



tech talk

Diver on wreck of SS *Genoveva Fierro* off the Spanish coast at Laredo

Text and photos by Sabine Kerkau

Croatia, Italy, France—these European destinations have long been coveted insider knowledge for technical and wreck divers. But what about Spain? Technical diving is still in its infancy in Spain. Nevertheless, there are some dive centers in the Mediterranean, as well as on the Atlantic coast of Europe, which offer trimix. There are countless worthwhile destinations in Spain. Unknown wrecks may be found at depths between 60 and 120+m, but there are also many cave systems waiting to be explored and discovered. In this article, I take a closer look at the wrecks off the Atlantic coast of Spain, between Bilbao and Santander.

Laredo

The Atlantic is unpredictable. If you want to do technical wreck diving off the coast of northern Spain, you must be flexible enough to deal with conditions that change very quickly. One should allow extra time for this, and it does not hurt

to also have an alternative program—a plan B—in case changing conditions scuttle your initial plans. Nevertheless, the forgotten wrecks of Laredo are definitely worth a visit.

Joseba Alberdi is the owner and operator of the Mundo Submarino dive center in the Spanish city of Laredo. He and his team, the Ocean Project organization, have rediscovered and identified

many historically important wrecks off the coast in recent years.

SS *Genoveva Fierro*

Sunk on 16 December 1925, the

Genoveva Fierro was built in Scotland in the Grangemouth shipyards. It was launched in January 1894 and sailed its first years under the name *Macarena*. The *Genoveva Fierro* was a steamship



Forgotten Wrecks of Laredo





Diver (above) and conger eel (right) on wreck of *Genoveva Fierro*

with a steel hull. It was 66.9m long and 10m wide.

In 1920, the ship was acquired by Federico Fierro and renamed SS *Genoveva Fierro*. On 15 December 1925, the ship was loaded with coal on the way to Bilbao. For some reason, the ship collided with SS *Antonio*. Although the crew of the *Genoveva Fierro* tried to get to Bilbao, their attempts failed, and the vessel sank about three miles north of Punta del Pescador. Fortunately, no one was killed in the ship's destruction. It was assumed that the place where the ship sank was about 45m deep.

For a long time, the wreck was forgotten until the Ocean Project organization began to search for it. In the beginning, the team had



only very inaccurate data available to them. So, they collected information and made many dives, but without success. From

the start, there was the possibility that the search could never succeed in finding shipwrecks, since some wrecks in the area were

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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of SS *Genoveva Fierro* off Laredo; Diver with John Dory fish, or *Zeus faber* (right)

destroyed with the help of dynamite and had their metal removed in salvage operations. But Ocean Project's dive team members, Alberdi and Alberto Marin, were stubborn and did not give up. Finally, they had success! In May 2000, they found the remains of SS *Genoveva Fierro*, after nearly three years of searching.

The wreck lies on sand, at a depth of 55m. The bow points to the northeast. The wreck is broken into two parts. In the last 75 years, many storms have passed over this site, damaging the wreck. The bridge has disappeared. At the highest point of the wreck, the hull projects 8m above the seafloor. Strangely enough, coal is still found in the wreck's holds. Because of its cargo of coal, the wreck has long



been nicknamed "Carbonero," meaning "coal merchant."

Visibility on the wreck can vary a lot. It is strongly influenced by the tides. In addition, the wreck can be affected by sediment, as it is

located near the mouth of the river Santona. Nevertheless, it is a very beautiful wreck site where one can frequently see ocean sunfish (*Mola mola*) and John Dory fish (*Zeus faber*).





