

UNDERWATER *Journal*

Your Guide to Diving Adventure



A Journey into Iceland **World of Water, Ice & Fire**

Also inside:

Philippines Banca Safari

Utila - The "Just Right" Island

UWJ-issue 30 - 2013



- Pg 4** Feature: Iceland, a journey into a world of water, ice & fire.
- Pg 34** Philippines Banca Safari
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- Pg 72** Freeze Frame: Crocodile fish eye

Cover: Facial portrait of a curious Lumpsucker fish taken in the frigid waters of Iceland. Image captured with Nikon D200 DSLR camera and Nikkor 60mm macro lens with exposure setting 100 iso, shutter speed 1/60 sec. at f9.0, lighting from dual Sea & Sea YS-240 strobes at full power.

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Lure of the White Smoker

Exploring Iceland's North Coast to dive the Strýtan Thermal Vent and other oddities

While Silfra may of put Iceland on the international diving map, a hundred miles to the north, hidden beneath the dark waters of a coastal fjord, a slender spire spews hot water into the ocean.

Known as Strýtan, this is the largest of a unique group of shallow-water thermal vents formations that are usually found only in miles-deep waters.

Lured by a chance to see a “white smoker,” a growing number of divers are venturing into Iceland's northern region just to add Strýtan to their logbook. For those willing to take the extra time, there is more to this region than meets the eye.



Photo © Erlendur Bogason

The waters of the Eyjafjordur Fjord were still and calm. There was a sharp crispness to the air and snow covered the hills lining the shore. Except for the gentle lapping of water against the sides of our inflatable dive boat, the world around us was silent.

To the north we could see heavy grey clouds hanging low to the horizon, the first signs of an approaching storm undoubtedly born in the arctic wilderness just a few miles away. In a few short hours, the weather would turn bad and diving would become impossible.

For now, all was calm and we were focused on preparations for an underwater adventure into the alien world of the white smoker; the marine hot water vent called Strýtan.

Our dive began with a routine back roll into the teeth-chattering 34-degree water. Instantly, our eyes adjusted to the dim light of the greenish-black water. Peering down through 50-foot visibility and searching for something to orient ourselves, we focused first on the down line.

Erlendur Bogason, who operates the nearby Strýtan Dive Center, has installed a mooring buoy to ensure divers find their way as well as help protect the delicate environment of this site.

Descending, our eyes opened wide as the first glimpse of the chimney came into view.



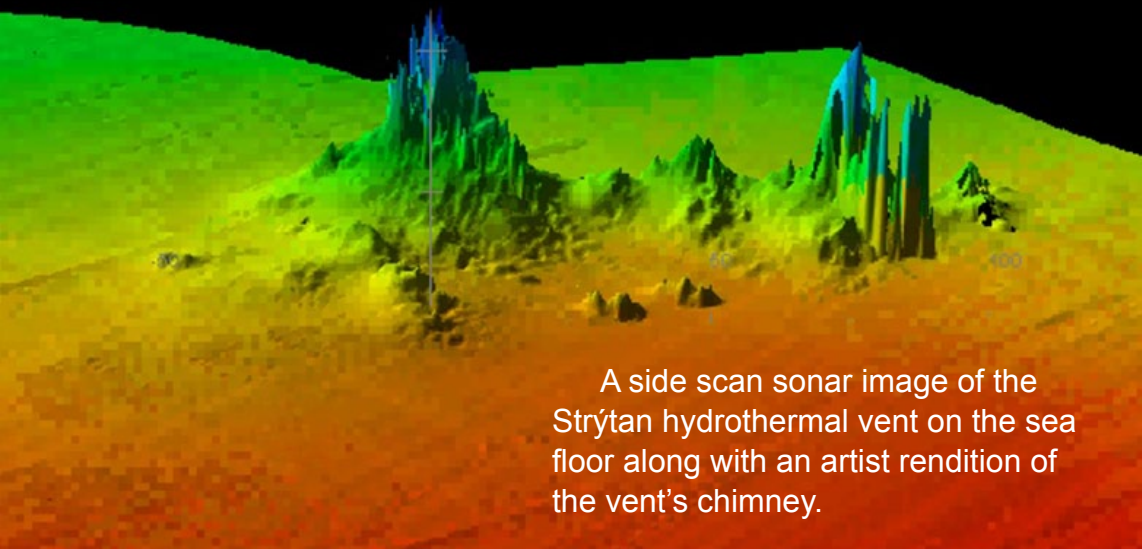
*Story & Photos by
Christopher P. Weaver
& Michael Salvarezza
Eco-Photo Explorers*

Strýtan's formation is comprised largely of smectite, a white clay material comprised of various crustal elements and minerals circulated through the oceanic crust under very high temperature and pressure.

