



Remains of ancient amphoras can be found resting on the reefs around Greece

Text and photos by Peter Symes

Greek diving is back on the menu. X-RAY MAG's Peter Symes asks Avgerinos Vrazopoulos, the director of Scuba Hellas—the Greek diving marketing group—for insights into the development of new dive locations and trip packages for international divers.

X-RAY MAG: You are taking on the seemingly gargantuan task of positioning Greece as a diving destination, somewhat anew, even though Greece has always had a recreational dive industry.

AV: Greece is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe. Every year more than 20 million people visit Greece to visit the ancient sites and museums, the endless sunny beaches with the crystal-clear waters, enjoy the famous Hellenic gastronomy, the extensive opportunities for sport, leisure and cultural involvement, and of course the famous lifestyle, which completes the puzzle of an amazing holiday!

Although Greece seems to be a great place to discover diving and to fall in love with the underwater, the country doesn't offer—or at least doesn't promote—organized diving with, say, at least 10-15 good dives in one location, aimed at the experienced and demanding divers who travel the

Rebuilding Greece's Dive Industry

— An Interview with Avgerinos Vrazopoulos of Scuba Hellas



Divers at dive site off Rafti Island in Rafti Bay with walls covered with sponges and soft corals (left and bottom right); Avgerinos Vrazopoulos of Scuba Hellas (below and lower left)



diving industry began with the lifting of the restrictive law regarding diving in early 2006. This I consider a watershed moment for Greece's dive industry. From this point onwards, dive centers were finally able to offer services for experienced divers and dive centers started exploring their backyards. Before long, those dive centers realized they had a real opportunity to attract real divers and began a process of adding more and more dive spots to their maps.

But that was not quite enough to undo the

damage. The global dive community had long since taken it for a fact that you could not dive in Greece. Even today, when I travel to promote ScubaHellas.com abroad, I frequently got told to my face, "What are you talking about? You cannot dive in Greece. It is forbidden." It appears that many who came to Greece as tourists in the past, some of which had their first diving experiences in the Greek islands, went asking for further diving adventures but were disappointed. This perception was then passed on through the grapevine until it became an established myth. As divers returned to their home countries and discussed options for further adventures in diving with fellow divers in clubs

world with their diving buddies. This is the most important reason that Greece is not firmly pinned on the global diving map yet.

As you noted, the recreational dive industry has been around since the '80s, but the 250 registered dive centers, even today, provide mostly DSDs (Discover Scuba Diving) and Open Water Diver courses to new divers—tourists.

Moreover, up and until 2006, diving in Greece was totally prohibited, apart from some very small locations and some bays, and only for training purposes. In order to protect our national heritage, the authorities did not allow any other diving. Special licenses were issued by port police and the ministry of culture only to a very few, to participate in research dives for archaeological purposes. As a consequence, dive centers had no interesting spots to offer experienced div-

ers. Instead, they had to focus on tourists, who mostly had no diving experience.

The idea of ScubaHellas.com arose in 2009, when I realized that, although there were thousands of potential dive spots all around the seas of Greece, I could not find—and I have been a diver since 1992—any dive centers offering a week full of good dives. Instead I had to travel abroad to pursue my interest in diving.

X-RAY MAG: Can you walk us through the historic development of the local dive industry and community since recreational diving came about? Given Greece's extensive archipelago, general popularity as a tourist



destination with a well-developed infrastructure, why hasn't Greece enjoyed much of a prominent position as a dive destination?

AV: The real development of the





THIS PAGE: Shipwrecks, ancient amphoras and wrecks of aircraft are also features of diving in Greece

X-RAY MAG: What are the challenges ahead? How do you envisage overcoming them?

AV: The biggest challenge is to overcome and change the persistent perception that still prevails in the global dive community—that it is still forbidden to dive in Greece. Secondly, to convince divers that there are locations that offer a week of good and different dives. This requires time, effort and reaching out. Another matter is to convince the local dive centers to focus more on the dive community, instead of general tourism, and to add still more dive spots. But as I tell my colleagues, we need to show professionalism and consistency and put in the hard work. This is the only way to overcome obstacles ahead and finally succeed.

home, while spending perhaps only half of the usual on airfares, and be able to enjoy their vacation in a safe and well-known destination.