THIS PAGE: Divers on wreck of *Andra*

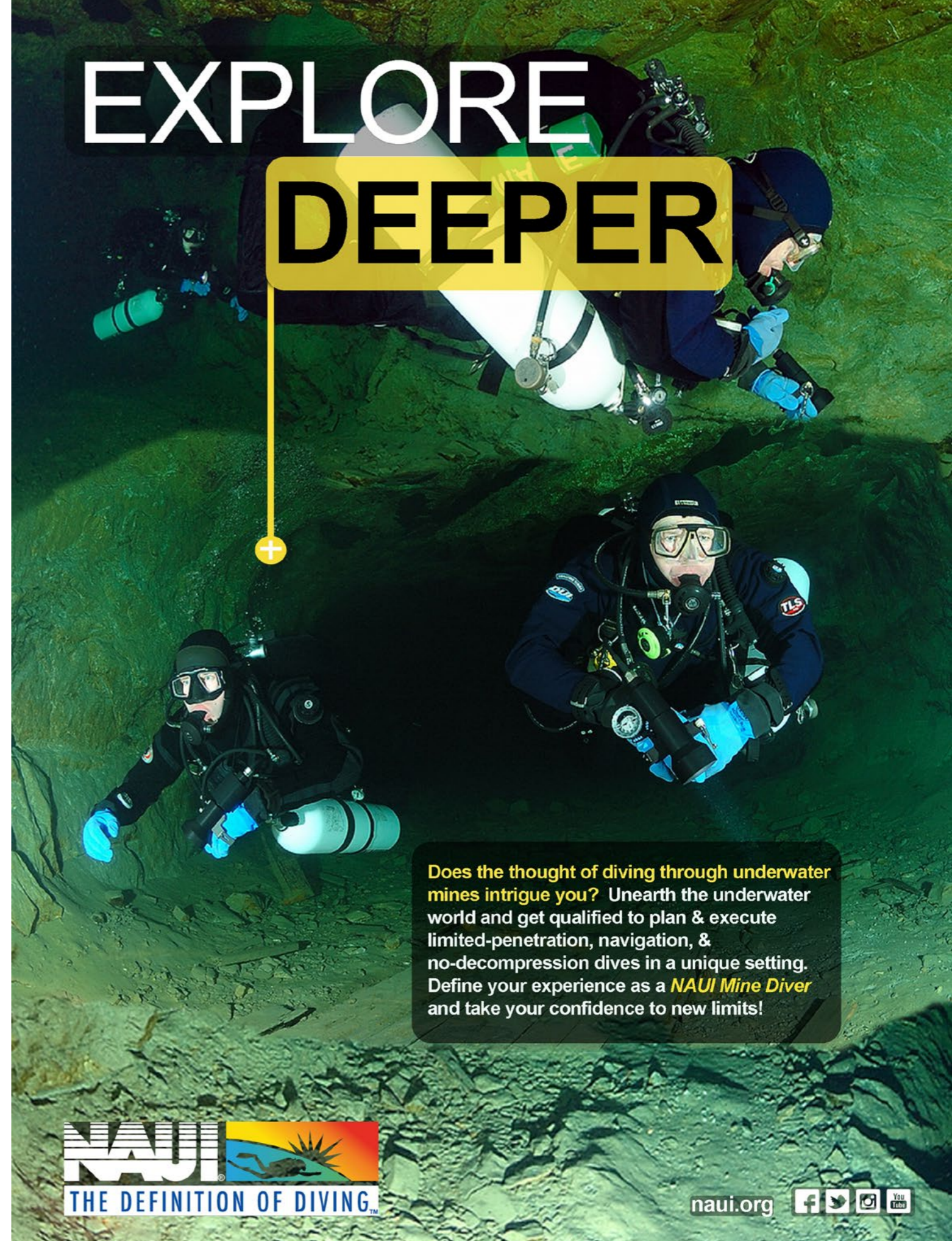
Andra

Sunk on 6 April 1937, this vessel was built by the German shipyard in Hamburg. The ship was launched in July 1922 and named *Indra*. It had a length of 71m and was 11m wide. In the beginning of 1937, the *Indra* was sold and renamed *Andra*. With the new owners, the ship was chartered by Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War. She undertook several journeys to the north, bypassing the blockade by the Francoists. On 6 April 1937, the *Andra* was sunk by armed fishermen off the coast of Laredo.


Times were hard and uncertain during the Spanish Civil War, both at sea and on land. Many ships disappeared, and even if there were records, they were often inaccurate. This fact and




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THIS PAGE: Scenes from wreck of *Andra* off Spanish coast at Laredo

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But until the final identification was made, the team's patience would be put to the test.

