

Isle Royale

Wreck diving fit for royalty.

Text and photos by Cal Kothrade

The great Lakes have many shipwreck 'hot spots', places where the tragedies have piled up over the decades due to wicked currents, foul weather and geographic constrictions. These hot spots typically contain many wrecks representing most or all of the major types of vessels and eras of shipping, all packed into a small area, making them 'must see' destinations for divers. Isle Royale in north western Lake Superior is one such example. Sprinkled around this forty-five mile long island divers will find everything from twentieth century steel freighters, to nineteenth century wooden steamers. Many of these ships fell victim to inclement weather, some to collisions with other vessels, and some met their demise on the rocks. The historic wrecks at Isle Royale represent some of the best diving the Great Lakes have to offer, and with consistently good visibility, (usually twenty-five to forty feet), you are virtually guaranteed an unforgettable experience.

Due to the remoteness of these sites, all dives here are boat dives. If you don't own one, you will have to charter one. The best way is to do a four or five day live-aboard, which will afford you the necessary time to circumnavigate the island, and hit all the major sites. Nobody does it better than Ryan Staley, owner and operator of Isle Royale Charters. Ryan's boat, the *Lake Superior Diver*, a 37 foot Chris Craft Commander, is based out of Grand Portage, MN, and is customized to easily handle up to six divers, tek or rec. A live-aboard in the great Lakes sounds out of place, but is the absolute best way to dive the wrecks around Isle Royale. One of the best perks is not having to hump your gear off the boat at the end of each day, as Ryan has a compressor and multi-gas mixing capabilities onboard. The pace is leisurely and relaxed, as you visit spectacular wrecks, all of which are zebra and quagga free, as Superior is the only one of the 'Big Five' to have not fallen victim to the invasive mussels. This means that the details of the wooden construction, hand tools and other artifacts are plainly evident, and wonderfully preserved in the cold water, just waiting for your dive light or dome port.

There are wrecks in all depths here, from shallow recreational, to deep technical, there is something here for most any diver. Because of the distribution around the island, should Lake Superior become ornery and uncooperative with your dive plans, there is usually something to dive on the lee side of the island regardless of the nature of the weather. Alas, should you find yourself unable make a dive due to Mother Nature, the island and the many lighthouses make for interesting day trips, hikes, and excursions, after all it is a National Park, and boasts some of the most pristine northern wilderness scenery in the country. A live-aboard trip will give you the best opportunity to squeeze in the most dives possible, as well as take in the most stunning sunsets every night from quaint harbors. If you're lucky, the Northern Lights will make an appearance, especially later in the season, toward the end of September.

The following wrecks, in no particular order, are some of the more popular sites you should be sure to try to see.

The SS America, a 183' steel passenger/packet steamer lies on a steep rock reef with her stern in about 75 feet, and the pointy sunlit bow, a mere two feet from the surface! Mostly intact, one

of the many highlights of this wreck is the wooden staircase that leads to the social salon from the main deck. Sunk 1928, no loss of life.

If huge double expansion steam engines get your heart rate up, then the wreck of the Henry Chisholm is perfect. The 1700 HP engine that once powered the 270 foot steam barge now rests in 70 to 150 feet, sitting upright at the bottom of Rock of Ages Reef. This calamity was the direct result of running full speed ahead onto the rocks, while attempting to make harbor. Sunk 1898, no loss of life

For a more contemporary disaster, try the Chester A. Congdon, a 532 foot steel bulk freighter that plowed into Canoe Rocks (now Congdon Shoal) in dense fog, on the north east side of the island. The stern has slid into deep water, but the head of the vessel broke off, slid down the other side of the reef, and now sits pointing back up the reef, looking for it's severed body, in about 120 feet. At the time, this was the largest financial loss on Lake Superior, valued at 1.5 million dollars. Sunk 1918, no loss of life.

Can't get enough of the steel freighters? The Emperor is an all day affair...dive the bow first, to get an idea of how big this 525 foot steel bulk freighter was. It starts in 25 feet of water, and slopes down the reef well past recreational depths. At approximately 90 feet, there is a spot on the reef that dips below the hull just enough to allow divers to swim under the vessel's keel from one side to the other (56 feet). Be sure to investigate the two mammoth anchors at the bow while you are off-gassing at the end of your dive. The stern bottoms out at 175 feet, and is a great dive if you are technical certified. There are spare prop blades still attached to the stern deck and rails, the stern anchor, and a prop with no blades attached in front of the rudder. There were 12 lives lost when this massive ship slid below the waves, (it only took 30 minutes after ramming into a rock reef), and there are still some personal artifacts lying around to remind you of the human toll shipwrecks sometimes exact. Sunk 1947, loss of twelve including the captain and first mate.

These are just a sampling of some of the breathtaking dives at Isle Royale National Park. Many other wrecks contain artifact rich debris fields, and a fascinating look into the history of ship construction from the mid 1800's on into the early twentieth century

The water of Lake Superior remains a bit chilly at depth year round, with temps averaging between 39-44 degrees F. Later in the summer surface waters may warm up enough to take a 'Superior shower' off the back of the dive boat, but Drysuits are still a must. Luckily for the divers aboard Ryan Staley's well appointed Chris Craft, the three daily meals included with your live-aboard package are about the best anywhere, land or sea. The captain is a Great Lakes gourmet, and will provide all aboard with the necessary calories needed by cold water divers to help stave off hypothermia. In fact, you may find that your drysuit has 'shrunk' by the end of your trip, the meals are so delectable. Don't get used to it though, I can't think of too many dive boats on the Lakes that have warm, fresh baked cookies waiting for returning divers.

Go now: Isle Royale Charters. www.isleroyalecharters.com