X-RAY MAG: What opportunities do you see for the Greek dive industry in the present day, i.e. given the current economic climate and geopolitical circumstances—such as, but not limited to, the unrest, or perceived unrest, affecting other destinations around the globe?

AV: Firstly, the crisis spurred the tourism sector to improve quality and range of services, and it also drove prices way down. Still today, prices remain lower than in previous years. Secondly, the many economic and political issues elsewhere on the globe have made many distant locations travel less attractive for various reasons. For Europeans, in particular, Greece has become a very attractive alternative, following the unrest in Egypt and Turkey. And as Malta is becoming still more crowded, we see more and more divers each year.

In 2017, around 30 million tourists are expected to visit Greece. Bookings are going up, and Athens' airport is already the fourth largest destination in Europe this year. Airlines are adding more flights to existing destinations as well as adding new ones.

X-RAY MAG: You have created this portal ScubaHellas.com with the purpose of promoting Greek Diving, and the first time we met some years back, you featured this portal in your exhibit at the German dive show. Why did you take on the task of promoting Greek diving? What happened leading up to that moment when you decided to embark on such a project? What made you believe it was doable?

AV: I both strongly believe that Greece really deserves it, and offers unique diving experiences to the most demanding divers. Not only do we have an endless coastline of 13,676km (the eleventh longest coastline in the world), 3,000 islands—240 of them inhabited, potentially unlimited dive sites (already more than

2,000 registered) all under crystal clear and relatively warm waters (underwater average visibility is 30m), but history as well. Apart from the beautiful scenery, there are more than 1,500 wrecks (more wrecks than any other country in the world) waiting to get explored.

As a marketing professional, it is also my belief that we have to promote Greece as a country and not just some individual areas. Having been a recreational diver for more than 25 years, I see that—provided the infrastructure to provide quality services is in place—we can offer all parts of the holiday puzzle, in one place. It is just a question of time to make the global dive community aware of the potential here. With tourism infrastructure and dive spots in place, we have got all we need,

and dive centers, they passed on the message they had unique first diving experiences in Greece but there was nothing further on offer.

X-RAY MAG: What changed to make room for the current promotion?

AV: Today, there is a completely different availability of holiday packages carefully designed for divers, covering all different needs in places where visitors can enjoy a week full of dives, combining

wrecks, caves and caverns, reefs and walls for all levels of divers—from open water to deep technical dives. There also seems to be a growing number of divers looking for new alternatives for upcoming vacations, which are closer (maximum three hours of flight time for Europeans), safer and of course—as you easily can find out in ScubaHellas.com—good value for money. As a result, discerning divers in Europe now have easier access to quality diving without traveling far from





Greek diving includes caves and caverns at several locations (left and bottom right); Avgerinos Vrazopoulos of Scuba Hellas takes divers out to dive sites near Athens (below)



then the sky is the limit. We also believe on following a simple recipe, with just very few and basic ingredients:

- Happy and satisfied divers who will become return visitors and share their experiences with fellow divers
- New dive locations all around Greece
- More dive sites in each location
- New packages, more complicated, designed to provide new experiences for more focused and demanding divers

We are just at the beginning of implementing that plan, and I am sure it will keep me busy for many more years—

and don't forget, I really love what I am doing!

X-RAY MAG: In working with the many dive operators in the area, do you find there are areas where they need to improve or step up, in order to (better) provide competitive and attractive offers?

AV: There is always room for improvement. As I explained earlier, this is our core philosophy, our DNA.

What we need is to get still more good presentations of dive sites, longer seasons of operation and more promotion, especially through the social media. The ScubaHellas.com team supports local dive centers by showing best practices, international benchmarking and providing cus-

and all we have to do is follow through on our strategy and have patience. Before soon, Greece will become the new trend among divers, I am sure.

X-RAY MAG: What did you learn in the process?