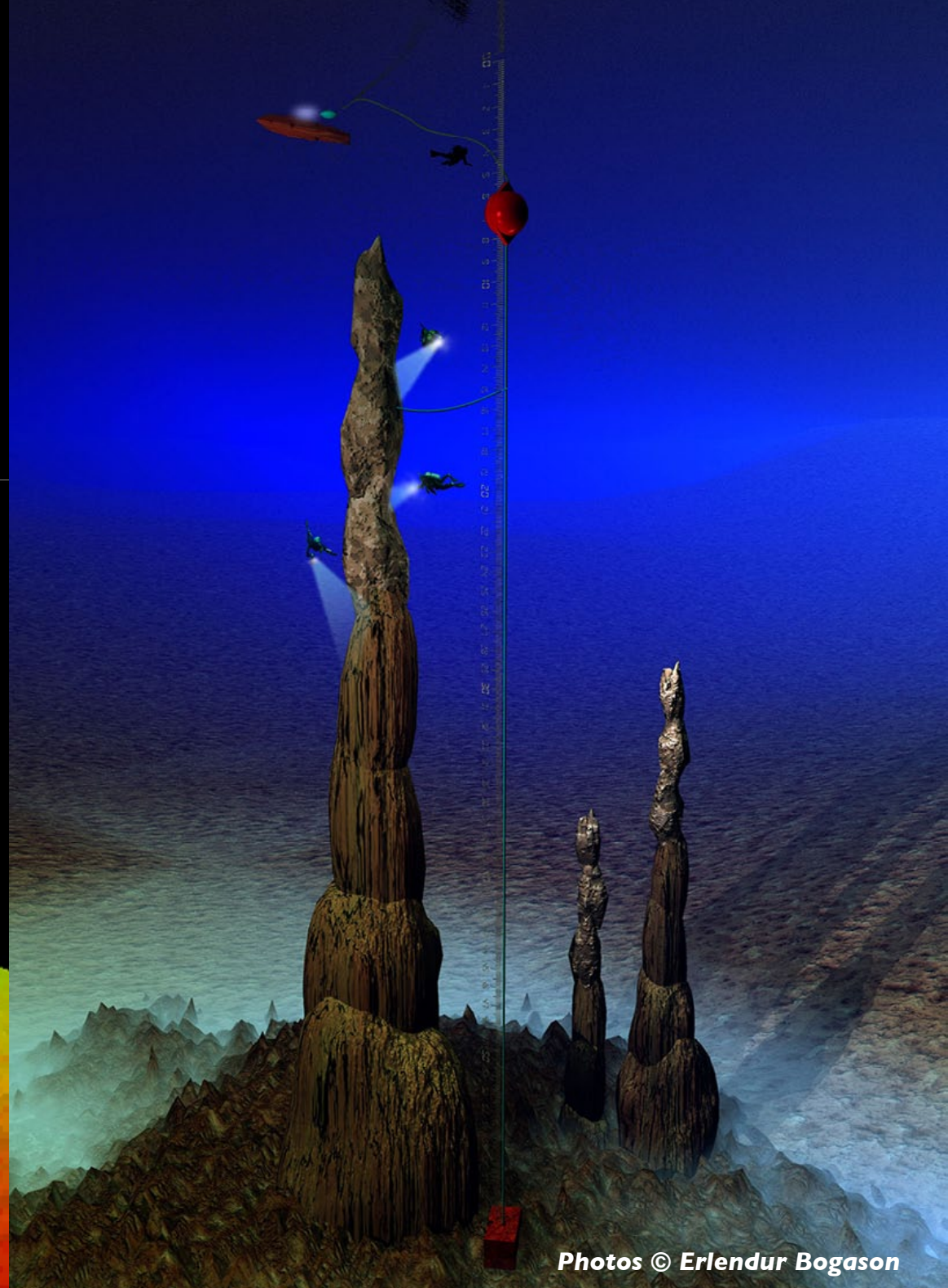
When this material, carried by the hot, mixes with the cold ocean water after emerging from the ground, it coagulates, hardens and forms the chimney.

The nickname "white smoker," comes from the continuous emission of both geothermally heated water in the range of 60 to as high as 464 °C and liquid carbon dioxide.

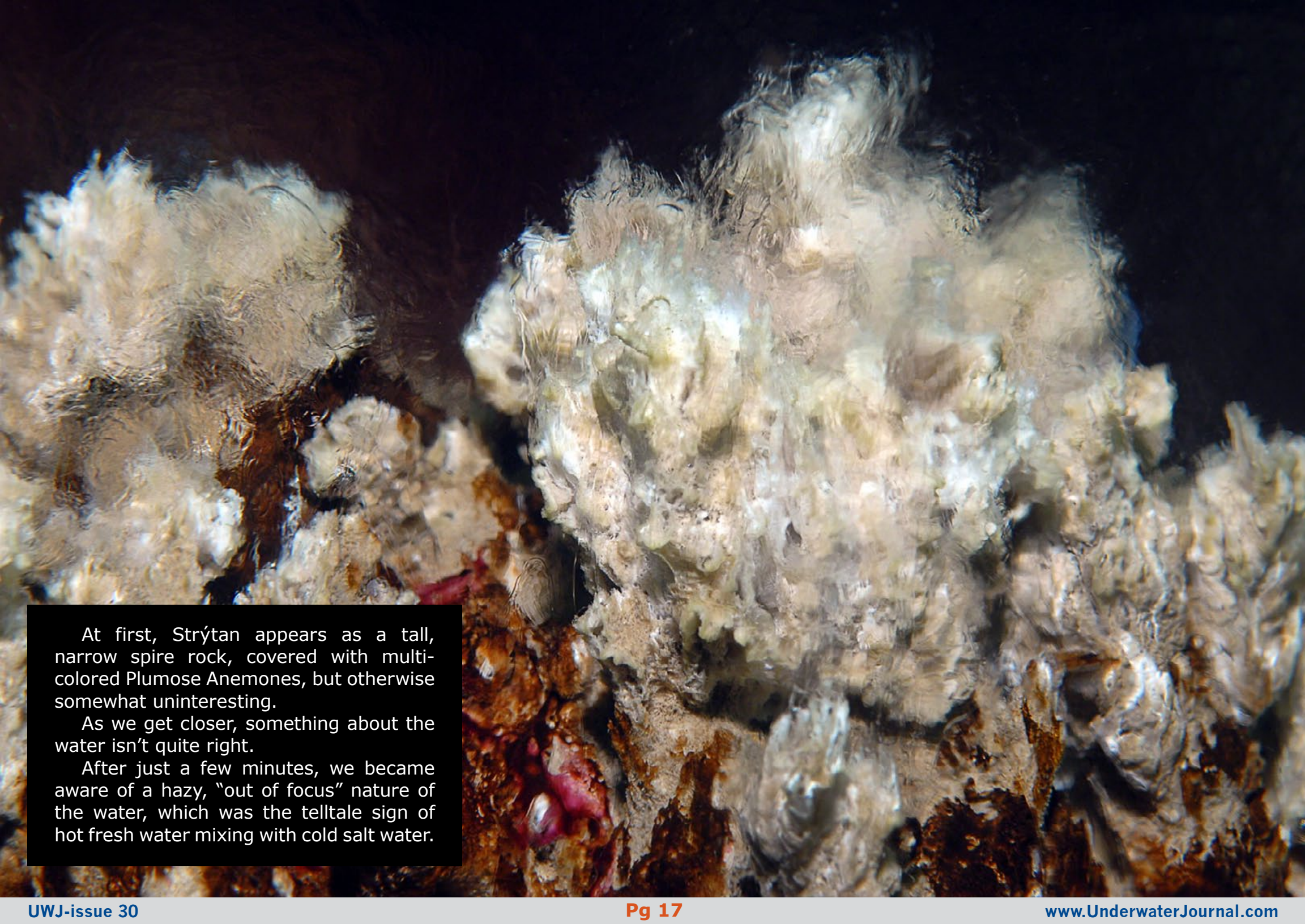
What makes Strýtan so incredibly special is that hydrothermal vents like this generally reside along continental rift zones thousands of feet deep. Where as the top of Strýtan's chimney rests a mere 50ft (15m) below the surface with the surrounding sea floor over 200ft (23m) below; the only one known in existence in the world within accessible range of scuba divers.



