oceanquestadventures.com

Email: info@oceanquestadventures.com

Phone: Toll Free 866-623-2664 or 709-834-7234

St. John's Tourism: www.canadasfareast.com

Airlines serving St. John's (YYT) airport include

Air Canada, Lufthansa and Continental

Polina Reznikov is an avid scuba diver and underwater photographer based in New York. She is Vice President of the NYC Sea Gypsies dive club and Events Director for Oceanblue Divers. She has experienced a wide range of diving environments in many parts of the world. For more on her work go to: www.polinareznikov.com.