In July 2002, Ocean Project undertook a first exploratory dive. The dive team, consisting of Alberdi, Marin and Jordi Chias, had prepared perfectly for the dive. And they were lucky—they found the wreck of a large cargo ship. It stood upright in a depth of 85m, and had a length of 70m and a width of 10m. Due to bom-

bardment, the wreck showed some damage, but was still in very good condition, all in all. Many dives were necessary to make the final identification. Eventually, with the help of historical illustrations from insurance companies and European naval museums, the wreck's identity was verified without a doubt.

España (formerly Alfonso XIII)
Sunk in 1937, the wreck of the bat-

tleship *España* is one of the landmarks of the Spanish coast. The mere mention of its name makes the eyes of all Spanish technical divers light up. Everyone wants to dive this wreck at least once, because it is of immense historical importance to Spain. The *España* class included three warships: *España* (the first one built), the *Alfonso XIII* and the *Jaime I*.

These battleships were developed, more or less, out of necessi-

the fact that the team members of Ocean Project had very little time for their research dives (due to the long cold winters of the Calabrian coast), explains why the search for the wreck extended over several years.

The dive team, led by Alberdi and Marin, decided in 2002 to explore a specific area off the coast of Laredo, where they suspected a major wreck. Historical records from the Spanish Civil War did not help the team much. Only information from local fishermen led to a site where a dive attempt was made.

At the end of March 2002, a dive was carried out at this site to a depth over 90m. But the only finds were some unidentifiable scraps. Undaunted, the team continued the search and finally made a discovery on 25 May 2002. At a depth of 85m, on the sandy seafloor, there were signs of a big wreck.

