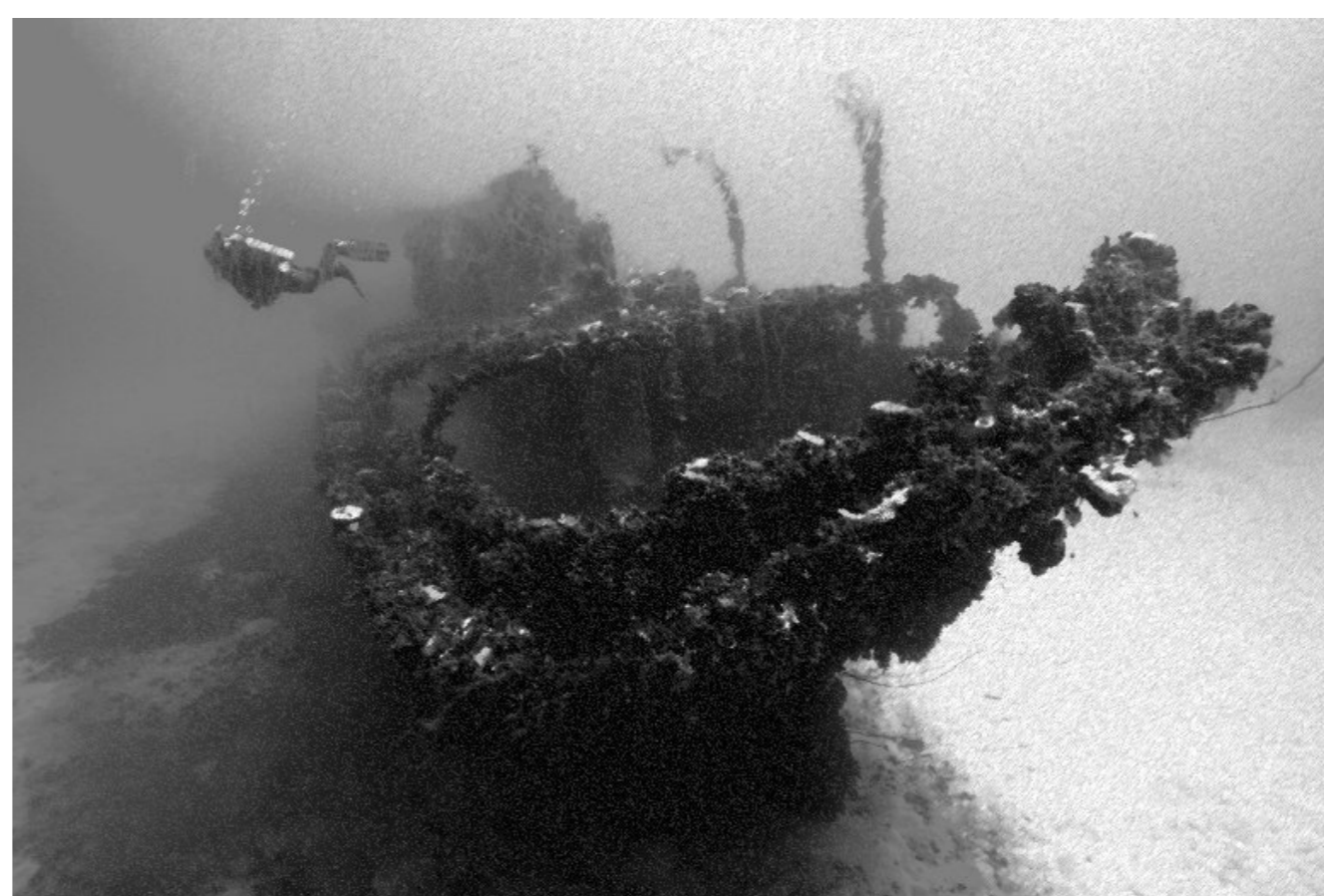
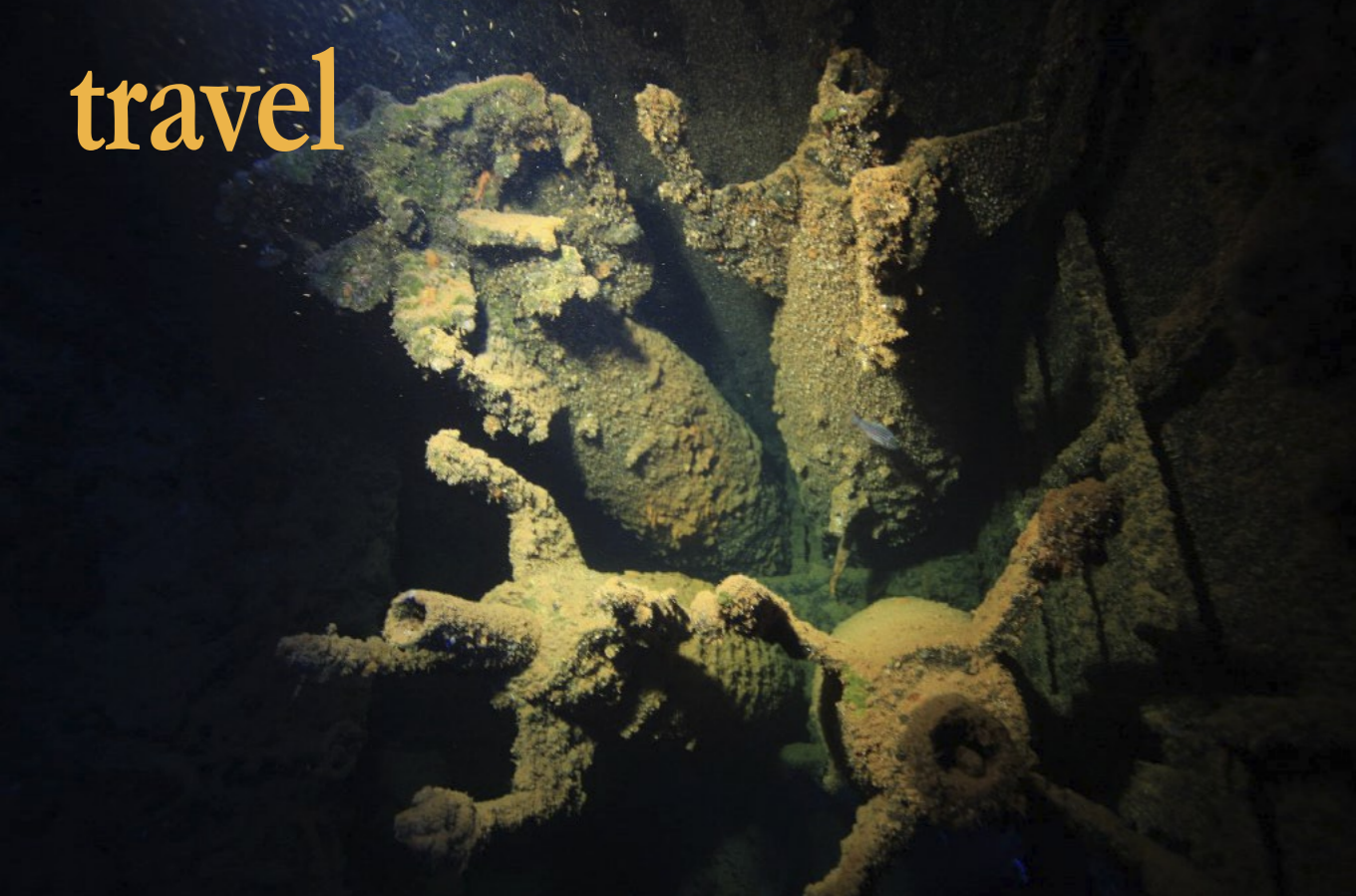




