

On Friday, September 1, Cindy LaRosa and Kevin Magee went diving aboard Osprey Dive Charter in Barcelona, NY. Despite a thick haze offering only 1-2 miles of visibility, the lake was dead calm with 0' seas, and the sky was sunny. This made for a perfect run to the "Atlantic," a wooden side paddlewheel steamer that sank in 1852 very close to the tip of Long Point on the Canadian side of the lake in 150' of water. 250 lives were lost. The wreck has been salvaged several times starting in 1853 and proceeding up to modern times, when it was involved in litigation between Canada and a Californian salvage company looking for treasure. It is one of the truly historic wrecks of Lake Erie, and it involves the tragedy of a great loss of life, early 1800's diver tales, an 1853 submarine (pre-Civil War), gold and treasure, and political intrigue with its linkage to the infamous Bill 13, which is attempting to ban all recreational wreck diving in Canadian waters.

After hanging an oxygen stage bottle at 15' for Cindy and gearing up, we descended to the wreck. We discovered that the wreck was very dark, requiring the use of lights to see, and visibility was disappointing at only 20'-30'. These are actually typical conditions for the "Atlantic," which is notorious for low viz and low light conditions despite the reputation of the eastern basin's great viz on most wrecks. The mooring line is tied to the top the large walking beam engine, which is amidships and surrounded by the two intact paddlewheels, one on each side of the engine. The mooring line ends at 120', and we descended to the top of the port side paddlewheel, which is at 130'-135'. Both sides of the ship are framed by large structural arches, which run about half of the ship's length, and the paddlewheels rest on the outside of the arches. We swam toward the stern (east), which reveals a mostly-silted lower deck, then swam back along the starboard side to the other paddlewheel.

At that point, Cindy was out of bottom time (10 minutes) and ascended. After seeing her up, Kevin continued to the bow, which has a decorative figurehead on a vertical post, either a ram's head or scrolling enclosed inside a metal cage of some sort. The metal cage may be part of the modern salvage effort. Most of the wreck is heavily silted, and all cabins and superstructure are missing. Given the vivid descriptions of the wreck from early divers in the 1800's and even from the 1980's, divers are usually disappointed to find that there is only the outline of the ship, the engine, the paddlewheels, and the extreme stern and bow to view. The rest is missing either due to heavy silting or due to the modern salvage. It is debatable how much of each is responsible.

Bottom time for Kevin was 25 minutes, and total run time was 49 minutes. Bottom temperature was 42 deg. F, and the thermocline was at about 65 ft. During the deco stop, a Lake Erie mermaid was spotted harassing some of the divers at 20' by tapping them on the head and swimming away. Since everyone was breathing high-O2 mixes, we know it wasn't nitrogen narcosis.