The water conditions will be cold and dark," began the dive-trip briefing emailed to me a week or so prior to my departure for Sweden. And so, with an open mind, I purge my dive-kit bags of warmer gear, replacing the necessary items with my drysuit, coldwater undersuit, Arctic hood and thick, dexterity-diminishing gloves. Something tells me that this diving trip is going to be Baltic.

The quiet village of Dalarö is a small yet hugely important place for Sweden historically, or for its capital Stockholm, at least. The village is pretty, so typically Swedish and, like many other villages within the complex archipelago, is formed of red, yellow, grey or white wooden houses standing neatly behind their white-wood fences. At a bend in the road, a divers’ hostel and marina sits by the shore, the marina home to small boats that service owners’ holiday homes throughout the islands, together with a cluster of dive-boats.

The islands, at varying distances from the shore, give the impression that one is not by the sea at all but beside a lake, and from the jetty the water is clear, flat and untouched by so much as a breath of wind.

Dalarö was once home to the Swedish maritime customs station, the Tullhuset, built in 1788 and a stopping-point for cargo-carrying sea traffic to Stockholm, which today is just an hour’s drive away.

Maritime activity was at its peak here around the turn of the 18th century. Among these historical buildings is the pilots’ station, once the office for boat pilots selling their services to captains unwilling to navigate these geographically intricate waterways themselves.

A bold few who were unfamiliar with the seaway chanced their luck, resulting in many vessels plunging to the seabed and, over time, creating today’s Dalarö Dive Park.

Our briefing is held upstairs in the Tullhuset. We’re to dive in two small teams, each one accompanied by a guide – mandatory on many of the most pristine examples of wreckage.

The guides and their respective boat-skippers give an informative briefing, showing off their 3D digital models, running through the dive-plans and points of interest and sharing some historical details of the wrecks themselves. The first and shallowest of the two wrecks is Riksäpplet. It lies at just 3-4 m maximum depth, so requiring a reverse dive-profile.

After the Battle of Öland in 1676, Riksäpplet and her fleet withdrew to Dalarö amid fears of a Danish attack. However, once moved to new anchorage a storm blew up and took the ship to the bottom.

Launched in 1661, the ship is not in particularly great condition for a Baltic wreck, thanks to a destructive salvage operation to recover its valuable wooden remains in 1921.

The project is intended to produce a website (projectbaltacar.eu), publications and public events promoting dive-tourism and maritime history. The total budget is 1.6 m euros, with more than 80% of this provided by the European Regional Development Fund’s “Interreg” Central Baltic Programme. But you’re not expected to remember all that!

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much lower than that of typical ocean water, thanks to an abundance of freshwater run-off. This, together with low oxygen content, provides ideal conditions for timber wrecks. The brackish water also keeps these wrecks free of shipworms, a clam-like creature that prefers to lay its larva in saltier water.

After a short motor out, the skipper ties into the yellow buoy and we strike into frigid green water.

Because of the poor condition of this wreck, we’re not expected to stay with our guide Susanne, so my Swedish buddy and I explore the wooden rib structure and hull remains by ourselves as the rest of the dive-team disperses in different directions. The wreck is still interestingly recognizable as a boat, its skeletal remains and very soon into the dive my fingers remain by themselves as the rest of the team are deeper than we are. We begin to complain of the cold. After a short motor in, the skipper says “We miss the return buoy-line and send up an SMB to complete the dive. On surfacing, we find that we’re no more than 5-6m from the buoy and, indeed, the boat. Depth of just over 30m. It is forbidden to fins over the top of this wooden wreck at any point. The guide’s powerful torch-beam reveals the anchor and then a carved wooden box feature, once the figurehead of the Bodekull. On the starboard side my own torch-beam reveals a circular stone object, now lying flat on the weather deck. This tool, I learn, was used to sharpen knives aboard the boat. It looks as if it had been used only yesterday. There are four fin-kicks later and we discover a cannon leaning over the side, still sitting in its carriage, the metal now swollen from centuries under water. This is the first time I have seen a cannon sitting on the deck of a wreck. Tools, glass bottles, a musket and a pistol also lie on this side of the deck, giving the impression that the ship sank quickly, with no time for the crew to remove these items before abandoning it. The wreck is fairly small at around 20m, so it’s possible to make two laps of it in a single tank, although our team took a little longer to absorb all the details and made only one lap, by which time my fingers were frozen solid. Photography is challenging in these conditions, with little in the way of dexterity remaining.

