



**Have You Ever Dived in
The Deepest Lake in The World?**

THE BAIKAL ABYSS - RUSSIA

Text and Photography by Andrey Bobkov

On a cold February morning some ten years ago I was driving my car along the Baikal shore in the settlement of Listvyanka (I ran a travel agency at that time and was making my way to one of local hotels to check if they were ready to meet my clients) when I saw an acquaintance of mine. He was a picture of absurdity at that moment – taking off his winter coat and trying to pull on some thin rubber garment instead. I stopped just out of curiosity:

- Hey, Andrey, what are you doing?
- I'm going to dive.
- But it's minus 30 Celsius!
- Yeah, and the water temperature is about plus 2∞, so it is warmer down there. I am taking my Open Water Diver exam today.



OZERO BAYKAL (LAKE BAIKAL)

LOCATION

Buryat A.S.S.R. and Irkutsk, Russia
51:29-55:46N, 103:40-109:55E; 456 m above sea level.

Surface area [km²] 31,500
Volume [km³] 23000
Maximum depth [m] 1,741
Mean depth [m] 740
Length of shoreline [km] 2,000

Lake Baikal is the deepest lake in the world. The bottom of the lake lies 1,285 m below sea level, and is the deepest continental rift on the earth. Its water volume is approximately equal to the total volume of the Great Lakes of North America, or to about 20% of the total freshwater on the earth. It is also known as one of the most ancient in geological history, and there are few lakes in the world to compete with this lake in biotic diversity. As many as 852 species and 233 varieties of algae and 1,550 species and varieties of animals have been known to inhabit L. Baikal. The world-famous Baikal seal, the only mammal living on the lake.

The lake is completely surrounded by mountains, and there are 22 small islands over the lake. The lake water is fed by some 300 inflowing rivers, and is drained through the single outlet, the Angara River. The climate of the drainage basin is extremely continental with long, very cold and dry winters and short cool summers. The climax vegetation under the climate is the coniferous forest largely dominated by larch.



I laughed and went on my errands, wondering why would anyone want to change in the street in winter to go into actually warmer yet looking more severe environment (if I only had known that some ten years later I, Andrey Bobkov, would be the instructor myself!).

Much water has flown since that time. Today I work as an instructor for a dive club Three Dimensions-Baikal, this is the only dive club in Irkutsk that has its own heated dive center and compressor room right on the Baikal shore, the club members store their equipment right in the dive center, we also have equipment for rental (it is put in disposal of laymen and professionals from all over the world who are looking for a chance to see what is the lake like under the surface). I personally like to give lectures to my students not in the classroom in Irkutsk (we have a dive gear shop and an office in the city), but in the dive center – to immediately combine theory with practice.

Lake Baikal is different...
...from what one expects a lake to be. It is a tectonic crack that is, according to limnologists (lake scientists), constantly getting wider and deeper, experiencing multiple earthquakes, that play their significant role in the in-lake water circulation: the lower layers come to the top whereas the surface waters are carried to the depth. This process results in the fresh water being very rich in oxygen, so no wonder recent reports state that lake Baikal is inhabited from surface to bottom.

However, you are not going to be smashed by the variety of species per square meter: by a lucky chance we observe a flock of local endemic fish called omul (*Coregonus autimnalis*); quite often we see endemic representatives of the *Gobiidae* family, these are funny fishes that are very good at mimicry; as for the flora's secrets – enjoy the views of the Baikal sponges, that look like corals, but are not



dangerous at all – imagine it takes 100 years for the sponge to grow 1 meter long. Remember Robert Frost said, “A poor life this is, if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare”. This is exactly what I keep doing every single dive – and I am never bored with the seemingly monotonous scenery. Indeed, right is Colin Wilson, saying, that when you think you have exhausted the world around you, you have only exhausted the world inside you.

The Baikal earthquakes also play their role in forming horizontal currents in the lake, which are fun to go with.

We dive all year round. The water temperature is about +1 - +4°C during the greater part of the year, but this results in amazing visibility of 20-30 meters in late autumn, winter and early spring. In summer time the water warms up to +16 - +18°C, which leads to the poor visibility of 5-10 meters in July - early September.

Dive sites

The Baikal abyss – a drop off – a vertical wall going into the depth is some 200 meters’ swim from out dive center. The water is so clear and transparent, yet you can not see the bottom, it feels like being on another planet.

Quite often we launch the so-called “exploration” expeditions to the places of historical significance: like, for example, the CircumBaikal railway. Last year in July we found a 100-year-old ship 16 meters long and 5 meters wide, which was probably a fishing boat that sank as a result of a hole in its bottom. Presumably, the boat crew did not take enough precautions and came too close to the tunnel construction site during explosion works. On the boat we found a vinegar bottle made in Moscow.

We also dive in the Angara river (the only river that flows out of the Baikal) in the places where old villages were flooded during the Angara hydropower station construction in Irkutsk. These places are full of historic artifacts: old cups, bottles, coins, etc.





Some enthusiasts are eager to find the Kolchak gold (Kolchak was the White Army officer who fought the Red Army in the October Revolution of 1917), which is said to be have been hidden from the rivals in the waters of the lake.

Ice-diving in the proximity of the Olkhon island in the Baikal is of particular interest because of unusual ice formations that look like mountains hanging from above.

Pushing the boundaries further
What sort of equipment do we use? Regular club members and club guests make use of Apeks scubas, those are quite good for cold water. We are also trying to keep pace with hi-end technology – today we are the only dive center in the region that has its own semi-

closed circuit rebreathers Azimuth and closed-circuit Inspiration, so far there only two people who are qualified to dive with these apparatuses, but it is not so much the quantity as the quality that matters, right?

To sum it up, let's quote the wise words of our wise ancestors; "Better see it once than hear about it a hundred times." You are welcome not only to see, but also to feel the deepest lake in the world – Lake Baikal and I will be there to share my experience of communicating with it.

Andrey Bobkov • PDA Instructor
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