Once tied into the Garpen's mooring line, the skipper lifts the engine and, with relief, I leave my spot in the wheelhouse to rejoин the rest of the team on the dive-deck to absorb the next briefing.

My only complaint about this Finnish Baltic trip is to be precise, the boat, is of the diesel fumes. Of course, the stern of a dive-boat can often be a smoky place to sit, but I struggled to find a fume-free spot anywhere on this hardboat.

For this wreck we choose to dive with a guide – one of two exceptionally experienced and knowledgeable women, Hanna and Nina. The Garpen is quite broken up and I doubt whether I would be able to navigate back to the mooring line, but this pair know the area well from maintaining the dive park’s buoys, lines and information blocks.

The visibility is now disappointingly green and smoky as we tug the wreck, close to the seabed. It is shallow at only 7-12m, which perhaps has a bearing on the poor vis. I struggle to use my imagination on such broken wreckage, if I’m honest, and begin to focus on finding some of the small creatures that live there.

There are very few fish to see at these Baltic Sea dive-sites, just a few shy pipefish if any. I’m not cold, so go with the flow, maintaining a visual with Hanna.

A quick pass is essential here if you wish to dive without a guide, and although sending an SMB up is the normal procedure, in this instance I prefer to make both my and the skipper’s lives a little easier by surfacing back at his boat.

For me the Garpen was no more than an average experience, though for divers with a deeper archaeological interest I will probably keep them amused for half an hour.

“We are not certain about the wreck’s history,” I’m told by Päivi Pildanjärvi, one of two Finnish underwater archaeologists diving with us. “Many details, such as the vessel’s structure and the location and time of its sinking, match with those of the Conservancy, an English brig said to have been shipwrecked on the night of 25 October, 1847, on the rocky islets near Hanko.

“It is told that the vessel sunk to a depth of seven fathoms and only the tips of its masts could be seen, but the captain and five crew members were saved.”

So our Project Baltazar (Baltic History Beneath the Surface) adventures continue – but not immediately. The rain is with us for most of day two and the wind has picked up. I don’t usually suffer from seasickness, though just in case I make sure to keep night of the horizon during our short, bumpy motor out towards Hauensool, or “Pike’s Gut”, named apparently for its likeness to a fish’s innards.

We’re heading for a narrow strait between the islands of Tullisaari and Kobb, used as a haven for shipping from the 13th century onwards. Seafarers carved their names, coats-of-arms and even short stories into the rocks of these islands, explaining why the area is known as “The Guest-Book of the Archipelago”. Some 40 such carvings have been found.

Not only does this area afford us shelter from the wind but it hosts a collection of wrecks, notably linked by ropes and arrows to ease diver navigation. It’s possible to access them from the islands’ shores, so we fix in alongside a jetty to begin our diving day.

We commended Hanna’s guiding expertise again and follow her along an underwater line towards one of two wrecks we’re to explore.

Once again, the visibility is poor and I’m reminded of a UK inland site, with green and snotty sowe hug the wreck, paired up towards one of two wrecks we’re to explore.

We follow the line on to two more adjoining wrecks in similar condition and finish the dive back at the boat, having taken few photographs.

With better visibility this would have made for a more pleasant experience and, with more marine life, might have kept me submerged for longer.

The small town and the people of Hanko are fabulous, so the Finnish chapter of our mission wasn’t a wasted effort, but the Figurehead wreck (described last month) had been the standout highlight. I just hoped that the third and final destination on the itinerary would provide us with something spectacular. Bring on Estonia!

The finale of my “test-driver” adventures lands me on the island of Hiiu onom, an hour’s car-drive from Tallinn and another 75 minutes by ferry. It’s great to be visiting a new country but there is a small problem – the weather forecast...
We have explored wooden wrecks in Sweden and Finland in all kinds of states, from a simple pile of wood through partially visible vessels to a 17th century ship with two masts and decking intact. We have experienced near-freezing but clear water, total darkness and at times almost zero vis. It has been a varied and mostly exciting diving experience for me.

The Estonian wreck itinerary, beside the Swedish and Finnish schedules, offers some relative youngsters for us to dive. We are to explore war wreckage, up to four ships dating back to WWI – offers some relative youngsters for us to

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**FACTFILE (Finland)**

**GETTING THERE** Fly to Helsinki and get a train the 80 miles on to Hanko. Will fly with Norwegian Air and back with Finn Air.

