

Thousand Islands

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— *Wrecks of the St. Lawrence River*





LARRY COHEN

Diver explores *Keystorm* wreck (above) and its ladder under the forward wheelhouse (top right) as well as the anchor chain (right)

New York, New York—the city so nice they named it twice. There are so many activities in New York City, but scuba diving? No dive boats leave from Manhattan, but with three dive clubs and many dive stores, New York has a large diving community.

Heading off shore from Brooklyn, Long Island or the New Jersey shore, there

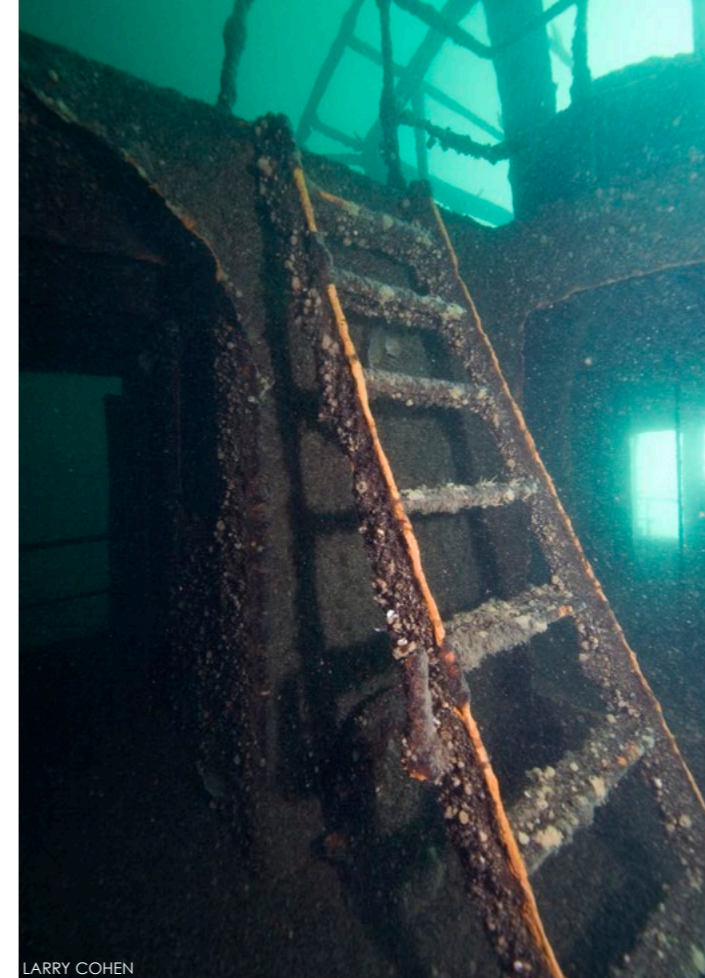
are a number of dive boats that visit the shipwrecks in the area known as Wreck Valley. Many of these shipwrecks are one to four hours off the coast. The problem is weather plays such an important role. Even if the sun is shining, strong winds could cause high seas. However, there is an alternative and ample wreck destination within reach.

Just a six and half-hour drive from New York City is the Thousand Islands region of the St. Lawrence River. This international waterway connects Lake Ontario to the Atlantic Ocean. Many ocean-going vessels use this seaway known as “Highway H2O”. Due to the fact that some of the shoals come up shallow, many ships run aground and sink.