A side scan sonar image of the Strýtan hydrothermal vent on the sea floor along with an artist rendition of the vent's chimney.



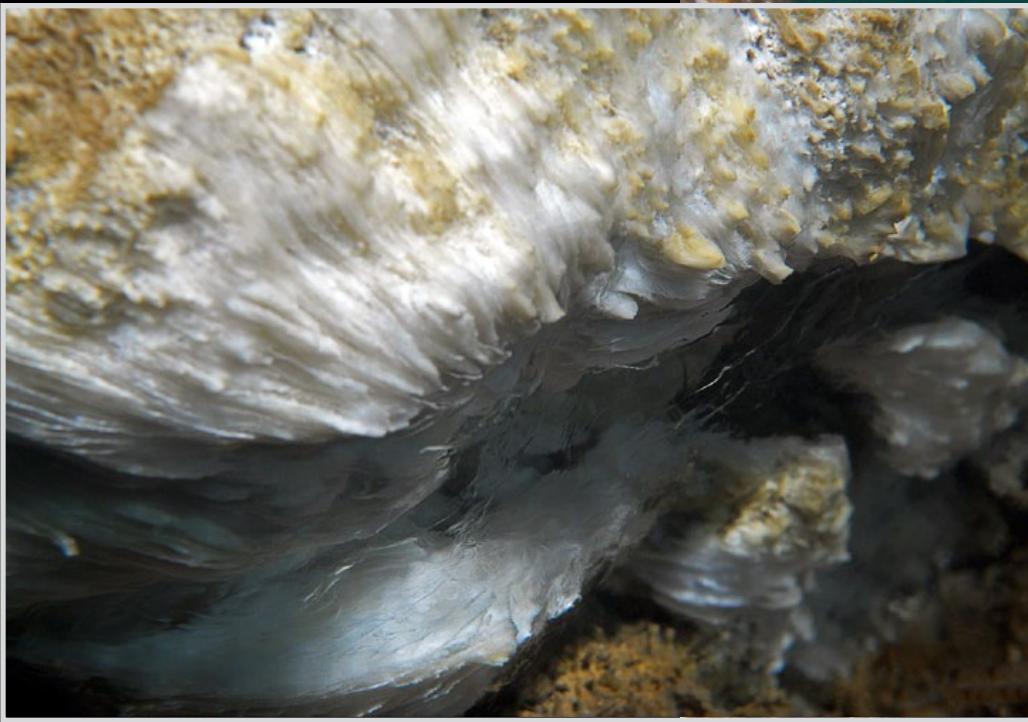
Photos © Erlendur Bogason



At first, Strýtan appears as a tall, narrow spire rock, covered with multi-colored Plumose Anemones, but otherwise somewhat uninteresting.

As we get closer, something about the water isn't quite right.

After just a few minutes, we became aware of a hazy, "out of focus" nature of the water, which was the telltale sign of hot fresh water mixing with cold salt water.



The hot water emitted from Strýtan's set of chimneys has been measured at 75°C (167°F) with estimated flow rate of 26 gallons/100 liters per second. Scientists studying this phenomenon estimate Strýtan's chimney formation dates back to the end of the last ice age, 10,000 years ago, and that the water exiting it was heated some 1,100 years ago.

Normally, divers in very cold water never remove their gloves... but at Strýtan, things are a bit different!

Divers here can carefully remove their gloves and warm their hands in the hot water flowing out from the cone—a unique method of hand warming on a cold-water dive!





