



ICE DIVING IN THE BAIKAL

BAIKAL DIVING CLUB "STARRY BAIKAL"

EVERY SHADE OF WHITE

Traveling off the beaten track? Winter holiday in Siberia? Sunbathing in the snow? Ice diving?

Olkhon island in the Baikal is a perfect combination of all four and so much more (beauty is where you find it)!

Let me set the stage for my story:

Participants:

Andrey Bobkov, TDI/SDI Instructor #17076

“Starry Baikal” dive club members

Place:

Olkhon Island, the biggest island in Lake Baikal

Distance from Irkutsk: 256 km

Maximum length: 71 km

Maximum width: 12 km

Total area: 730 km²

Population: 1,600 people

Water basin: Maloye Morye (the Small Sea) – technically, it is a strait, separating the island from the mainland

Length: 70 km

Width: 5-16 km

Fish species to be found: sturgeons, perch, pike-perch; local en

demic fish species: omul, golomyanka, sig, kharius

Time: March 1-4, 2013

Water temperature: +10 - 15 C

Air temperature: -15-20 C

Ice thickness: 90-100 cm





I have been diving in the Baikal for over 12 years now, still it has not lost its novelty and charm to me. I planned this ice diving tour for my club members to excel in their practical skills and discover new aspects of ice diving in the new environment.

It takes about 3 hours by car to get from Irkutsk to our base camp on the Olkhon. What a view you get on the way! – Steep hills covered with snow, scarce larch-trees replaced by the dense taiga forest, small settlements scattered here and there – it all brings you into the meditative state of mind, when you feel in harmony with the universe. Then you get there: the road from the mainland to the island. Just like that – go over the ice – the Olkhon in the distance, sugar white sparkly snow and to crown it all the impossible-to-be-described never static sky.

After arrival and settling in the base camp in the middle of nowhere (yet with running water, electricity and Wi-Fi available at all times), we go on our scouting trip – to find the best place for making a hole in the ice.

Ideally, the ice should be clear of snow. Our primary concern is a big nazhim (this is a Russian word to refer to a place where two big ice platforms collide together, making rock-like formations on the smooth ice surface). Nazhim is just like an iceberg – what you see on top is only a small part of what you get underwater. Our goal when ice diving is to enjoy watching the exquisite shapes of ice.

Secondly, we are interested in transparent ice – not milk-white, but as clear as glass – it lets more light in and it is fun to see the people on top.

The last but not the least important fact – the proximity to nazhims adds chances to see the endemic Baikal seal (we call it “nerpa” in Russian), as they need to get out of the water from time to time and it is easier to perform in a nazhim.

Due to its geographic position, Olkhon island is a very dry place in summer (there is approximately one rainy day a month) and, consequently, being covered with snow in winter is not a typically Olkhon scenery. However, this winter proved to be generous to dress the island in white. “We expect a lot of mushrooms in the summer,”- one of locals commented.

For the first day of diving we decided to travel to the extreme north of the island – Cape Khoboy. It took us about an hour and a half to saw through the 90-centimeter thick ice to make a 2x2 meter hole. We use the ice cubes to make a wall on one side of the hole – firstly, to make it conspicuous to other travellers (depending on the air temperature it takes 2-3 days for the ice crust to grow as thick as 15-20 cm), secondly, to protect us from the wind.

Our usual gear includes a full-face hood, 2 regulators, a 15L air tank and a dry suit with a warm undersuit (we strongly recommend Weezle Extreme Plus, which proves to be the best in our severe condi-

tions, even if a leakage occurs) – enough to keep one sound for a 40-minute dive.

We usually administer hot water (approx. 80°C) into both regulators to prevent them from setting on free flow due to temperatures fluctuation (-15-20°C in the air and +10°C in the water).

After the dive we bring scubas into a heated tent (this is local fishermen's portable home – you can hide there from the wind, eat and sleep with a hot stove and some wood to sustain the fire).

On the first day we were surprised to find an omul (a local endemic fish, tastes great when smoked!) with no head at the bottom. Was it left here by fishermen? – But they don't put nets in shallow waters. How come the fish turned up so close to the bank? The omul riddle remained to be solved on the last day.

On the second day we were very lucky with windless sunny weather and decided to go round Cape Khoboy to dive on the other side of it – to have the Baikal abyss below and the ice on top. The day held a unique experience in store – witnessing the ice “breathing”. Locals say so to refer to the occasions when it suddenly starts moving and cracking. It is just amazing to see the monolith come apart – a huge 30-centimeter wide crack forms within seconds. To think that just a minute ago the 90 cm thick platform was as solid as a rock!

A very special sound precedes the cracking – some sort of thunder-like roar and then you feel the ground is moving under your feet. This is the moment when you realize how small and powerless a human is in front of the giant nature.

The ice. So usual in our everyday life: ice cubes in drinks, ice chunks to make sculptures and slides in the city Central Park. Here on the Baikal it acquires so many other qualities – when you travel over the ice in a warm car, watch the vast territory covered with snow, you suddenly realize that the Baikal surface feels like desert – an endless frozen desert with mirages. We saw water in the distance – as if there was no ice at all. The picture made us shrug, but it was a mere play of the sun rays against the ice – an illusion.

The third day started with more surprises – because of the huge cracks we could not get through to the place where we dived on the second day, so we had to leave our cars and carry the gear over the nazhims to the hole we made on the first day. 7 minutes after the dive started I saw my buddy pointing to a dark silhouette in the distance – something big was hiding between the rocks. As we moved closer it rushed past – the seal!

We were lucky to have chosen the place for the hole right close to the seal's rest territory. It became clear that the omul we found on the first day was the nerpa's unfinished feast. On further exploration of the area we found some other traces of the seal's presence. We decided not to chase it for the sake of a photo. We will come back later to see if it is possible to establish a friendly relationship. When we got out of the water the sun was shining so brightly we felt like sunbathing. Unfortunately, within minutes the sky was covered with clouds and turned into a merge of violet and pink. The ice immediately reacted to this by becoming intensively turquoise.

So, what colour is the ice? Actually, it is in great dependence of many factors: the place, the weather, the presence of the sun.

It is milk-white when it covers the coastline rocks – like sugar icing on a cake.

It is black when you are looking at it from the distance and when it is free of snow.

It is green when you lie down on it and try to see through.

It you look at its cracks on a sunny day – it is all colours of a rainbow!

The beauty of Lake Baikal Ice Diving Safari is in these simple yet deeply philosophic even being purely naturalistic discoveries.

It is the time to feel in harmony with yourself and the world, to feel you are a part of a wonderful picture. I feel this connection charges me so much.

Then we get back to the city. The hustle and bustle do not interfere with my inner serenity.

In less than 90 days the ice will be gone, so where we travelled by cars in March boats will be of use in May, and in 240 more days the liquid will be firm again.

For us to observe every shade of white.