**DIVING** Sakulshukoulu Aalto organises guided trips mainly at weekends but during the week by request; sakulshukoulujaatto.en, The Atlanta dive-boat without guide can be booked with Hanko Diving; Hanko diving

**ACCOMMODATION** Hotel Bulevard near Hanko Marina, bulevard.fi

**WHEN TO GO** Surface algae tends to bloom at the end of July/nearst August, so the best visibility is September-November and March-May.

**MONEY** €uro

**PRICES** Return flights from €88. Return train to Hanko 34 euros, Hotel from €55 pp per night (two sharing). Two-dive boat-trip 89 euros. Weekend trip with overnight accommodation (two sharing) 249 euros. Dive-guides for two or more divers 80 euros per day.

**VISITOR INFORMATION** visitfinland.com; tourism.hanko.fi, maritkuskuvellamo.en (Maritime Centre Vellamo)

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**FACTFILE (Estonia)**

**GETTING THERE** Direct flights to Tallinn from UK airports. Ferry to Hiiumaa island with Präämide, präämide.ee. The 80 miles on to Hanko. Will fly with Norwegian Air and back with Finn Air.

**DIVING** Deep Explorer is run by Technical Diving Estonia (Facebook; Guides Toru-More, eventuskaldivitklubi; Egert Kaminik, @marmarad

**ACCOMMODATION** Viinakook (vodka distillery), viinakoos.com

**WHEN TO GO** As Finland.

**MONEY** €uro

**PRICES** Return flights from €88, return ferry 7 euros. A double or twin room B&B at Viinakook costs 50 euros, and diving around 100 euros pp per day (two dives).

**VISITOR INFORMATION** visitestonia.com

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**Construction of the Akula began in a St Petersburg shipyard in 1906. It was a new design concept, created by naval architect Ivan Bubnov with an increased range of action in mind. The sub was launched three years later and found to be slower than anticipated. In November, 1911, the Akula entered active service in the Baltic Fleet, and following your transferred to the 2nd Submarine Brigade. It tallied up 19 patrols until, while carrying naval mines on a deployment mission in 1913, a mine sent it with its 35 crew to the seabed. From the bow we can view at least half of the week’s 40m length. The visibility is outstanding and, and my head rearing with excitement, I don’t feel the cold at all. We stop for a nose at the conning tower. Looking down to the seabed from there, on the listing port side, we can see four of the dome-like naval mines Akula was carrying. We take a tentative closer look, bottoming out at 30m. The Akula has four propellers and I position Susanne by a starboard screw to squeeze off a few shots. Beside them some explosion damage is evident in front of the rudder. Looking up, I see the lights of the rest of the dive-team coming our way. Back at the conning-tower, we examine its construction. Much of the metal is not corroded, with one shiny piece standing proud and looking almost immaculate. I leave Susanne to carry on the dive with the team, having pulled through much of my air in just over half an hour, and head for the mooring-chain to begin my ascent and wait out my short stop. With one last look back at this magnificent relic, I think about those 35 souls that remain inside and head for that layer of soup above me for the last time. From Finland to Sweden and on to Estonia, the Baltic Sea has enchanted, excited, exhausted and exhilarated me. It’s been freezing, fun and sometimes frustrating – but that is the essence of exploration and adventure diving.

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**The bow and stern stand proud, parts of the hull are still upright and a fair number of tools lie about the ship’s inwards, plus-boots, car-parts and wooden crates. This week is so huge that it deserves two or three dives to fully appreciate what it’s all about. Some nitrox and at least a 15-litre cylinder is required to maximise your time. Tech-divers will have a blast. None of the 27 crew perished during the sinking, so a full exploration is possible.**

**Back on the Boat,** we mull over our second dive. Should we return to the E Rossi or cruise for another hour to find the Russian submarine Akula? A difficult decision, because we haven’t explored nearly enough of the E Rossi, but the sea state is on our side to locate and dive a different wreck. So we unanimously agree to move on to check out this sub, hoping the vis will be as good.

**With the long travelling distances between these wrecks in Estonia, I can imagine that one might have a tough time at sea. We’re lucky today, now with very little wind, and I find a comfy place on deck to while away the time.**

**The wreck-site is again buoyed with a solid yellow marker, and loosely we agree to follow Egert again. We will be the first divers in the water but this being an intact submarine, other than some mine damage to the bow and stern, getting disoriented is not a consideration and guiding not essential. Again the green fog clears as we drop through the 3m layer of soup. The temperature gradually drops and I begin to pump some air into my drysuit to stave off the cold and the increasing squeeze. Then I leave the line, turn 180° and, laid out as if it had sunk yesterday, is the highlight of our trio of Baltic Sea trips. The best really has been saved until last.**