AV: In order to move forward and improve, I believe that we should learn new things every day. That said, I found it more difficult than initially thought, to change this "myth" of the diving prohibition in the Greek seas, and much more time and effort is required to change this perception. I also found that although there are 250 dive centers, there are very few open-minded professionals who deliver service at a high level,

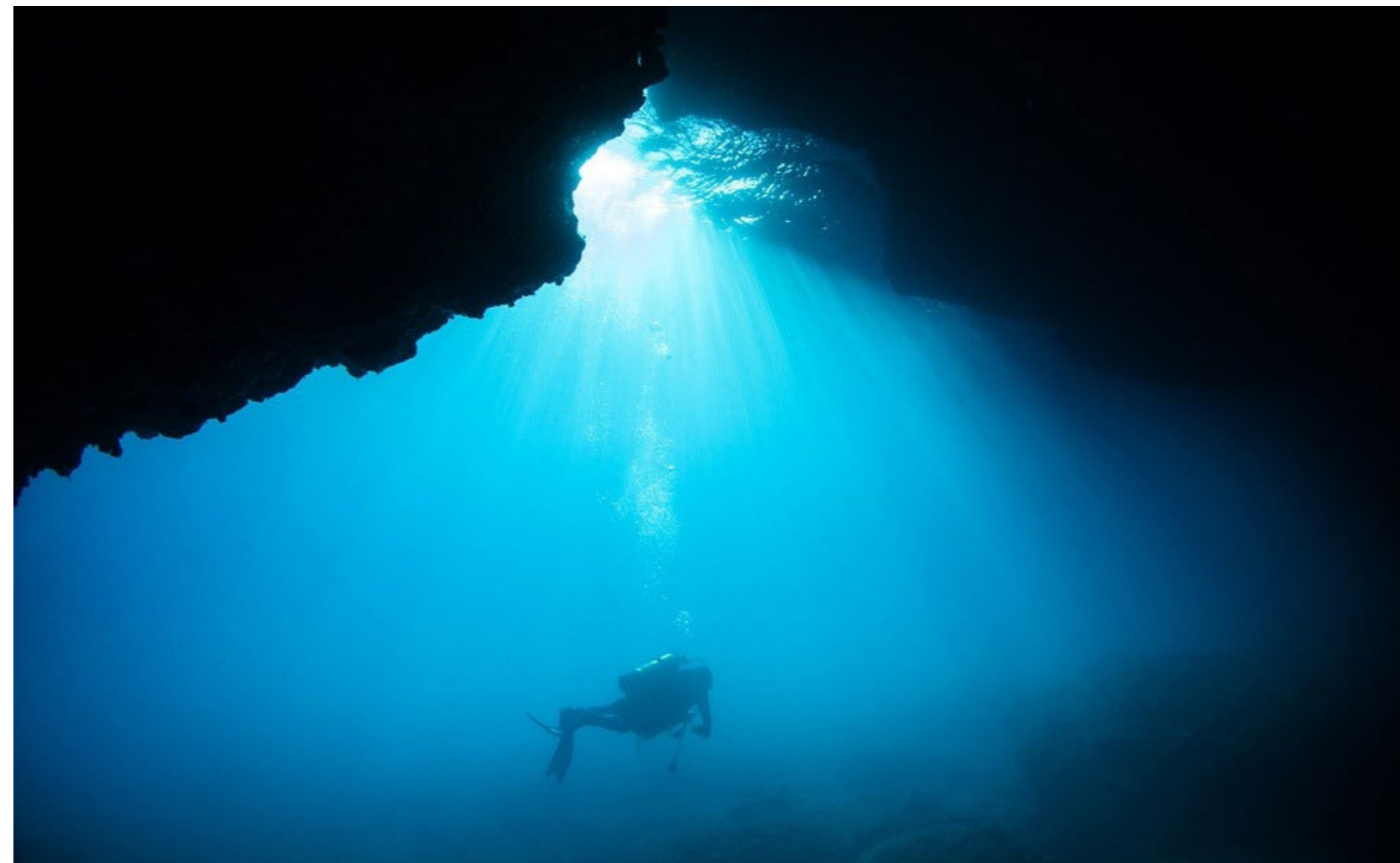
who add more dive locations on their maps, and are willing to invest in marketing and changing their focus from delivering DCDs and training today for tourists to delivering well-designed services for experienced divers.

X-RAY MAG: What are you hoping to achieve in the next 5-10 years? What are your criteria for success? Will there ever be a point in time where you will consider Scuba Hellas fully developed, or is it a continuous process that will never end?

