

Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way (Translated from Dutch to English)

INTRO

No one was allowed to know what was in the hold of the British Ocean Liner SS Laurentic. Only the word "metal" was written on the boxes. After the ship ran on a mine in 1917 and sank, only a small proportion of those on board survived. The secret cargo disappeared into the depth - 3211 gold bars. Not all gold has been found yet. René Lipmann and Sander Evering dived on the world-famous ship and go on for a search ...

Text: Sander Evering Photo's: René Lipmann

STORY

A few years before the RMS Titanic is launched, her slightly older niece, the SS Laurentic, embarks on her first voyage in April 1909. The British Ocean Liner sails the Atlantic for years to transport passengers between America, Canada and England until she sails on a mine in an ice-cold night in January and quickly comes to an end in a dramatic way. 479 passengers are fighting for their lives, but the water and the horrible freezing cold weather are taking 354 lives that night. Passengers try to lower the lifeboats, but this is very difficult. The SS Laurentic is already sloping considerably, the power has gone out and the people on deck do not see a thing. They fight for their lives and once in the lifeboats they row in the icy, howling winter storm towards the coast of Fanad Head. The next morning, they are found in the lifeboats, almost all frozen to death. Many of them still with the oars firmly clamped in their fists ...

MALIN HEAD

It's not for nothing that the coast of Ireland is called "The Wild Atlantic Way". This road runs from the Northern Cape at Malin Head through the beautiful bays of Clew Bay to the Southern Peninsula such as Sheep's Head. The rocky cliffs, covered with the most beautiful grass, were created by an ice age and the many years of influence of the Atlantic Ocean. With an inexhaustible amount of energy, the water has molded this rough coastline into a breathtaking landscape. The high cliffs give a fantastic view over the dangerous cliffs and the beautiful Atlantic Ocean. Not a bad word about our own North Sea, but in Ireland you imagine yourself on a different planet. I can't wait until we start this exciting trip and I literally bounce when we drive towards Malin Head and see the first cliffs. I jump over the rocks towards the edge for the best view and suddenly I am tempered by nature.

BREATHTAKING

Our Airbnb "bed & breakfast" in Letterkenny turns out to be a large Irish country house, including a driveway. On the way to Letterkenny, by changing the distance still to be traveled from kilometers to miles, Google Maps tells us that we have crossed the border with Northern Ireland a few times. The border, which was once strongly contested, is now virtually invisible, and we drive imperceptibly through the other country. At the time of writing, nobody still knows what the influence of the Brexit will be in this border area. I intend to gauge the locals, although the next day during a heated discussion at the Donegal Tourism Conference it soon becomes clear that here too, local entrepreneurs live in uncertainty and worry about the future. We are mainly concerned about how fast we are allowed to drive, is it now 70 miles or kilometers per hour? From our "castle" we drive an

hour to the north, to a small harbor in Downings. We build our double cylinder set and bring it on board, along with some decompression gas. The dive is not going to get very deep, but we are preparing for as long a time as possible on the bottom. The SS Laurentic is not only very large, but also very special in many respects. The 172-meter-long ocean liner, built by the White Star Line in Liverpool, was primarily used to transport passengers and goods between England, Canada and America. The Laurentic was unique in speed and efficiency at that time. For the first time, three propellers were used with the third being driven by the steam from the exhausts of the other two normal propellers. The experimental design proved to be a success and was therefore later used as standard, including on the RMS Titanic. The fast design of the ship did not give Dr. Crippen a chance during his flight of the law. The doctor suspected of murder fled to Canada with the SS Montrose, but he was recognized. Through the ship's radio Captain Henry Kendall passed on his report to the police. Detective Walter Crew jumped aboard the SS Laurentic, who subsequently overtook the SS Montrose at high speed. In Canada, he disguised as a skipper, climbed aboard the SS Montrose to arrest Dr. Crippen before he set foot on land. Dr. Crippen was convicted for the murder of his wife and hanged in 1910 in London.

TOUCHED BY A MINE

In the freezing storm of 1917, the SS Laurentic was hit by a mine. Then she ran off course and sailed into a second mine. The engine room was badly damaged by the explosion and many technicians were killed immediately. The ship's generators also failed and there was no more electricity, so no pumps. The ship made a lot of water, started to tilt and sank within an hour. There was not even the possibility to send an emergency signal. The people on board did not stand a chance because of the darkness, many of whom were already seriously injured. The lifeboats could hardly be operated due to the tilt, and those who made it to the lifeboats were by no means safe. The temperature dropped to -13 degrees and the icy cold weather turned out to be just as great an enemy as the water. Many bodies washed ashore, and most people were frozen to death in the lifeboats.