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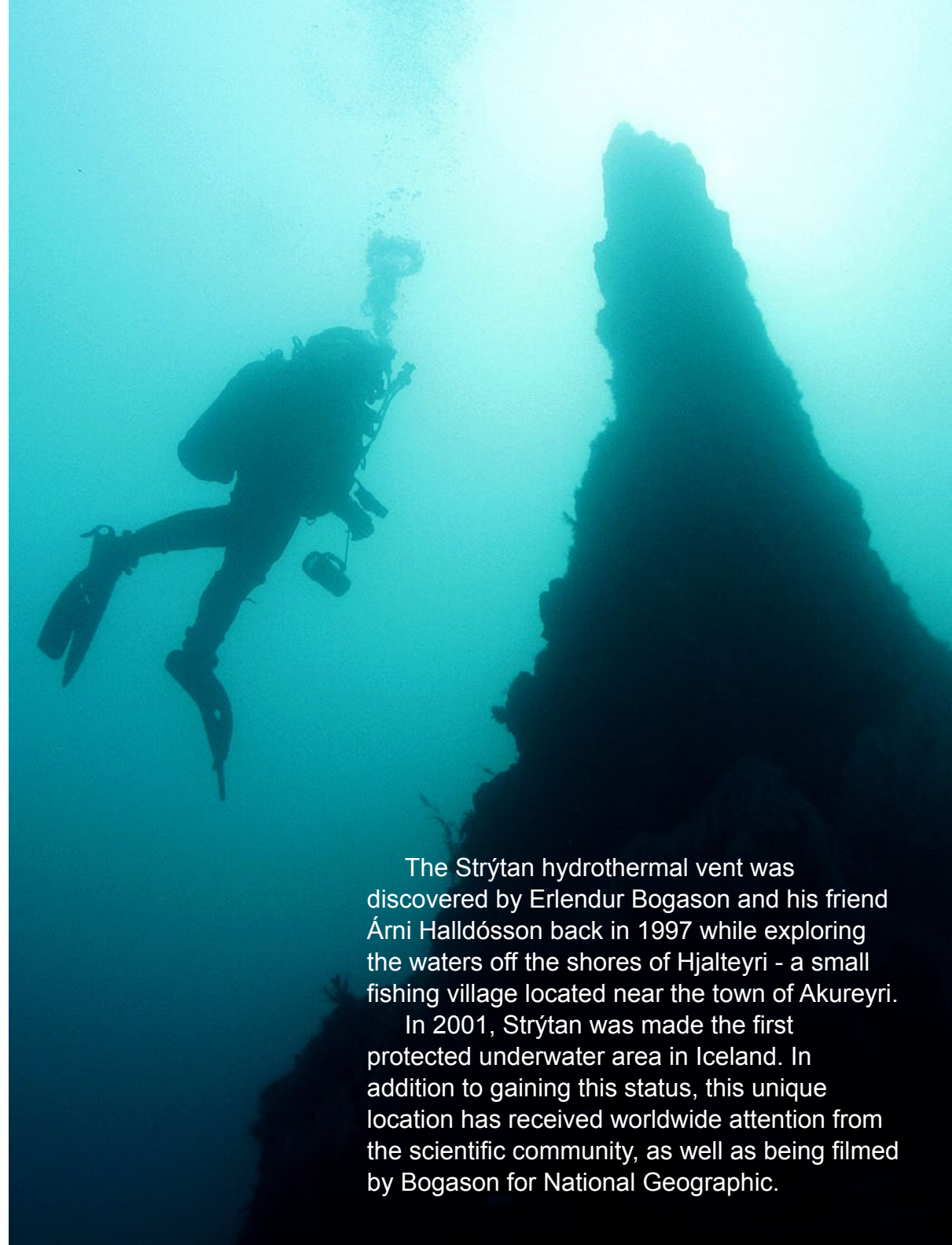
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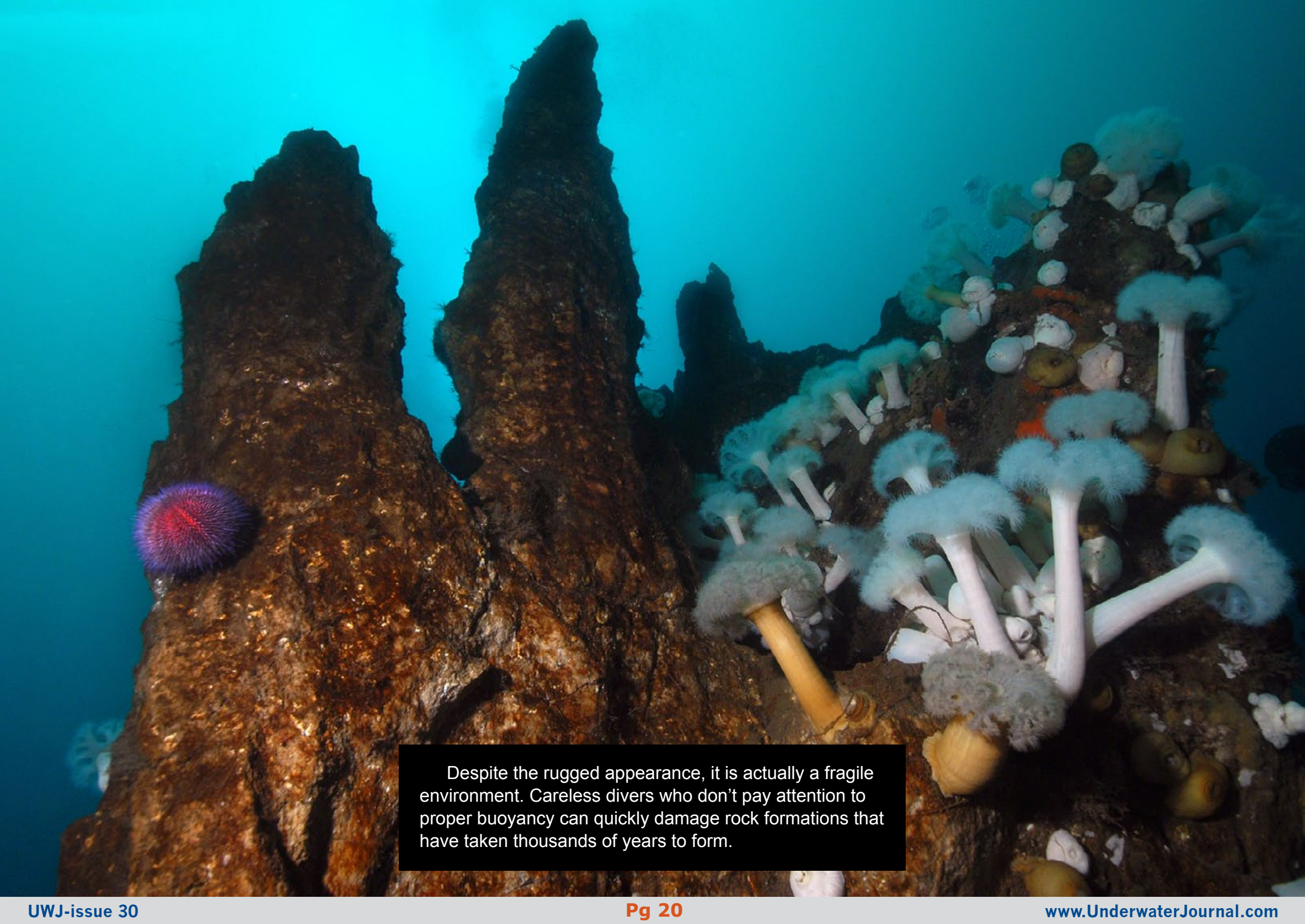
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The Strýtan hydrothermal vent was discovered by Erlendur Bogason and his friend Árni Halldósson back in 1997 while exploring the waters off the shores of Hjalteyri - a small fishing village located near the town of Akureyri.