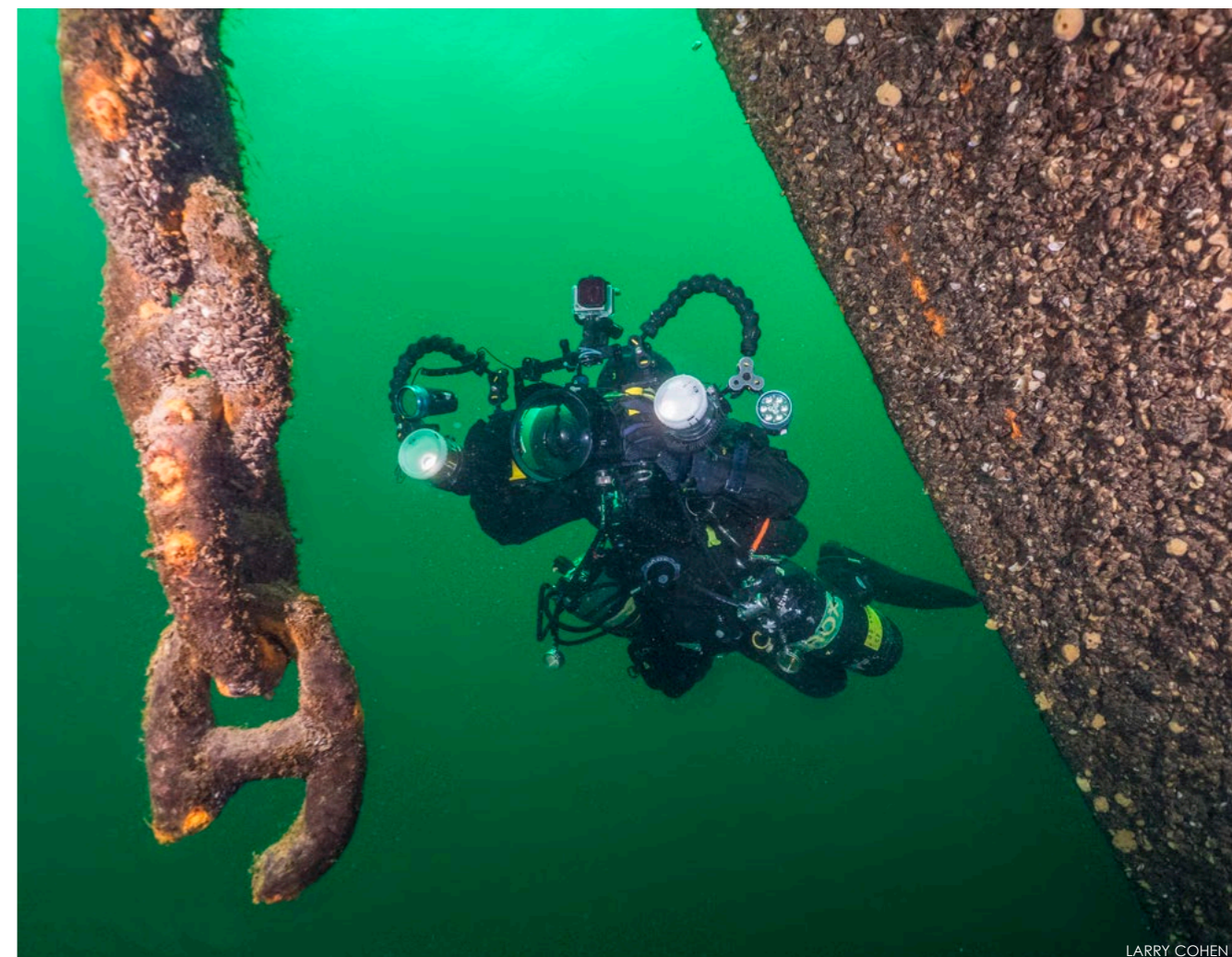
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Within a day’s drive from New York City is a wreck junkie heaven, with numerous shipwrecks to explore along the St. Lawrence River on the US-Canadian border, in the area called the Thousand Islands. Larry Cohen and Olga Torrey give a sampling of the wrecks in the region popular with both the American and Canadian diving communities.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver at the forward anchor winch on the wreck of the *Keystorm*