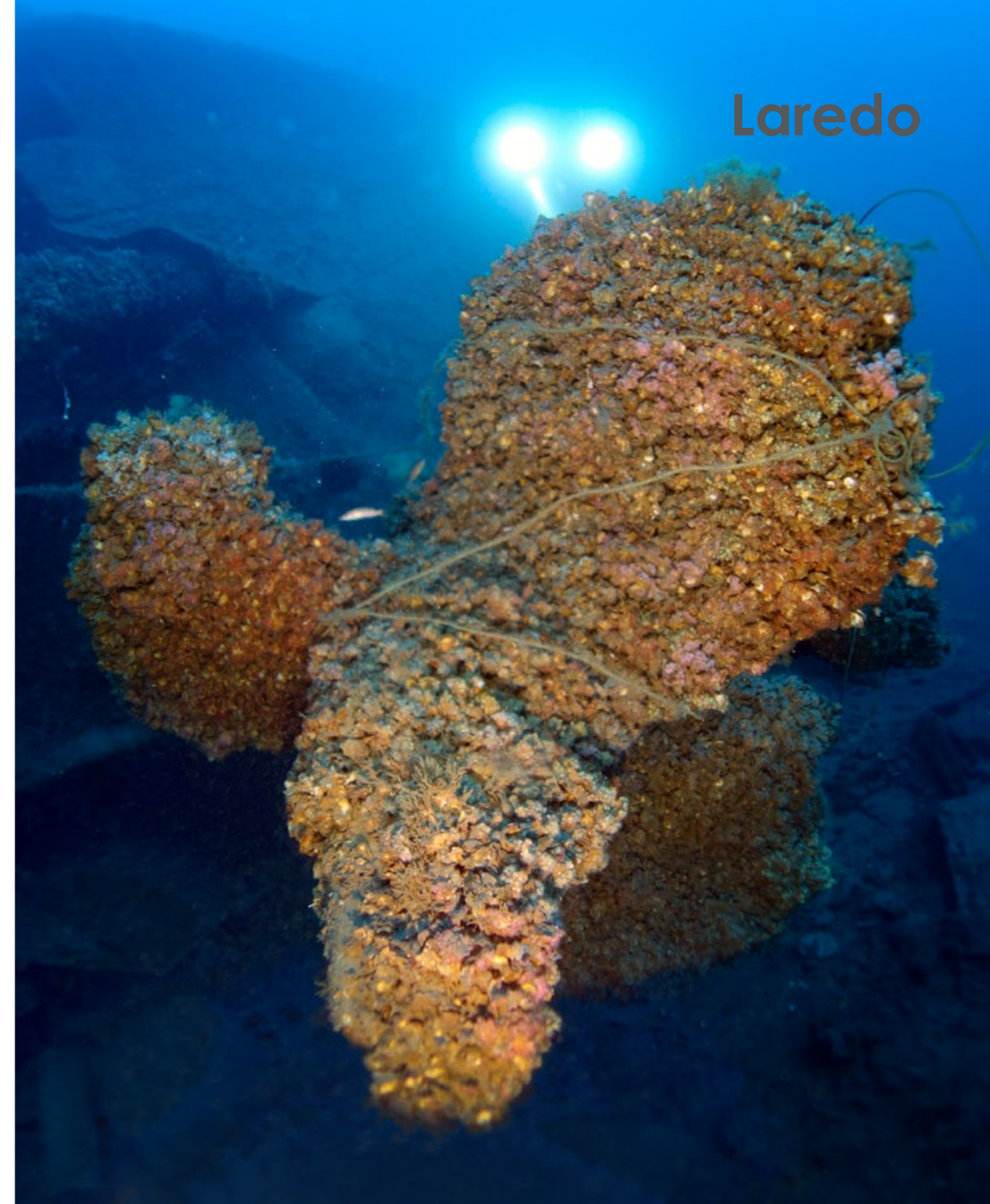




THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *España*

precarious moment, the ship was also attacked by enemy aircraft. Nevertheless, almost all crew members (more than 700 men) were saved. Five sailors lost their lives. The *España* sank at the stern. The sea was about 75m deep at the collision site. When the ship hit the seafloor, it made a 180-degree turn. For some time, the bow still protruded from the water. Then, by the sheer pressure of trapped air, some metal plates were blown off the hull, and the *España* disappeared from the surface.

Although the position of the wreck was known, many years passed before a first test dive was undertaken to the *España*. Alfonso Gonzalíz Fernández, a local hard helmet diver, was granted permission to dive the wreck in 1984, after a year of fighting the authorities for a per-



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ty. Spanish finances were depleted after the Spanish-American War of 1898. The *Alfonso XIII*, named after the Spanish king, had its launch in May 1913 and was completed in August 1915. It was 140m long and 24m wide. In 1931, it was renamed *España*, after the first ship of its class. The ship was involved in countless heavy battles during the Spanish Civil War. Then, in the second quarter of 1937, tragedy struck—it was sunk at Santander, after running into a mine.

Foggy mist lay over the bay of Santander. It was the 30th of April 1937. Spain was in a civil war. The battleship *España* patrolled off the coast to find a blockade breaker. On the 140m long battleship, loaded with armaments and ammunition, crew members were on alert. A convoy of British ships

was trying to get to Santander.

The *España* took pursuit. In doing so, she doomed herself. A few days earlier, mines had been laid along the coast of Santander. In the zeal of the fight, the *España* came too close to this danger zone. After the commander of the ship became aware of the danger, he ordered an immediate change of course. But it was too late. The rear portion of the backboard side collided with a mine. The fall of the *España*, triggered by a mine laid by its own war division, could no longer be stopped. In this same



mit. It was to be a hard helmet dive, with air supplied from the surface, to a depth of over 70m! From today's point of view, it was a very daring dive. Fernández remained on the wreck for 15 minutes. Back at the surface, his report on the wreck was very negative. He said the visibility was very bad and that the wreck was upside-down and completely inaccessible.

It would be another 15 years before the next dive to the *España* took place. In 1999, after two years of preparation and research, Marin and Alberdi did their first dive on the wreck of the

battleship. They, too, made their first dives to the wreck with compressed air and a bottom-time of 15 minutes. However, their reports and underwater photographs drew a completely different picture of the wreck than the report by Fernandez.