In 2001, Strýtan was made the first protected underwater area in Iceland. In addition to gaining this status, this unique location has received worldwide attention from the scientific community, as well as being filmed by Bogason for National Geographic.



Despite the rugged appearance, it is actually a fragile environment. Careless divers who don't pay attention to proper buoyancy can quickly damage rock formations that have taken thousands of years to form.



More than just Strýtan

While exploring Strýtan's towering formation, we couldn't help but take notice of the marvelous amount of marine life that abounds in these waters. The region is home to an interesting, wide array of marine life.

Over by Grímsey Island, a small island offshore, provides a unique opportunity to watch several species of seabirds plunge beneath the surface in search of a meal. Below the surface, divers can encounter a number of these birds like

Puffins, Razorbill and Gannets swimming to depths of 20 meters (66 feet) or more in their hunt for small fish.

The most prevalent species of fish we would see on dives were schools of Cod and Pollack, which we often watched swirling around overhead.

When scouting the bottom, encounters with Starry rays will require diving with a sharp eye, but most other things have a way of really sticking out.



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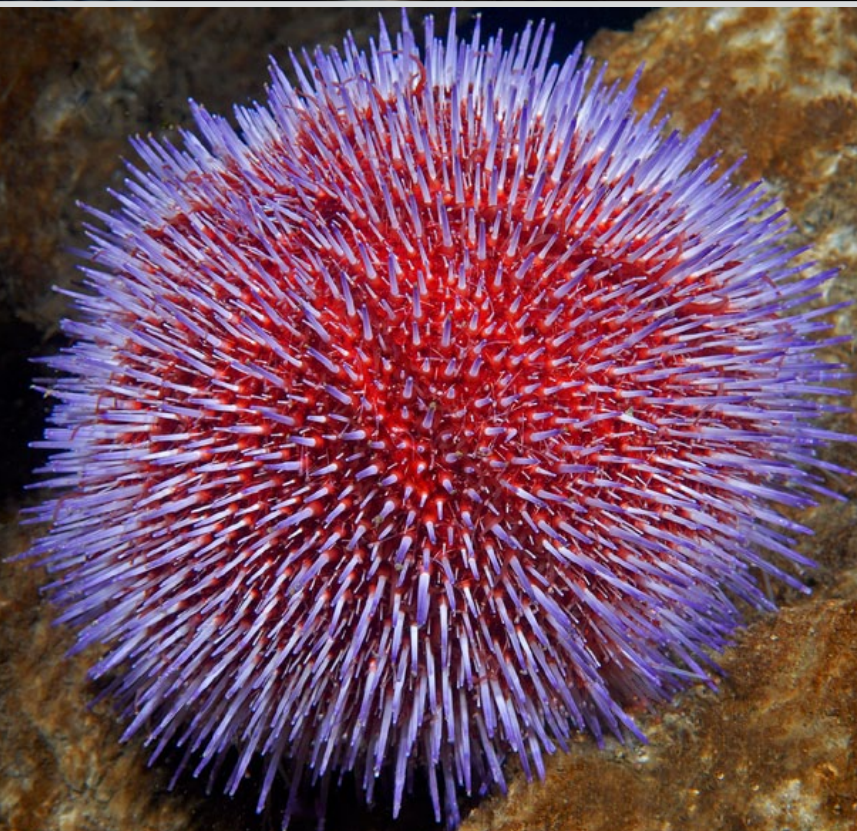
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Photos © Erlendur Bogason

In spring, huge schools of cod move into the northern fjords to spawn. These schools are not skittish around divers, and can even be hand fed in some cases.





Our two favorites were the curious Lumpsucker fish (**top right**) and the ever ferocious looking, but harmless Wolf Fish (**top left**).

Macro enthusiasts will spot colorful *Flabellina nudibranchs*, along with crustaceans, sponges, starfish, and anemones. One of the most surprising was the flamboyant red and purple hues of some of the sea urchins.