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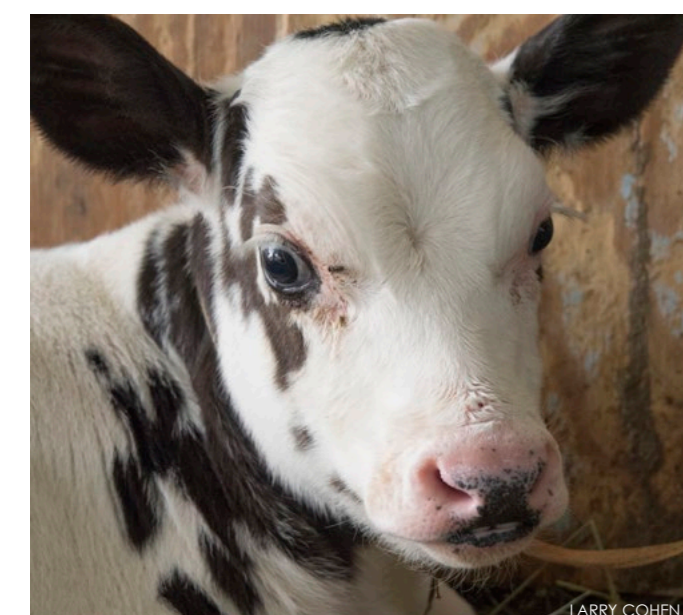


The world's shortest international bridge connects two small islands in the St. Lawrence River—one US, and one Canadian (left); Ocean-going vessel on the St. Lawrence River (above); Boldt Castle (below); Portrait of young cow; there are many farms in the area (lower left inset)

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Collisions and mechanical problems had been also responsible for many of the area's shipwrecks. Best of all for divers, even when the wind is blowing, the river gets very little chop. It is rare to get blown out on the river.

Zebra mussels were accidentally introduced into the river from the water dumped from ballast tanks of ships from western Europe. These non-native mussels have caused many environmental problems, but they are filter feeders and have improved the visibility in the river.

The area includes communities

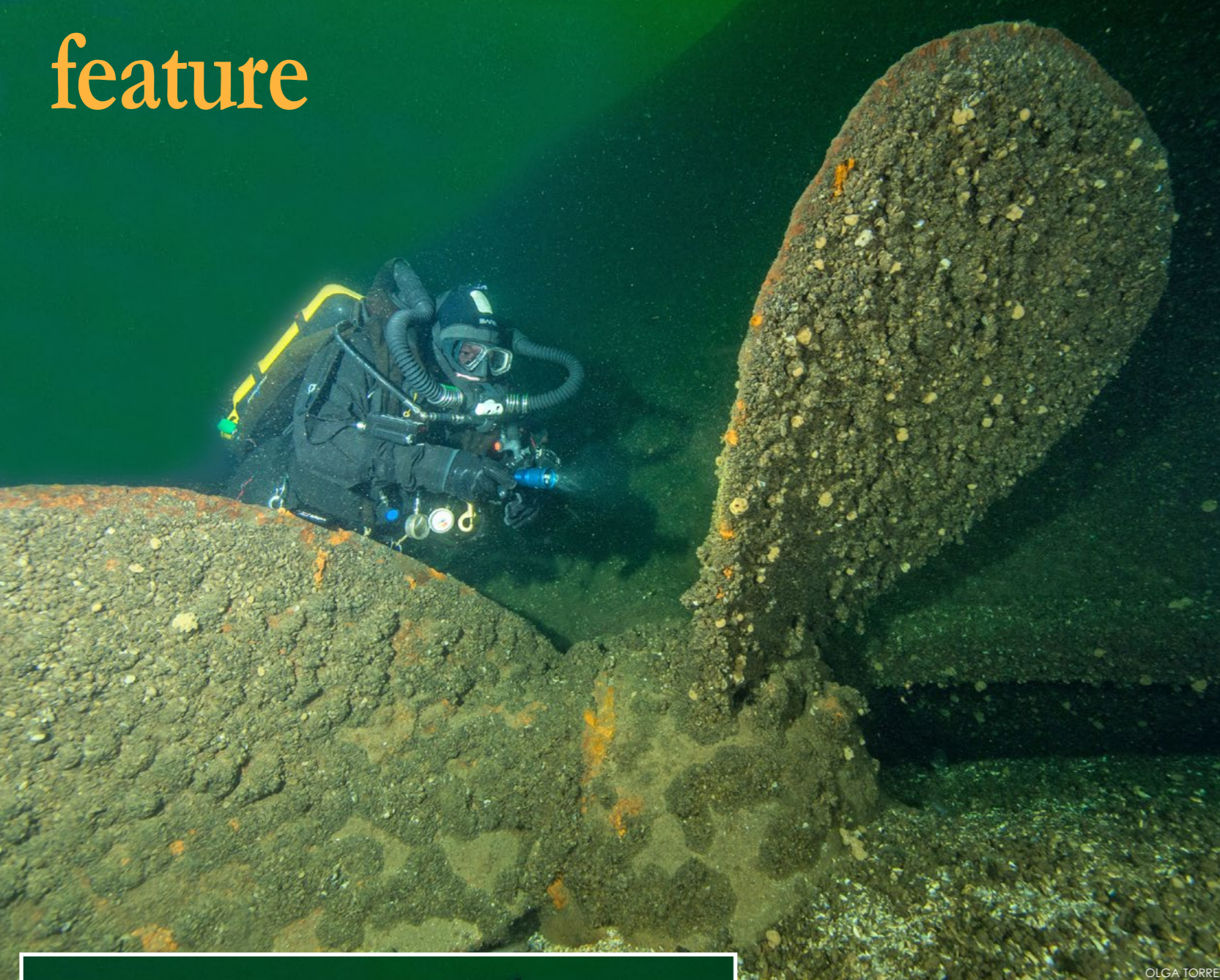
on both the New York and Canada borders along the St. Lawrence River and the eastern shores of Lake Ontario. There really are nearly 2,000 islands in a 50-mile area on the St. Lawrence River.

