

Marblehead, Mass., Offers Plenty To Satisfy Divers

By Thomas J. Keer

Marblehead, Mass., is the ideal location for all-around New England diving.

Marblehead is located 30 miles north of Boston at the lower end of Cape Ann. The Gulf Stream channels warm water north from the tropics and makes temperatures comfortable enough for diving by mid-April. Because the water doesn't cool until early November, a solid seven-month season is typical. These warm Gulf Stream waters promotes growth and allows cold-water reefs to develop.

Marblehead Neck boasts three excellent beach dives. The first spot is Devereux Beach, where depths reach a maximum of 25 feet and the terrain is a combination of sloping rock and sand. The shallow water warms quickly, and diving is especially good in the early season for close-up photography. Flounder fishing is excellent, and horseshoe crabs and skates inhabit this area. Due to its shallow depths Devereux Beach is probably most enjoyable for snorkeling.

Castle Rock is the next location on Marblehead Neck, its name aptly chosen by its enormous stone formations. Castle Rock is the most popular site of the three for lobstering and photography. A sloping beach provides easy entrances and exits, and depths fluctuate between 10 and 50 feet. The large rock creates miniature caverns and small-scale wall diving.

Visibility is excellent, and close-up photography of lobsters, crabs, colored starfish, anemones and sponges is popular. A sandy bottom meets the rocky terrain where flounders can be easily speared. Castle Rock offers great summer diving.

The Lighthouse is the final beach dive, located at the tip of Marblehead Neck between the harbor and the bay. Clean water sweeps along the shoreline and creates excellent visibility. Photography is good and school fish, such as striped bass, mackerel and bluefish chase bait into the harbor, making the Lighthouse a fine area for spearfishing. The bottom drops sharply to a depth of 30 feet. One important note is that diving is prohibited between Memorial Day and Labor Day; the Lighthouse is a public park, and diving during those times is suspended in favor of beachcombers, thus limiting the spot to early- or late-season dives.

Convenient parking is available in all three areas, and each dive site is about 50 feet away.

Boat diving is superb due to the variety of islands. Conditions vary with each location, and visibility around the islands is slightly better than the beach dives. Every island is quickly reached by boat, the farthest being Great Misery — only a 12-minute ride. In general, depths range from 6 feet along the rock edges to drop-offs around 90 feet. There are two important

considerations: thermoclines and lighting. As depths increase, water temperatures drop 10 or 15 degrees limiting bottom time and making full quarter-inch suits essential. In addition, the amount of penetrating light decreases, and flashlights are helpful for lobstering or general poking around.

Marblehead has a public dock with a 30-minute tie-up allowance; the best public launch is Winter Island, in Salem Harbor, where there is ample parking for your car and trailer.

Marblehead Rock is the first island outside of the harbor, making it a central orientation point. The boat trip takes approximately three or four minutes. The rock is shaped like an inverted "C," with the cove facing the harbor and offering protected diving. Visibility decreases somewhat during the summer due to the sharp rise of boat traffic. Depths are 25 feet, and the bottom is colorful and rocky. This spot is noted for blackfish and large lobsters.

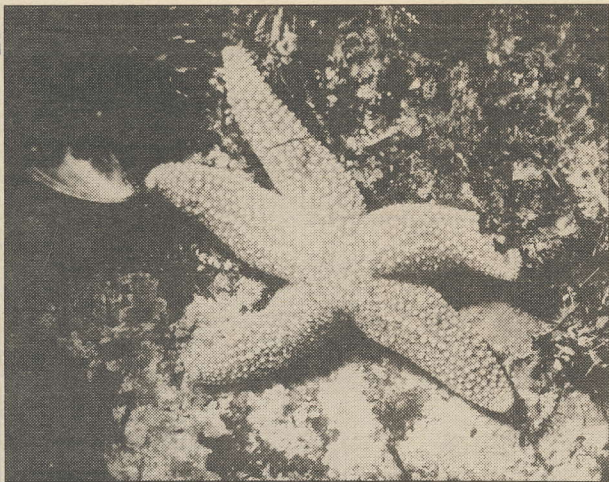
On the opposite side, the visibility is better due to the clean, open-ocean water. The drop-off is steep, averaging 40 or 50 feet. Large boulders slope to thick, healthy green, orange and purple kelp beds. Lobstering is excellent.

A dozen families live on Tinker's Island, five minutes west of Marblehead Rock. As with the rock, the northern side is sheltered. Depths are 12 feet, making the area a natural for snorkling. The bottom is sandy with sparse, grassy fields.

Flounder fishing is excellent, and lobsters burrow in the sand — which make interesting photographs. On the other side, a protected cove offers clearer ocean diving. Drop-offs are to 60 feet. Striped bass and bluefish school in the cove, and many surfcasters fish the eastern side. The brig *John Hancock* sank in 1843, and remnants of its wooden hull are in 45 feet of water.

Cat Island is the home of a YMCA summer camp. Located five minutes east of Marblehead Rock, the northeastern cove offers the best diving. The cove eliminates contact with boat traffic and reduces strong open-ocean currents. Cat Island is large, with numerous areas to explore. The rocks at the eastern side are among the deepest in the area, with depths dropping to around 90 feet. The thermoclines are especially noticeable here, too. Enormous, geometric boulders are located in the upper 40 feet. Some lobsters hide in the crevices, and fish school in July and August. At around 50 feet, the boulders disappear, replaced by smaller rocks and kelp beds. They form caverns and intricate passages, and at this junction of boulders and rocks, the kelp is magnificent. Currents are stronger, so accurate compass work is important.

Though actually part of the town of Beverly, Great and Little Misery deserve mentioning. Located 15 minutes northeast of Marblehead Rock, the two islands are less than 50 yards



Elie Honein/Tom Keer Photo

Sea Star — A starfish graces the bottom of Massachusetts shores.

apart. Dive the eastern side of Great Misery and the southern and eastern sides of Little Misery. Boats moor in the northern coves, which makes diving a bit harried.

The steamship *Monohansett* sank off Great Misery in 1904. Part of its hull and drive shaft are all that remain. The steamship *City of Rockland* (1924) sank off of Little Misery; its entire hull sits in about 15 feet of water. The water clarity is excellent and often approaches 45-foot visibility. The terrain is kelpy and varies between sandy and rocky. Striped bass spend most of July around the Miseries. Both islands are large enough to spend the day and either roast freshly-caught lobsters or picnic until sunset.

Some 52 documented wrecks sank in Marblehead waters between 1773 and 1978. Forty have been found and 12 are still missing. Many are fragmented due to the harsh, New England winters. Raymond Bates' "Wreck Diving" chronicles each discovered wreck in the area and gives precise Loran markings for their easy discovery.

Night diving in 20-foot visibility is exciting. Because many creatures are nocturnal, there is a lot of activity after sunset. Flounder and shellfish seem to litter the ocean floor, and horseshoe crabs surprise skates on the sandy bottom. Because of the limited visibility, a diver relies more heavily on his other four senses.