AV: We are still only at the beginning, and what we have accomplished so far is just the introduction. In order to move things further along, we are following a

strategic plan. First of all, we have to establish ScubaHellas.com in divers' minds and hearts. In order to win over their minds, we need to consistently invest in marketing and promotion, and provide real alternatives for people who travel for diving. In other words, we have to move to the top of the list of options, when people are thinking about their next diving holidays. Then, I say hearts, because visiting divers have to return home so pleased with their adventures that they will tell their friends and share their experiences on social media and come back again and again.

As you can surely appreciate, this is a never-ending process, and if we add to that divers' satisfaction must always increase,





A fireworm (left) with an amphora from antiquity, sticking out of the sand; Remains of ancient amphoras found on the rocky reef at Raffi Bay (lower right); Diver enjoys crystal clear waters at Blue Canyon, Anovyssos (right); Avgerinos Vrazopoulos (below)

AV: Initially, I thought I could do it all by myself. I believed I did not need any help from the government. Then, in 2015, I realized that this was a big strategical mistake and I approached GNTO (Greek National Tourism Office), presenting my goals and vision, with the aim of getting some support. Eventually in 2016, we collaborated on organizing our first press trip, which I think went very well. I believe that the authorities are now convinced that diving tourism can become a great asset, a new profit center, and that there are ways of combining security and protection of our national heritage through organized diving.

Obviously, my fellow dive professionals all around Greece are also pushing matters in the same direction, trying to convince local authorities of the benefits of supporting and promoting diving.



ing. During the past two years, a number of projects have been set in motion, such as underwater museums and parks, all of which will help diving in Greece to grow to the next level. There are many municipalities around Greece planning to introduce scuba-related attractions. Unfortunately, the ongoing crisis makes investments a challenge and holds us all back.

ence.

What we do in ScubaHellas.com is to listen carefully to divers' needs and wishes. We can design vacations for many or a few, in big crowded cities or small and remote islands, for families or for groups of extreme divers.

This is what makes Greece different—the ability to provide a very wide range of services.

X-RAY MAG: How does a visiting diver make the most out of visiting Greece? What is worth paying special attention to that is perhaps not so obvious for the outsider? Do you have any tips?

AV: Unfortunately, it is impossible for a diver to explore more than

one or two different locations in just a few days. I rather prefer to propose destinations with more diving than traveling. I have been diving for the last 25 years, and I have dived all around Greece, and still, I feel like I have seen only a small portion.

So, for those friends coming to dive for the first time, I propose that you be specific. Don't try to do as much as you can in a few days. You need to find one place to explore—we can help you to do that. Wherever you decide

tomor care professional seminars and training. Our team follows carefully designed procedures and evaluates key performance parameters on all areas of operations (i.e., facilities, equipment, briefing and training). We put up certain rules and procedures, which dive centers must incorporate in their mode of operation. Each year, we evaluate which dive centers that not only share the same passion with us, but

also can provide high level services and move in the same direction, and finally can follow ScubaHellas.com way of operation and philosophy.

X-RAY MAG: Has the government been supportive of your efforts? What are the challenges and limitations?





Divers find colorful sponges and algae on rocky walls at Anavyssos dive site (left) and Rafti Island (below)

our famous ouzo and tsipouro, masticha, and of course, the unlimited local wines. Let your senses guide you—only then will you get a real taste of Hellas!

X-RAY MAG: Are there any specific sights or locations in Greece that are not so well known outside the country but may become so in the future?

AV: There are plenty, and very soon you will see these new places appearing on ScubaHellas.com dive map, but we need some time to develop each destinations to provide the full package, and we need to be sure about our proposals. Since we are still at the beginning of our journey, we have to be very careful about what we are offering. Just stay tuned to ScubaHellas.com! ■

For more information, go to: **ScubaHellas.com**



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to go, the islands or the mainland, you will have so many things to do, you won't have time to do them all.

Don't forget, it's a holiday too, and it is always nice to spend some time just laying on the beach, relaxing under the sun!

Visit our page ScubaHellas.com to explore our existing proposals and then

leave us some tips. Our team will listen to you carefully, providing what best suits you.

Most importantly, try to avoid July and August — it is the peak of the season. It is overcrowded and you won't be able to enjoy your stay. It is better to go during May or October, when the weather is also perfect, warm enough

and water temperatures are more than 20°C (68°F).

Keep the last one or two days free of dives (no deco, no flight time) in order to spend some time visiting top-side sights around Greece and try local Mediterranean cuisine along with spirits, like