The area includes islands as large as Heart Island where Boldt Castle is located. George C. Boldt, millionaire proprietor of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, set out to build a full-size castle. The structure was to be a symbol of his love for his wife, Louise. She passed away before the castle was finished. Boldt stopped construction and never

returned to the island. In 1977, the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority completed the castle. In contrast, two of the smallest islands—one US, the other Canadian—are connected with the world's shortest international bridge.

The community of Clayton, New York, is home to museums including the Antique Boat Museum, the Thousand Islands Museum and the Thousand Islands Arts Center. Angler fishing is a popular activity, and there are many farms in the area. Traveling along Route 12, it feels like one has traveled back in time to the '50s.





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Penetrating *Keystorm's* forward wheelhouse is easy (above); Diver at *Keystorm's* propeller (left), at the bow (right) and at the aft funnel (lower left inset)



OLGA TORREY

SS *Keystorm*

One of the premier wrecks on the New York side is the steel freighter *SS Keystorm*. This cargo steamer built in England is 78.6m (258ft) long with a 13m (42.5ft) beam. On 12 October 1912, while bound from Ashlabula, Ohio, to Montreal with a load of coal, the vessel struck Scow Island shoal in a fog near Alexandria Bay, New York. The pumps were put in operation, but it was too late and the ship sank five hours later. The *Keystorm* sank stern first and rolled over onto her starboard side. All the crew was rescued. Her cargo of

coal was salvaged, but attempts to raise the ship failed.

Now the ship sits on a slope, with the bow in 7.6m (25ft) of water and the stern in 35m (115ft). There is plenty to explore on this picture-perfect, intact wreck. As you come down the mooring line, one sees the port side of the bow, with the anchor chain hanging down. Swimming to the deck, which is vertical, one sees the winch and other machinery. As divers swim aft, they see the massive forward wheelhouse.

This area could be a dive all in itself. The openings and ladders

around this rounded wheelhouse is a perfect location for taking photographs.

Behind the wheelhouse are three large cargo holds and a 15.25m (50ft) long mast. Behind the mast is a large funnel by the aft wheelhouse. From here, one could swim to the stern over the port side to the propeller, which is half-buried in the silt. This is the ultimate multi-level dive. It is best to enter the water and swim directly to the propeller and work one's way back up the wreck. This will minimize deco, but if your computer is set for a deep stop, be careful not to miss it.