On a dive trip during one of my stays in Spain, I happened to meet Alberdi and Marin and hear about the forgotten wrecks of Laredo. It was the first time I had heard about the *España*. They showed me pictures of the wreck and the telling of their first dives to the *España* kindled a desire in me to visit the wreck as soon as possible.



THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *España*

was greeted with the impressive shapes of four giant propellers that stretched out in front of me, as I slowly made my way to the stern. My dive partners, Ivan and Mario, knew the wreck very well and led me first into an immense armory where the large guns were stored. In the underwater photographs from the first dives Alberdi and Marin made on the wreck, one can see the ammunition still properly stacked. Since then, everything has become strewn apart in disarray, and the ammunition holds are partly open, giving divers a free view inside.

This first dive was indescribable—brightly lit with sunlight and very good visibility on a wreck that had so many details, I did not know where to look first. Although

the *España* is upside-down, it is possible to penetrate the interior without too much difficulty in many places.

Two days later, we made another dive. This time, we chose the rear of the wreck as our goal. My dive buddies led me to, among other things, one of the large holds. Again, everything was full of ammunition. But not only that—I also saw lamps, wash basins, pipes, hand wheels, portholes and so much more, I could not remember it all. It was incredible! And I thought to myself, why should I fly all the way to Truk Lagoon on the other side of the



Diving the *España*

These days, the window of time in which dives can be carried out on the *España* is restricted to a few months per year. From Laredo, the journey to *España* is about an hour. There are no fixed lines and buoys on the wreck, but Alberdi is such an experienced and great captain that he could find the wreck almost blindfolded.

He was also able to give me a choice of which part of the wreck (bow, stern or midships) I would like to dive, sinking the downline precisely on target, so there would be great views of the wreck for me.

We selected the stern area for the dive. The team diving ahead of us fixed the shot line to one of the four big propellers, and so I

world when I have something like this on my doorstep?

On my last day in Laredo, Alberdi once again took me to *España*. This time, we wanted to dive the bow, and my dive partners were Alberdi and Marin. They showed me “their” wreck, as no one else could. I think I could do 100 dives on this wreck and it would not be boring. The *España* is, for us, a “real” wreck, with all the characteristics and artifacts one could imagine finding on a historical wreck such as this. It is not an artificial reef, well-grown and populated with swarms of fish. It is a piece of living history. A video of the *España* can be found on my homepage at: Sabine-Kerkau.com, or on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/70069956>

SS *Hochheimer*

A dive into the past. On 21 May 1944, in a bay on the Spanish Atlantic coast near Bilbao, the



THIS PAGE: Scenes from the dive to the wreck of the *Hochheimer*; Large conger eel (left) and common lobster (below) on *Hochheimer* wreck

a fish trawler. Besides, the artifacts they found clearly indicated that it was not a Spanish ship.

The porcelain found on the wreck came from the Royal Porcelain Factory in Berlin—Königliche Porzellan-Manufaktur (KPM). Some pieces showed the Imperial Eagle and swastika of the Third Reich. They came to the conclusion that this was the wreck of a German ship. The final identifica-

small German freighter, SS *Hochheimer*, sought shelter for the night. It was transporting a cargo of iron ore back home. The hands of the clock had stopped at 0:40. Almost the entire 25-man crew were in their bunks. They did not realize that their journey would find a dramatic end in a few moments, for the English submarine, *Scepter*, which was hunting for enemy ships in the Gulf of Biscay, had discovered the freighter.

The captain of the *Scepter* did not do things by half. He fired six torpedoes at *Hochheimer*. Seconds later, two explosions penetrated the silence of the night. The ship sank quickly. The Atlantic is cold this time of the year, and only seven of the 25 crew members survived. Seventeen sailors found their last resting place in the wreck, at a depth of over 90m.

Fast forward to the year 2007. No one even suspected the existence of the wreck off the coast of the North Atlantic coast. In 2007, mapping of the seabed



would show the outline of a possible wreck at almost 100m depth. First, it was assumed that it could be the wreck of a historically significant fish trawler from the civil war.