Nearby Strýtan in the same waters are other dive sites well worth visiting. Arnarnesstrýtur, sometimes referred to as "Little Strýtan," is a cluster of smaller hydrothermal vent cones covering an area 1312 feet (400m) by 3281 feet (1000m) with an amazing variety of marine life. Arnarnesstrýtur was protected in 2007 and became the second protected underwater area in Iceland.

The French Gardens is a sublimely beautiful, though rarely visited site consisting of additional cones and vents.

At Akureyri are two wrecks worth visiting while you are there. The first is the wreck of the Standard, which lies inside the harbor in shallow water. A German bark, Standard was built in 1874, sunk in 1917 and discovered in 1997.

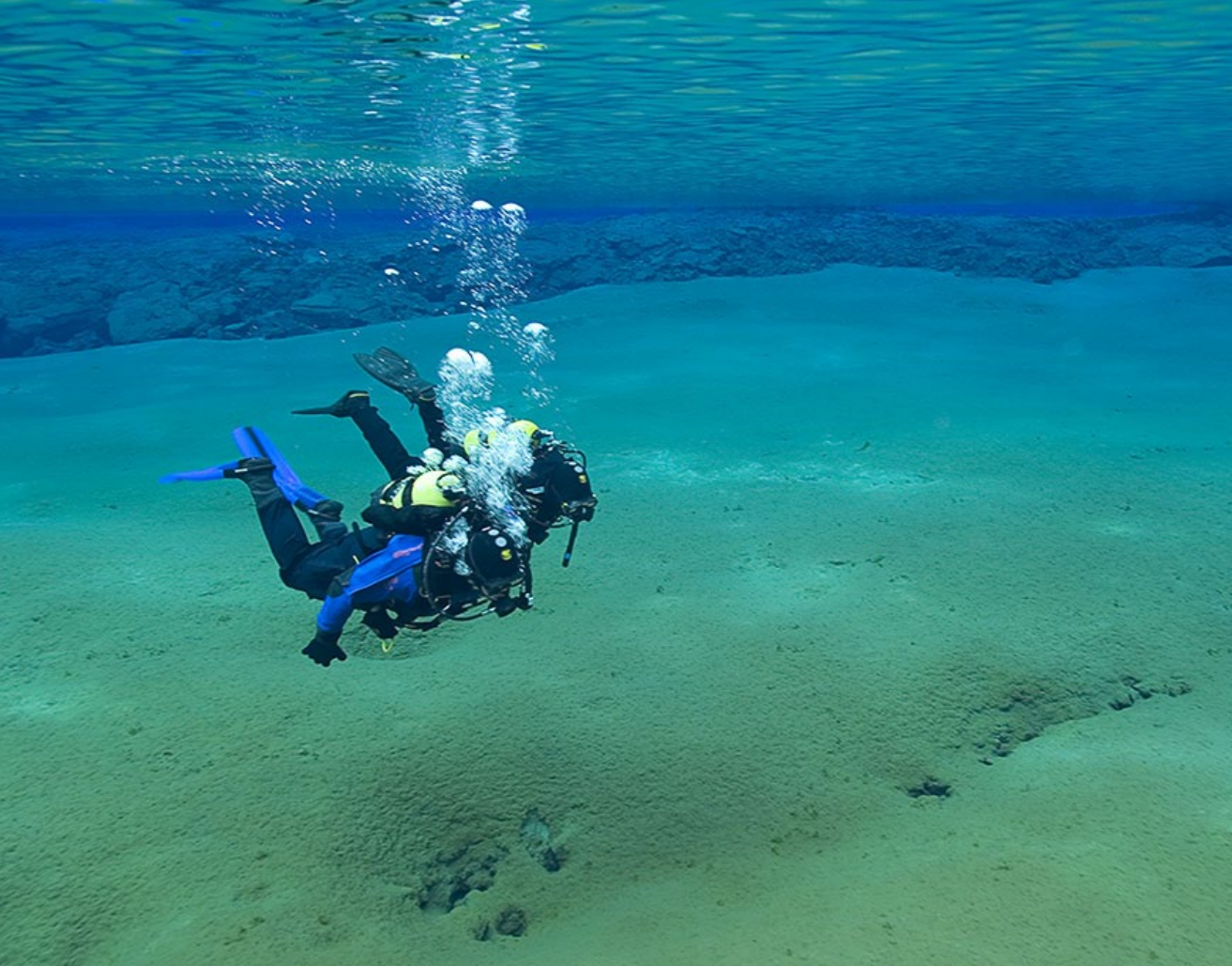
Just outside the harbor is the Skútan, a well-preserved 60-meter (196-foot) wooden schooner from the 19th century, sitting at a depth of 27 meters (90 feet). The site is marked by a buoy, and is within swimming distance of shore.



When weather conditions turn too foolish to dive the ocean, or you just would like to experience another variety of underwater hydrothermal vents, there is Nesgjá. Like Silfra, Nesgjá is a crack or fissure in the Earth's crust formed through tectonic activity flooded with water.

While not half the size of Silfra, the site connects a brackish lagoon to the ocean offering spectacular visibility, unusual rock formations and ethereal yellow-green algae plumes.

Photos © Erlendur Bogason



BEYOND STRÝTAN AND THE SILVER POND A Sampling of Iceland Dive Sites

If you are an experienced cold-water diver with the intention of putting Iceland high on your list, keep in mind the list of available adventures continues to grow each year, as divers seek out new areas and discover new activities. The following sampler provides a glimpse of what is available for those willing to invest the time and resources required to delve into Iceland's submerged landscapes, but it is by no means a complete listing of all that awaits.

El Grillo - Sunk during WWII, this 134 meter (440 foot) tanker lies in a Fjord on Iceland's eastern coast at a depth of 45 meters (147 feet), with the superstructure rising to 28 meters (91 feet). It is considered one of Iceland's premier wreck dives.