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Wooden planking and brass pikes on *Islander* wreck; Diver explores the *Islander*; The bow of the wreck; Artifacts could still be found on this shore dive; Freshwater fish call the *Islander* home

The *Islander*

On the other end of the spectrum is the wooden sidewheel steamer *Islander*. This ship was built in Rochester, New York, in 1871 and is 38m (125ft) long with a 6m (20ft) beam. The *Islander* served as a mail carrier and gave river tours. On 16 September 1909, the ship caught fire while at dock at Alexandria Bay.

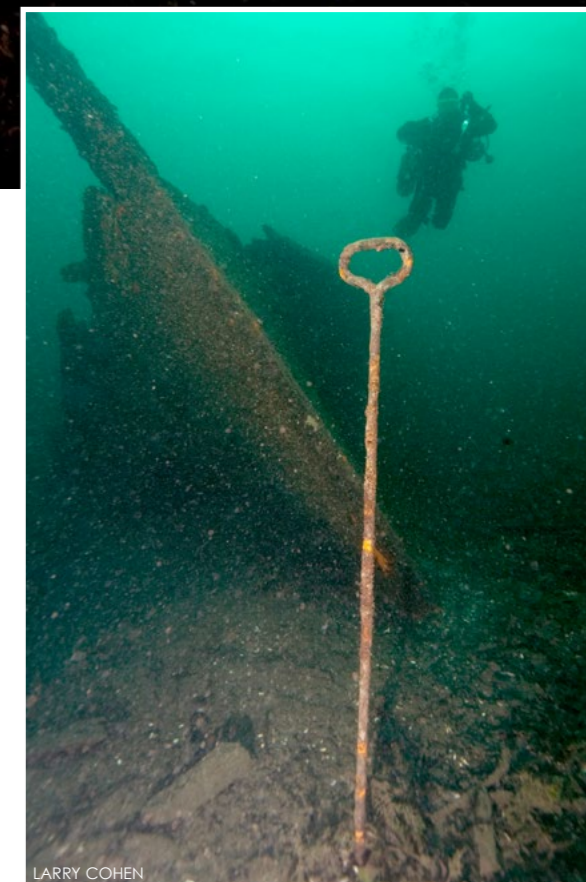
This is a very easy shore dive. There is a parking area, gazebo and ramp to the water. All you do is walk in the water and you are on the wreck. She is partially broken-up, resting upright parallel to the shore's slope. The bow faces upriver. The port rail is at 9m (30ft), and the starboard rail in 13.7m (45ft). There is a debris field surrounding the wreck at 18.28m (60ft).



