

Mikhail Lermontov trip report: 5-8th February 2011

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Enter the Promenade Deck and locate the entrance to the forward foyer. Drop straight down to the spiral staircase and follow the twisted banister through the collapsed area down to the Restaurant Deck. Head aft and squeeze through two narrow doorways, then enter the Leningrad Restaurant. Locate the semi-circular glass partition and head immediately up to the forward port corner of the restaurant. Turn towards the bow, squeeze down and in through the staff entry to the kitchens, over the mounds of silt, past the scullery, past the cold galley, diagonally down and tie off close to the bakery. Phew, a little over half-way there. Drop straight down for 4 or 5 metres and locate the next horizontal passage leading towards the bow. Now all I have to do is cruise along this passage to the double doors above my head, twist around and up and I should be in the foyer area immediately below the Crew's Mess. Then if the doors are open I can get into the mess area and start my explorations.



At this point I wake up. It's 3am in the morning and I am dreaming about the Lermontov deck plans which I've looked at so many times I've memorised them. My heart is pumping; I am sweating. The dive I'm planning is something I've been wanting to do for ages, and yet now that it's only a few days to go I'm questioning my motivation. Do I really want to travel along over 50m of very twisting and silty passage, full of unstable bits of wreckage waiting to drop on top of me? And having got all the way in I also need to exit – how much will I be able to see on the way out? I remember the story of another diver who also wanted to visit Crew's Mess; she had a bulk head door collapse behind her, cutting her line and almost completely blocking the exit route. Why why why why am I doing this? At 3am in the morning everything always seems worse than it really is. I turn my pillow over to the dry side and try to fall asleep again.



Two days later and Mel and I are descending for our second dive of the trip – ready to tackle the Crew's Mess. The visibility is dreadful, between 1 and 2m max. on the outside of the ship. But we have a cunning plan.....

60 minutes later and we surface with huge smiles. We've spent over 25 minutes actually inside the Crew's Mess, enjoying the far better preserved features that are characteristic of rarely visited areas. We even saw a completely intact wall clock; the time frozen at 5.43, exactly as it has remained for nearly 25 years. The dive has been fantastic, nothing like the sweaty nightmare of two days

previously. Our cunning plan has worked. However, it's OUR cunning plan so I'm not telling; but if you have the skills the Crew's Mess is well worth visiting.

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Day two and as we head out to the dive site I already feel uncomfortable. I'm trialling a different under-suit, a 400 gram thinsulate and it's really too warm and too bulky under my dry-suit. I'm oozing grumpy vibes. We drop into the water with a plan to visit the Leningrad Restaurant, but Mel has got a little confused as to which entry point we are using. In the very poor vis. it's hard to communicate and whilst I know we can enter via the middle foyer on the Promenade Deck it is not my preferred option. Mel ties off the line and drops into the foyer, which is stepped to one side – not a straightforward exit. After some confusion with which way to head on the spiral stairs we drop down a deck and reach the entrance to the restaurant. My primary light fails. *"\$?!*&*^* or words to that effect. We abandon the dive and start our exit. Once we are safely outside of the wreck it is clear I am underweighted. My grumpy vibes have turned into very grumpy vibes – a totally unsatisfactory dive.

But from this point on the day improves dramatically. I revert to my other undergarments and I am comfortable and correctly weighted again. We return to the Leningrad Restaurant on dive two and spend a comfortable 40 minutes exploring inside. We find several cupboards full of plates, glasses and other kitchen ware. With so much time inside the same room you start to notice all the little details and the room comes alive. I have a good dive.

For dive 3 we return to the Crew's Mess again, this time spending over 35 minutes exploring. I find an upright piano, the black and white keys unmistakable, even under the fine layer of silt. The keys no longer work of course, but it is easy to imagine a member of the crew tinkling away, singing an old Russian folksong. We look at the red padded chairs, the padding still in relatively good condition unlike the furniture in the easily accessible Bolshoi Lounge. We check out every corner and look into the other rooms which lead off – something for another dive. And our exit is easy – we still have reasonably good vis. and can see each other all the way out. It's a pleasure diving with a highly skilled buddy. A day which has started poorly has ended well. Two more days to go – lots more exploring to do.