Kleifarvatn Thermal Area - Located less than an hour from Reykjavik, this lake is filled with red and yellow-tinged thermal vents that send streams of bubbling, sulfurous flow into the clear lake waters above. The largest vent emits a mixture of gas and heated water that creates a very audible vibration underwater.

Garður - A shore dive that can begin with a precipitous plunge from a stone fishing pier. Often used for training and familiarity dives, but rich in sea life including helmet crabs, starfish, and a resident wolf eel.

Bjarnagja - This water-filled tectonic rift, similar in nature to Silfra, is located very near the coast on the Reyksjanes peninsula, and is filled with slightly brackish yet very clear water. Though not known to connect to the sea, it is home to codfish. This site is often done as a follow-up to an ocean dive.

Askja - Located in the island's rugged interior, this volcanic lake is heated by geothermal waters, which bubble from underwater fissures. As such, steam rises from beneath the gravel beach where divers enter. The water itself supports a vivid growth of green and yellow algae formations.

Lake Thingvellir - Iceland's largest glacial lake hides a number of rocky clefts worthy of exploration. Two favorites are the boulder-strewn ramparts of Davidsgja and the less-visited cleft of Kárastaðir.

Litla River - A drift dive in a river channel that is geothermal-heated to 17°C (62 °F), and filled with trout and char.

Cold Reality



Diving in Northern Iceland is a unique adventure. Coastal waters may reach a high of 10°C (50°F) in summer, but are more often in the 2-5° C (35-40° F) range, and freshwater sites such as Silfra remain a chilly 2° C year-round.



Topside conditions can be volatile, with sunny summer days turning to cold, driving rain in short order. Access to many inland sites is seasonal, and requires a guide and a husky 4-wheel-drive vehicle.

This is not quite expedition diving, but it may involve gearing up on a tailgate or rock ledge before hiking over rough terrain to the entry point. Ocean sites, whether reached from shore or boat, are often weather-dependent.

The logistics of drysuit diving, combined with demanding and variable environmental conditions, demand a reasonable degree of athleticism and self-sufficiency, whether you are giant striding off a rock ledge or back rolling from a small boat into cold seas.

If these realities aren't off-putting, then an Iceland diving adventure might be for you.

If so, the opportunity to experience the wonders of Earth's geological forces, combined with nature in the true wild is worth the price of admission.

Plus, where else can you take a thermos on your dive, fill it from a geothermal vent and make some hot chocolate with 1,100-year-old hot water before returning to the dock?

- CW & MS



During the height of summer, the midnight sun dominates the sky with long daylight hours and air temperatures dwelling in the mild 20°C (68°F) range. Throughout the summer season, tourism basics such as bus tours, whale watching cruises to soaks in the famous Blue Lagoon thermal baths can be supplemented with cave explorations, back country hikes to glaciers and volcanoes, sea kayak expeditions, fly fishing, whitewater rafting and a range of off-road biking and motor sports tours.

Winter sports are also big in Iceland, and when the roads freeze over, the snowmobiles and skis come out.

ICELAND ABOVE THE WATER

When in Iceland, it would be a shame to focus only on the island's underwater attractions. Time spent above the water should be seen as much more than just a surface interval. Glaciers, waterfalls, hot springs and cerulean lakes punctuate a primordial landscape that has become a playground for nature lovers and adventure travelers.

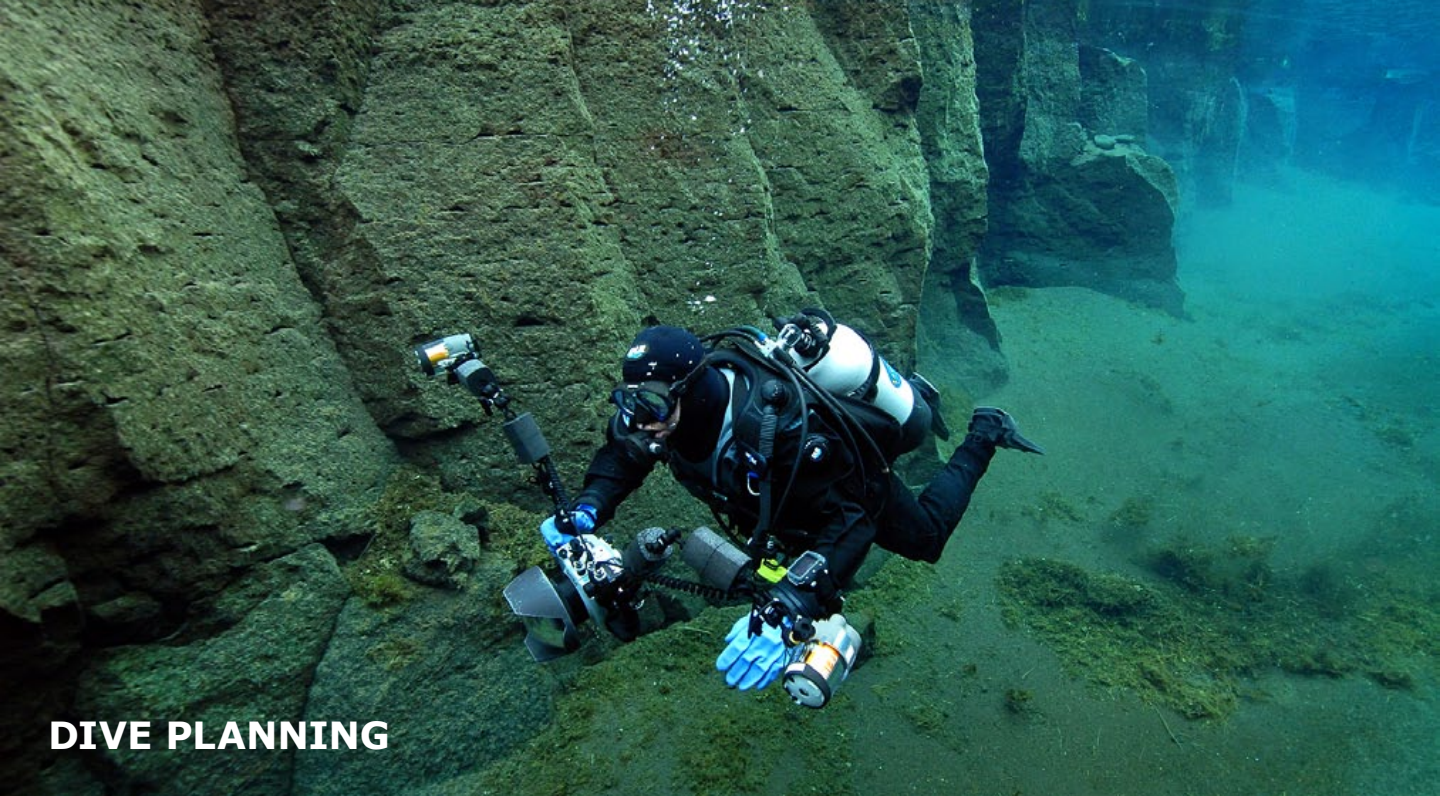
Iceland has a well-established tourism infrastructure, but much of it involves day tours to the various natural attractions such as waterfalls and hot springs. Bus tours generally originate in the capital of Reykjavik, located in southwestern side of Iceland, on the southern shore of Faxaflói Bay. A lesser number of tour operators offer multi-day adventure excursions deeper into the back country.