In 2008 and 2009, a group of Spanish technical divers dared to dive at the wreck. After this first dive, they came to the conclusion that the wreck could not be

tion of the wreck was achieved with the help of the on-board clock, which had stopped around midnight. The position of the wreck and the time on the clock corresponded with the logbook records of the *Scepter*.

Diving the *Hochheimer*

In 2015, I took what proved to be an emotional dive to the wreck of

A memorial bouquet is placed on the wreck of the SS *Hochheimer*

the SS *Hochheimer*. Some years ago, I participated regularly in several "Deep Wreck Expedition Week" events in Spain. In 2015, the wreck of the SS *Hochheimer* was also on the program, but in Spain, the wreck was simply called the "Nazi wreck of Bilbao" at the time.

Since 2009, there have been no dives to the wreck, officially, so it was not surprising that almost every Spanish technical diver dreamed of diving on this almost untouched wreck. I was also enthusiastic. Such a dive is something special and one of the reasons I started diving.

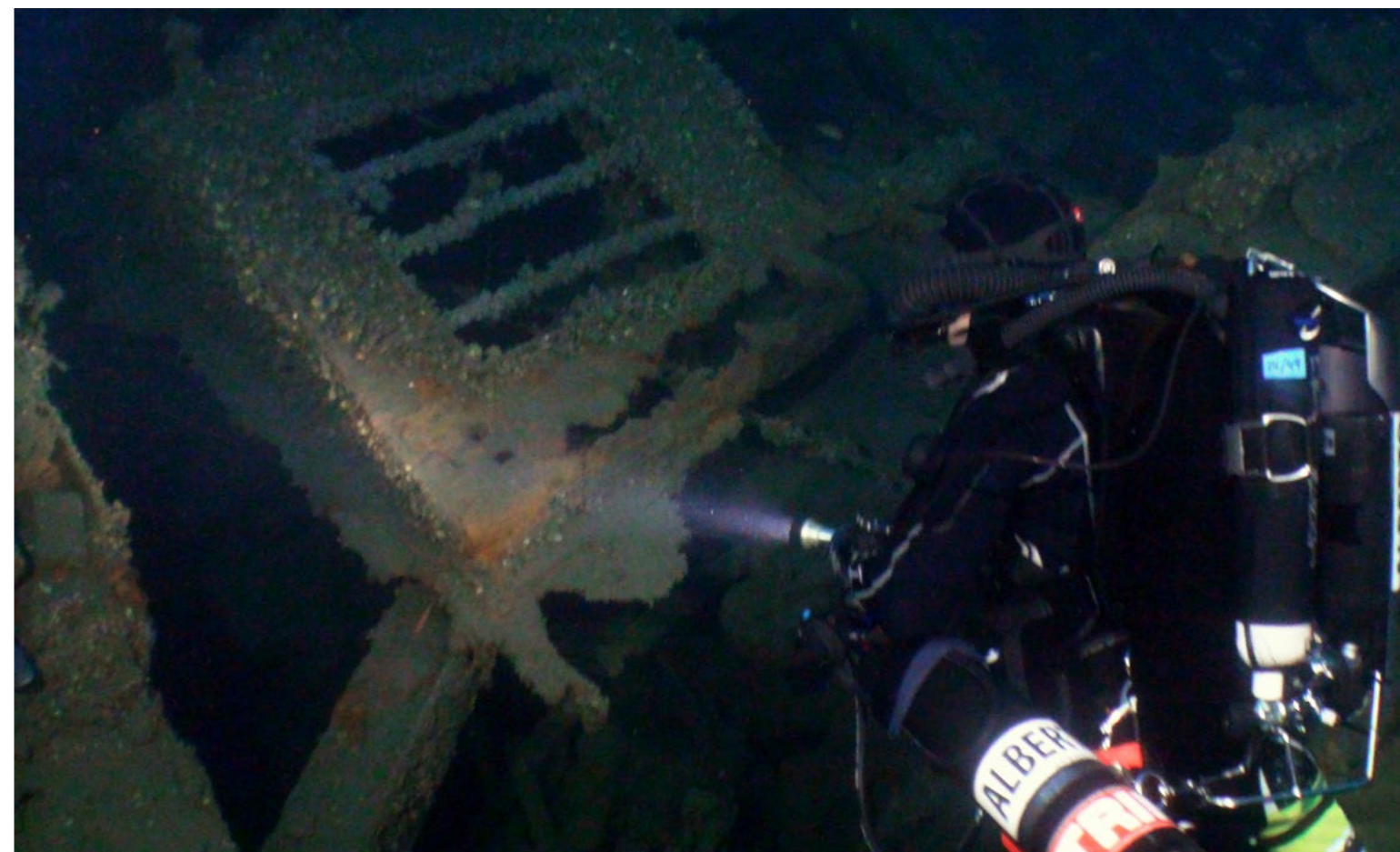
A dive on this wreck started at a depth of 90m, and diving conditions in the Atlantic can be very