The skipper had earlier explained to me that the best time to dive here was in winter, when the water was near 0°C. At this time of year, divers are often able to view the whole wreck from stern to bow, he said. During our dive in May, the lowest temperature we hit was 5°C. The wreck was discovered in 2003 but not made public until 2007, and is one of the finest examples of wreck preservation that I have ever seen.

The diving around Dalarö is challenging, not for the beginner and only for those comfortable with diving in cold and dark conditions, with the equipment to match. For the technical archaeologist, the experience is top-drawer.

And for me, this kind of trip is the essence of adventure diving. Effort is required to visit these time capsules, along with a certain amount of discomfort (those fingers again!), yet the experience is worth every chilblain. Those involved in the wreck’s protection are knowledgeable and passionate about this history on their doorstep, and to dive with these people as guides certainly enhances the experience.

My next stop on this Baltic Sea archaeological wreck tour is to be Finland, and I’m curious to discover how this experience will compare to Sweden. So, after a two-week interval, I move on to the town of Hanko on the country’s south-western tip.

Compared with the Swedish trip, the diving in Finland will be relatively shallow, the deepest dive no more than 18m. I’m pleased to discover that the water is warmer too, at 10°C, balmy compared with the 5°C I had endured in Sweden. The Finnish and Estonian wrecks within the BALTACAR remit are marked with buoys, and any remains deemed to be more than 100 years old are protected by the Cultural Heritage Act. An information board attached to a concrete block marks the beginning of each underwater museum experience in Finland, with detailed maps of the wreck and basic information about its discovery.

Divers will also find the obligatory blurb about “taking only pictures and leaving only bubbles”. From the concrete block, a line guide Susanne and me to our first wreck, nicknamed “The Figurehead”. We had dived together well on the Swedish trip, so decide to continue with this underwater partnership while in Finland.

My initial nil-visibility worsen melt off into the green as we descend, with the water clarity appearing to be vastly better than it had on my initial look from the surface. Although still fairly dark, both the port and starboard sides of the wreck are visible from the bow on arrival. Only the top 2-3m of water have a soupky look. The name of the wreck derives from the female-shaped figure that once lunged forward from the bow. This eventually came loose, fell from the wreck and was recovered from the seabed in 2001. It is displayed at the Maritime Centre Vellamo in Kotka, 60 miles east of Helsinki. Päivi Pitkänen, one of two Finnish
beginning to pick up at the surface.

Back aboard via the stern ladder, we find a buffet of fruit and biscuits laid out for returning divers, who are all thrilled to have been able to explore a timber wreck in such great condition.

A second dive-boat appears and ties into our stern, politely waiting for the balance of our team to surface before the divers descend.

I’m excited to see that the wooden decking remains in place, except for a few areas where anchors have levered some of it off prior to mooring lines and concrete blocks being installed.

I’m enjoying the dive immensely as, from the starboard side, we fin over and across the wreck and peer into the dark cargo-holds with our lights.

We discover the huge wooden rudder still in place at the stern, and then follow the portside hull back towards the bow, where we find the rest of the team now descending the mooring line.

As it’s a shallow dive and the wreck is only 28m long, we’re able to complete three laps before our ascent to make a 5m stop on the line.

The dive-boat above tags at the heavy mooring chain as we wait, with the wind beginning to pick up at the surface.

FACTFILE (Sweden)

GETTING THERE • Will flew with Norwegian Air to Stockholm. A taxi from there to Dalarnö costs £10 but the skippers plan to arrange transfers soon.

DIVING • Mapas, Captain Anders Toll, divecharter.se. MJ Captain Krieger Jansson, dykboaten.se.

ACCOMMODATION • Divers Hostel, vandrarhemmetlassen.se.

WHEN TO GO • Algae blooms in July and early August, so best visibility is September- November and March-April.

MONEY • Swedish krona

PRICES • Return flights from London from £66. The dive’s hostel has rooms (two sharing) at 700 krona (about £60) a night or bunk at 320 krona for a group of 4-500 krona. A one-day dive trip two wreck dives with lunch costs 900 krona pp with Divecharter, dykcharter.se.

DIVERWEB.com