Day three and for the first dive we've decided to continue exploring the Leningrad Restaurant. Our aim is to explore the lowest half of the room, the area where anything and everything eventually collects. Unlike the top part of the restaurant, which is clear except for the tables bolted to the floor, the lower section is crowded with a jumble of chairs, light fittings, soft cushions and other ephemera, all covered in a thick layer of silt. We fin very delicately around trying not to stir anything up, but our bubbles tumble and roll along the ceiling dislodging any silt they find. The effect is like a light snow storm, but orange rather than white. After 40 minutes we're satisfied we've seen enough, but before we head to the surface we have a short side trip to make – into the Chief Purser's Office.



You can just make out the white piano keys

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The front half of the Restaurant Deck (also called the main deck), showing the 3 areas we explored – restaurant, kitchen, crew’s mess. We’ve went into almost every room shown above.

For dive two we decide to take a break and stay within the areas we know well. We cruise along the Wintergarden all the way to the stern and then drop into the swimming pool. We have a quick look at the Neptune Bar and then drop down to the lowest part of the dive, the passageway which is the mirror image of the Wintergarden, now sandwiched between the seabed and the barbers shop. We head up into the aft foyer, locate the spiral staircase and then head forward and into the Sadko bar. This is now very easy to locate as a huge section of wall collapsed in October 2010. Previously the entrance was more difficult to find and involved a tight and silty squeeze. I spend a few minutes gazing around, letting my brain piece together the various bar fittings. The sink is obvious, but then you start to spot all the other details – the coffee machine is particularly impressive. From here we head forward, past duty free and into the middle foyer. Next stop the Astoria bar and the narrow corridor past the bar store and into the forward foyer. We eventually exit into the Bolshoi Lounge and through one of the windows. For our relaxing dive we’ve done a complete through trip of the Lounge Deck – pretty cool.

For our final dive we are again heading to the Crew’s Mess area, this time to explore all the nearby rooms. We start in the kitchen area which is the furthest forward on the deep side of the

wreck. It is clear very few other divers have visited as everything is undisturbed. We see huge cooking pots, extractor hoods and a large freezer still held in place by floor bolts. We decide not to go beneath it. Next we poke our heads into a pantry and check out the other deepest rooms. After 20 minutes we head up and into the Crew’s Mess. The area is now becoming more familiar and I spot more details – a broken TV set, a record player and a 1980’s style cassette recorder. We drop into a room which must have acted as an information



area for the crew – two large noticeboards still survive. Again it is clear very few have been here before us – we are privileged. Eventually our time is up and we have to exit – another 50 minutes inside the wreck, with the majority spend in new areas. Theoretically there are another 5 decks below this one which we haven’t touched yet, although only 4 appear to have rooms worth exploring. We’re going to be busy for several more years to come.



Embossed lettering we found– it says 'Lermontov' is the Russian alphabet

Final day and it's time to record a few images to show others what we've seen. We start in the Crew's Mess again, photographing the clock, piano, TV, chairs etc. It's not easy, trying to get close to objects without generating silt, which will cause back-scatter in the photographs. I get Mel to light objects with her can light, but she is also managing the line and ensuring I don't dislodge anything with my fins, get disorientated, or generally cause problems as I concentrate on the photos. I snap away happily, taking 60 or more shots – digital underwater photography is so much easier than the old style where you had to pay to develop every picture you took. However, you still have the same problem – will any come out?

After 40 minutes we've had enough and exit the Crew's Mess and kitchen area and head into the Promenade Deck. I have a small detour to make before we head for the surface – cabin 212 – made famous by the Lermontov DVD. This is the cabin occupied by the female excursions officer, the one whose jewellery was recovered by the salvage divers. There isn't much to see and if you hadn't seen the video you would swim past oblivious, but as I have seen the video this cabin means something to me – a small part of Lermontov history.

For the final dive of the trip we take it easy. We visit the Festival Lounge, the Officer's Mess, Bridge, Captain's Cabin, Chart Room, Radio Room; basically as much as we can on the Bridge Deck and Sun Deck. We also do a quick trip to the Boat deck to look at the four named cabins – Bela, Tamara, Nina and Mary – again a little bit of Lermontov history. Cruising gently around I imagine the ship as she was in her prime and marvel at our great fortune in having such a magnificent wreck in such shallow water. As we head back to our ascent line I am smiling. We've had a great trip, with 11 superb dives (OK 10; 1 wasn't so good) and we've explored a lot of new areas. We've also scoped out access routes to yet more new areas – the future looks bright. Roll on our next trip in October!