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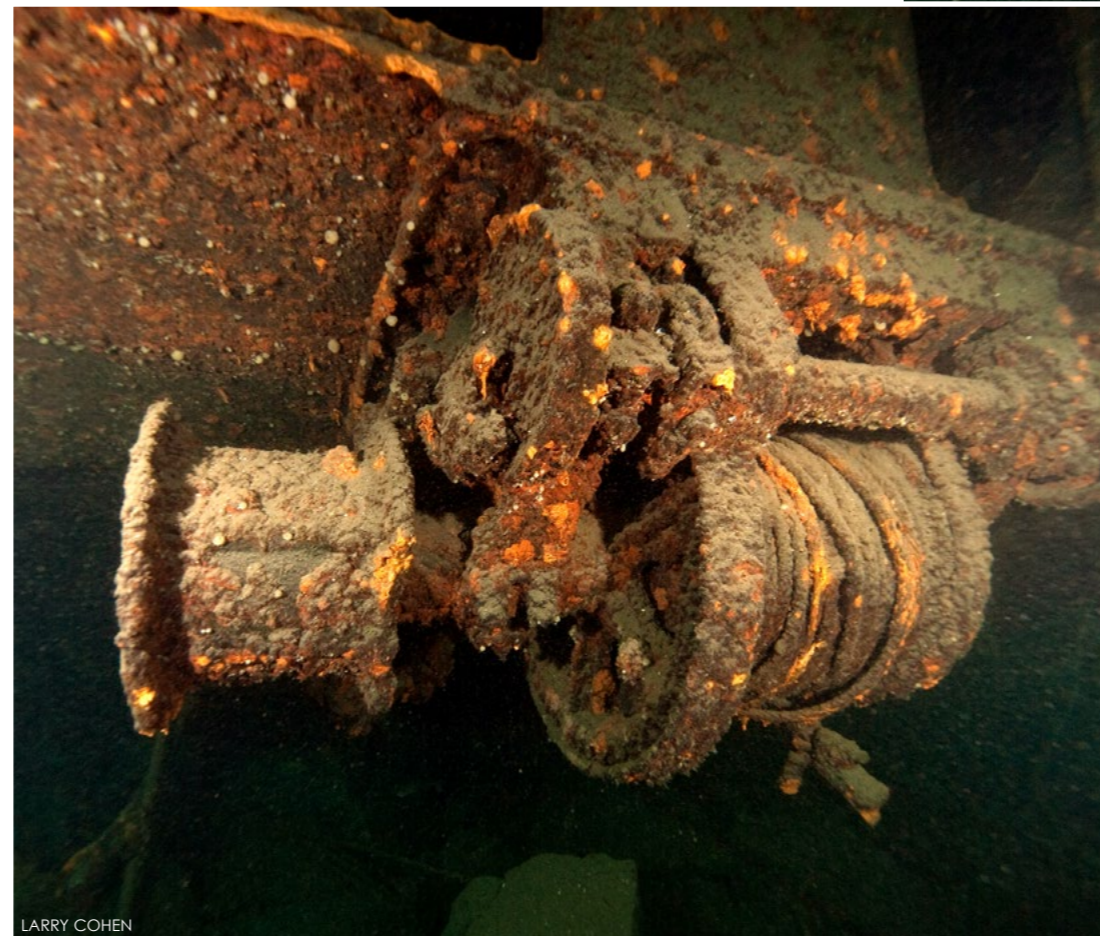


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COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The wreck of *America* sits upside down; Diver at propeller; *America's* rudder; Small wooden boat next to the wreck; Winch on the *America*

The America

Having to get back on a dive boat, a trip to the Thousand Islands is not complete without visiting the 28m (92ft) long steel drill barge *America*. The vessel sank due to an explosion on 20 June 1932. She sits upside down in 22.86m (75ft) of water in a shipping lane. The marker buoy is about 30.5m (100ft) from the wreck. Divers follow the chain to the shoal where they come to the barge in 16.76m (55ft) of water. Care must be taken since the bottom is a heavy layer of oily silt. The barge is a large structure and the vessel is easy to penetrate. Up on top, one can see the two propellers. The current could be very strong on this part of the wreck.



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver at the *King Horn's* capstan; The mast can still be seen on the *King Horn*; Diver explores the machinery on the *Vickery*; Diver swims over the wreck of the *Vickery*; Diver over the wreck of the *King Horn*

The King Horn

The *King Horn* is a 41.45m (136ft) x 7.6m (25ft) two-masted schooner that was refitted as a barge. The barge ran aground while in tow in 1897. She was loaded with grain. The intact steel hulled with wood planking wreck sits in 29m (95ft) of water. The helm capstan, and other machinery could still be seen on the wreck.

A.E. Vickery

The *A.E. Vickery* was a three-masted schooner built in 1861 in Three Mile Bay, New York. She is 41.45m (136ft) long and has 7.92m (26ft) beam. On 17 August 1889, the vessel struck a shoal while transporting corn to the Wisers Distillery at Prescott, Ontario, the makers of Wiser's whisky. Now sitting upright in 35m (115ft) of water, *A.E. Vickery* is relatively intact. The wreck is always in a heavy current, but one could swim the length of the wreck inside.



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This is just a small sampling of the wrecks in the Thousand Islands region of the St. Lawrence River. In both Canada and New York, there is plenty to explore from a boat or right from shore. ■

REFERENCES:

- www.visit1000islands.com
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- www.1000islands-clayton.com
- www.brockville.com

Larry Cohen and Olga Torrey are well-travelled and published underwater photographers based in New York City, USA. They offer underwater photography courses and presentations to dive shops, clubs and events. For more information, visit: Liquidimagesuw.com.



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