

A beard of fine shaggy weed gives the *Arabia* a face like an ancient mariner.

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Tobermory, Ontario

Well-preserved wrecks draw both newbies and vets to Canada's self-proclaimed "diving capital." TEXT BY ROBERT OSBORNE, PHOTOGRAPHY BY WARREN LO

→ **UNLIKE THE CHEERY,** carefree vibe of most dive briefings, this one we're hearing now, aboard the *Deep Obsession* on our way to dive the **Forest City** wreck, is intense. With her stern sitting in 150 feet of water, we're diving one of the deepest wrecks in Georgian Bay's Fathom Five Park, so the skipper sternly—and repeatedly—warns us: "No one," he says, "will stay long enough to go into decompression."

The normal dive profile for diving this 216-foot steamship is descending down the anchor line, then immediately turning around and beginning a slow ascent up the length of the wreck. As we meticulously follow the dive plan, we pass through at least two thermoclines, drastically reducing the already chilly water from 55 degrees to a bone-numbing 41. The normally clear blue

water turns a deep, hunter green. At the stern railing, I glance at my computer—133 feet, 7 minutes bottom time. We start our ascent. The wreck is in pretty good shape at the stern, but as you climb, we can see it's more and more busted up. After the *Forest City* hit the side of nearby Bear's Rump Island in 1904, she slid back and sank on the side of a steep wall. Looking closely as we ascend, it makes sense: the ship hit the island bow first.

Welcome to Tobermory, Ontario, a town that's about a four-hour drive northwest of Toronto, a dead ringer for a quaint New England fishing village and home to some of North America's best freshwater diving. Think tropical visibility (80 feet is not uncommon) in cold climes, with wrecks and swim-throughs. Tobermory even calls itself



the "Diving Capital of Canada." There are more than two dozen dives for every level of diver—all within minutes of the town's dock. And just one weekend of diving here is a great introduction to some well-preserved wrecks.

→ NIAGARA II

This 182-foot lake freighter was cleaned up and intentionally sunk in 1999.

Niagara II’s bridge sits at about 60 feet, and if you really get down and dig a hole in the sand, you could probably hit 90 feet at her keel. Almost immediately after descending down the line, we can make her out, sitting on the bottom. I stand behind the wheel and pretend to steer the ship and check the radar screen. My dive buddy and I even check to see if the table is still set in the crew mess hall. (It is.) Finally, we work our way up to the top of the smokestack to turn on our lights and drop down. A convenient hole is cut into the side at the bottom of the smokestack. You emerge into the engine room where a large door welded open actually lets you see the outside. You can also swim the length of the hold.

→ **CAROLINE ROSE**
Beginner divers enjoy diving this



The table is set, but places are empty in the mess hall of the *Niagara II*.

132-foot schooner because she’s in only about 50 feet of water. And although winter storms have banged up the *Caroline Rose* a little, she’s still a worthwhile dive. The hull is split open and laying flat on the bottom, but there’s a lot of detail still to see. Parts of the railings are still intact, but some of the machinery—winches, engine parts—is still

scattered around. Even the propeller is still attached.

→ **ARABIA**
Tobermory touts this wreck as the jewel in its crown. The *Arabia* sank in 1884 with no loss of life. But since the 131-foot barque was discovered in 1971, 11 people

have died diving this wreck—mostly inexperienced or unfit divers having problems and panicking. At 110 feet deep, with often strong currents, this wreck is for advanced divers only. When we dive the *Arabia*, it’s clear, sunny and calm, and as we hit the bottom of the descent rope, the bowsprit appears before us, looking eerily intact. Her anchor is still snugged up tightly to the bow, with the chains still loosely draped around her winches and across her deck.

As I hang over the front deck, I’m looking appreciatively down the length of the *Arabia*. She’s covered with a beard of fine, shaggy weed, making her look like an old, dignified mariner. I check my computer. We have enough time for one circuit of the wreck before we ascend. I’ve barely started to absorb and appreciate this wreck and

DIVE IN: TOBERMORY, ONTARIO

→ **GETTING AROUND:** Tobermory is about a four-hour, 185-mile drive northwest of Toronto and is located on the northern tip of Ontario’s Bruce Peninsula. From Toronto, take Route 400 North to Barrie, then go west on Route 26 to Owen Sound, then north on Route 6 to Tobermory.

→ **DIVE CONDITIONS:** Currents are mild on most of the wrecks in Fathom Five Park. The exception is the *Arabia*, which can experience strong surface currents and brisk currents at depth. Water temperatures range from 41 to 50 degrees, with thermoclines as you descend, making a 7mm wetsuit or dry suit a must. Visibility ranges from 25 to 80 feet, depending on prevailing winds and currents.

→ **DIVE OUTFITTERS, CHARTERS AND EDUCATION CENTERS:** There are two dive operators in Tobermory: Divers Den, diversden.ca, and G+S Watersports, gswatersports.com. Both operators have complete rental facilities and run several boats, morning and afternoon, from late May to September. In case of emergency, there’s a hyperbaric chamber minutes from the docks. For more information, visit the Tobermory Chamber of Commerce web site, tobermory.org.

now the dive is nearly over.

While I later find solace indulging in delicious local delicacies—crisply battered

whitefish and flaky, gooey butter tarts the size of my hand—there’s even greater comfort in knowing I’ll soon be back.

1/2
Horz

STUART

Live Areas

8” x 4.75” (non-bleed)
48p x 28p6

9.25” x 5.625” (bleed)
54p9 x 33p9

1/2
Horz

HENDERSON

Live Areas

8” x 4.75” (non-bleed)
48p x 28p6

9.25” x 5.625” (bleed)
54p9 x 33p9