demanding, so careful planning and preparation are therefore essential. In addition, I was the first German to see the wreck, 71

years after the loss of the ship. The 17 sailors who died at the time of the ship's demise weighed heavily on my mind. I could not explain



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *España*

and one 40 ccf stage as well as a large camera.

First, we dropped a shot line into the depths. We had to be quick about it, because we needed every spare minute for the descent, or we would miss the wreck. From about 70m, I could see the first outlines of the wreck. The visibility was good and we were surrounded by deep blue twilight.

We swam to a big free-standing boiler and attached our weighted cable to it. Ten minutes had passed by this time, leaving just 15 minutes left for us to explore the wreck, before we had to start our ascent to the surface.

There was so much to see. The walls of the superstructure were partly disintegrated. Even without penetrating the interior of the wreck, I could see lots of porcelain lying in the wreckage. Among other things was a completely intact coffee pot and coffee cups, with the Nazi Imperial Eagle and swastika clearly visible on the

back of the porcelain. There was also a bathtub, sink, mirror frames and other artifacts that were easily identified. And everything was inhabited—I have never seen so many huge conger eels as those found on this wreck.

Just before we had to start our ascent, we took a quick look at the small cannons on the deck of the wreck. Much too soon, it was time to leave. At 25 minutes, we started our long ascent back to the surface. At our deco-stop, we had to decompress for two hours in the blue water. There was a lot of time to reflect on the incredible impressions of the wreck.

Afterthoughts

My conclusion is that Spain has a lot to offer, both above and below the sea. There are spectacular wrecks and great cave systems, rarely ever dived, that will make any explorer's heart beat a little faster. Metaphorically speaking, there is often light, but sometimes shadows, too. If you go to



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why, but I felt that I should not visit the wreck empty-handed. I wanted to place a memorial bouquet with a German flag on the wreck. But I was not sure how the expedition team—which consisted of five Spaniards, an Englishman and myself—would react to this idea.

However, my concerns were completely unfounded, as I got full approval for the plan, and everyone on the team supported me in the initiative. They all gave me their promise that they would not explore the area of the crew's quarters, so as not to disturb the peace of those who perished

there.

The conditions at the dive site were optimal. There were almost no waves and only a minimal current. The expedition group was divided into three dive teams. Together with my dive partners, Alberdi and Marin, we made up the third dive team. Equipment assembled for my dive included a drysuit, JJ closed circuit rebreather, two 80 ccf stages



Rugged coastline of Laredo

Spain to do technical dives, you have to be aware that one must allow for a lot of flexibility and patience in the planning. One should always have an alternative plan in the back of one's mind, just in case.

Some areas can only be explored with local divers, since there are no logistics set up for technical divers. Based on my own experience and what my Spanish friends tell me, I know that the wind is very often a problem and long-planned dives can indeed be cancelled or postponed. I recommend that if you

can afford to travel by car, take as much equipment as possible with you. Rental of stage bottles and other technical diving equipment, such as bailout, is not always available, or can be difficult to find. ■

For more information, visit *Mundo Submarino, Laredo (Cantabria)* at: **Mundosubmarino.es**. Sabine Kerkau is a German technical diver, dive writer and underwater photographer based in Switzerland. For more information, please visit: **Sabine-Kerkau.com**.