Yet the dramatic end of the SS Laurentic is not the reason why the ship has become almost as famous as the Titanic. At the outbreak of the WWI, the Laurentic was converted into an auxiliary cruiser. She was renamed HMS Laurentic and used for patrols, transport of goods, troops and many officers, such as during her last transatlantic crossing. During this last mission to Canada, the ship transported not only many naval officers but also a secret cargo in the hold. This cargo was so secret that even the captain didn't know what he was transporting. "Metal" was simply written on the crates. This secret charge proved to be of enormous importance even after the sinking. For years everything has been done to get this cargo back to the surface. It is also the reason that we swim a little lost in the first five minutes of our dive because our compass is not working ... We descend and see the wreck fairly quickly, but it is not a celebration of recognition. There are pieces of metal everywhere and only with the enormous boilers do we get an idea how to navigate. Just like that, there is a huge cannon half hidden in this metal scrap heap. I recognize this from our visit in Fanan Head, where you can see a gun of the Laurentic that has been restored and is standing on the side. We know how to swim towards the bow on a compass, but why has this fantastic ship turned into twisted steel? Explosives. Many explosives were used to find the cargo of the ship. The boxes marked with "metal" do indeed contain a considerable amount of precious metal; gold. No fewer than 3211 gold bars, intended for Canada and America to

finance part of the WWI. The value was enormous, converted to 1.7 billion dollars today, so nobody was allowed to know what was in the hold of the Laurentic. Shortly after the cold horror night in February, a plan was quickly made to salvage the gold. The bottom is almost 40 meters deep and the gold was relatively deep at the bottom of the ship. Many companies wanted to help, but only if they received huge compensation. Helmet divers were sent down and made their way on the ship. Explosives gained access to the hold and the first gold was salvaged quite quickly. It seemed to be a job of a few weeks, but that changed quickly. A violent storm hit the Laurentic again and things even washed up on the beach. The access to the gold was completely closed and a new entrance had to be made. This time the entire ship was peeled deck by deck, again with explosives. The mission lasted much longer than expected and they faced enormous challenges. Dive tables had just been invented by John Scott Haldane at the time, but that certainly did not guarantee safe diving without decompression problems. The helmet divers were connected with two lines to the mothership on the surface. A line for air and a safety line. Due to the difficult surface conditions, the captain had difficulty keeping the ship directly above the Laurentic. That is why the divers got some extra line to prevent them from getting stressed. Sometimes these lines broke up and became entangled. The divers became puppets, controlled by a ship almost 40 meters above them, and not everyone survived this operation. There were also other problems with the equipment, from suit squeeze to a "blow up" in which a defective exhaust valve blew the suit up and the diver shot up uncontrollably. And do I have to explain that explosives under water pose a risk? The salvage eventually lasted until 1924, but later in 1934 a few bars of gold were still found. As we swim across the wreck to the bow, I have the same question in my mind as you do; has all the gold been found? Or is there still some in the hold? After investigation it appears that all gold except for 20 bars has been found. They should still lie in the wreck to this day, hidden deep in the seabed and hidden under a layer of twisted steel. Or would it have ended up somewhere else? That question will never be answered unless a diver makes a very special dive on the Laurentic. Has it therefore perhaps become Ireland's best-known wreck? Maybe, but only the dive itself is worth it. If you like wrecks, this dive is just as much fun as a car enthusiast strolling over a vintage car graveyard. It is a treasure hunt where you can find everything.

MORE THAN METAL

Declan is determined to show us more than just the wrecks. That is why we make multiple dives at very simple and quiet locations, just from the shore. At first glance it seems a bit boring and I suspect that the view is comparable to the Dutch area of Zeeland. We walk into the water with ease and after the checks we slowly descend. We follow some rocks and I pay attention to the stones and depth, which I will use to find the entry later. Avoiding the aquatic plants with long stems is almost a game and I see over my shoulder that my dive buddy René it is "game over". Laughing, I free his fins and I suspect we have had the most exciting part of the dive. Until a dogfish tries to be invisible on the bottom. Seen! Although, it can also be a catshark. Even after my studies on the internet I still can't figure it out, do you? We try to photograph our little friend, but it fails. Until we find a more favorable copy later. A bit later, a ray with dots is swimming past us, although you can hardly call it swimming. This young fish is just as big as my hand and it swims like a young bird just starting its first flight. Doubts, a lot of doubts exude the little one. With an awkward stroke that even the most talentless student has never shown, the fish tries to break free from the bottom. That works in a very small part, before the landing is bumbled again. Our dive is

calm, relaxed and above all very fun. Visibility is a bit better than Zeeland, there is more life under water and there are no other divers, nowhere. Diving in Ireland is versatile and fantastic.

INFO

The trip

You fly from Amsterdam to Dublin and then drive with a rental car in about three hours (distance is 240 km, where 180 km on provincial roads) to Letterkenny. We flew with Ryan Air which offers this flight 2 to 3 times a day.

Residence

There are many different accommodations in Donegal, in all price ranges. We booked our "villa" through Airbnb and paid € 25 per person per night.

Diving center

We made all our dives with DivinDec. The dive center is located in Letterkenny and is run by the Irish Declan Burke. He knows the area like the back of his hand and has a lot of experience as a tech diver on the wrecks. In addition to its dive center, Declan is the developer of Anchor Dive Lights. www.divindec.com

Wild Atlantic Way Wild bays, unspoilt nature and hidden bays. You will see a different landscape after every turn on the Wild Atlantic Way. The entire route is marked with signs. The route along the entire Irish west coast is 2500 kilometers. For all info about Donegal and its hidden secrets, visit www.govisitdonegal.com

PHOTO CAPTIONS

We sail with the rib from Downings to the wreck of SS Laurentic (below).

Ireland ... a visit to a pub should not be missed during your trip (above).

We visit Fanan Head, there is a cannon of the SS Laurentic.

Just like that, half hidden in this metal scrap heap, is a huge cannon.

The wreck of the SS Laurentic is completely twisted by explosives, but the huge anchor is still intact.

The helmet divers were connected with two lines to the mothership on the surface.

A cat or dog shark? We figured it out, it's a dogfish!