While most of Iceland's outlying countryside remains wild and largely unsettled, the Greater Reykjavik area is cosmopolitan city, which is home to about half of the nation's 320,000 residents. Its high northern latitude at 64°08' N makes it the world's northernmost capital of a sovereign state.

Reykjavik boasts a thriving visual and performing arts scene, and has earned an international reputation for nightlife. Those seeking more authentic local flavor will find it outside the capital, where small guest houses and rural settings provide a respite from \$30 cover charges and club couture.



DIVE PLANNING

Silfra, along with a handful of other freshwater sites can be dove year-round, but snow and ice limits access to more remote sites in the interior. Coastal waters offer the best visibility in winter, but are more popular in summer, when warmer waters can bring mild algae blooms that reduce visibility into the 10 to 15 meter (35-50 foot) range. May and September offer a good compromise, as air and water temperatures are relatively mild, and airfares and lodging rates are typically lower than in summer.

Taking this in obviously creates few opportunities for “do it yourself” dive planning as air fills, transportation and logistics can be difficult or impossible to arrange on the fly.

If planning a diving excursion to Iceland, there is a trio of Reykjavik-based operators, and one on the island’s northern coast also offering a wider range of diving activities that can include multi-day trips and “dive safaris” to both coastal and inland sites. Most such trips are priced and schedule based on a minimum number of participants, but private or custom tours are also offered for an appropriate premium.

It’s best to spend some time grazing the well-populated websites maintained by these operators (listed to the right), then start an online dialogue to firm up the details. Most of these dive tour operators can also incorporate additional land activities into their multi-day excursions.



Iceland Dive Operators

Scuba Diving School of Iceland - PADI five-star facility in operation since 1997, and the original promoter of Silfra.
www.dive.is

Scuba Iceland - Reykjavik-based facility with an experienced staff and a full-service shop.
www.scuba.is

Dive Iceland - Smaller operator offering personalized service also located in the Reykjavik area.
www.diveiceland.com

Styrтан Divecenter - The operator who discovered the Strýtan thermal vent. Located on the north coast in Akureyri.
www.strytan.is

Getting There

Travel to Iceland from both the northeastern United States and northern Europe is very straightforward. Iceland's Keflavik International Airport (KEF) is 50 kilometers (31 miles) from the Island Nation's Capital, Reykjavik. Iceland Air and Iceland Express offer year-round service from North America, with Delta providing seasonal service. Direct flights from New York to Reykjavik's take just under six hours, and can run anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 based on seasonality. A number of airlines including Easyjet, SAS and Norwegian Air Shuttle serve European gateways. Flights from northern European gateways take two to three hours, and are advertised for as little as €200.

Transport to other regions in Iceland can be accomplished either by driving or through domestic air travel. There are domestic airports in Reykjavik, Akureyri, and several other towns.

Drive time from Reykjavik to Akureyri is four to five hours, while air travel is 45 minutes.

Certain transcontinental flights make a stopover in Iceland, and airlines doing so often allow a stopover for no charge, or a nominal charge. Divers planning travel between North America and Europe could take advantage of this stop to add a dive adventure in Iceland to their existing trans-continental itinerary.

Travel Documents: Although current passport is a given for travel, most passengers do not require a visa to enter Iceland as long as their stay does not exceed three months.

Currency: The local currency is the Icelandic Krona, but US Dollars and Euro are often accepted.

Electricity: Voltage is 220-240V/50Hz, with the primary socket type Europlug, Schuko. A Travel Adapter with the round pin universal plug will pretty well cover it.



Iceland lies on the edge of the Arctic Sea. At its northernmost point, Iceland is only 30 miles south of the Arctic Circle.





Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

In addition to liking the cold water diving like they found in Iceland, Michael and Christopher head the New York based organization, Eco-Photo Explorers. Its mission includes promoting interest in protecting our ocean environment by creating awareness through the use of underwater photography. For more visit ecophotoexplorers.com

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