Kwajalein

Text and photos
by Thorsten Repp

Wrecks of the Pacific



THIS PAGE: Eerie scenes from some of the sixteen wrecks of Japanese cargo ships that can be found off the Kwajalein Atoll

PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver checks out the great propellor of the *Prinz Eugen* wreck. Just one of the blades is the size of a diver

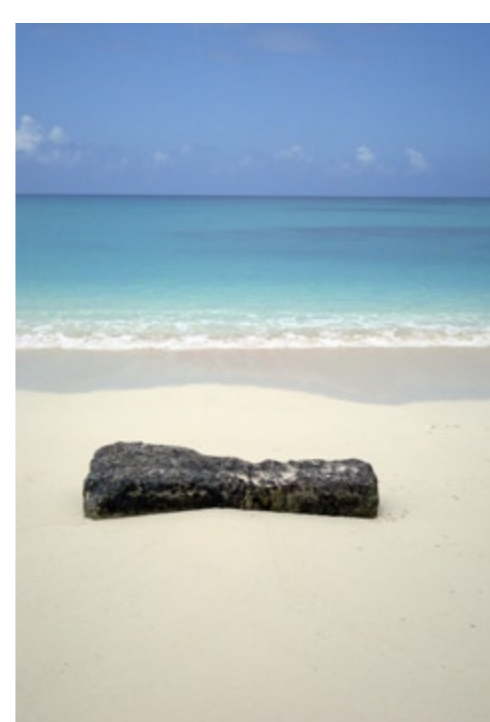


Almost invisible for wreck divers all over the world one of the biggest wreck dive spots in the South Pacific can be found among the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

It was January 1943 when the heavy battle of Kwajalein took place during World War II on what was the outer ring of the Japanese force in the South Pacific at that time. The runways on the Atoll have been destroyed within a few days by the US troops and the following air raid sealed the fate of several big Japanese cargo ships which have been bombed to the seabed of the lagoon. Sixteen of these ships can be dived today. Overgrown by pale green organisms these big Japanese freighters form in the twilight of the depths the ghost fleet of the Kwajalein Atoll, one of the biggest World War II shipwreck graveyards in the South Pacific.

Several US aircraft wrecks are scattered around and many can be found on the northern tip of the atoll, Roi Namur. Right beside the





CLOCKWISE: Diver investigates remains of artillery and cargo on the *Prinz Eugen* wreck; Scenes from the white sandy beaches of Kwajalein Atoll; Diver peers into open deck chambers of the *Prinz Eugen* wreck

main Island rests a victim of “Operations Crossroads”, the nuclear bomb test series in the Bikini atoll 1946. It is the German cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, the biggest and most magnificent wreck in Kwajalein.

Prinz Eugen has become known for the fight alongside one of the famous battleships during World War II, the *Bismarck*, especially for its role in sinking the British *HMS Hood*. In 1946, the *Prinz Eugen* was brought to Kwajalein after the atomic bomb test series. Due to bad damage, the vessel leaked just before the crew reached the safe harbor of Kwajalein Island. The big ship filled with water, rolled to its starboard side and sunk upside down.

Today, the wreck rests in 20 to 40 meters of shallow water. The stern is partly out of the water and exposed to the continuous waves and sharp blowing wind from the sea, which can get very rough from time to time. One of the big copper props has been detached and relocated to Kiel in Germany where the ship was built in 1936.

Into the blue — diving the *Prinz Eugen*

Just a few meters below the surface, the massive body of the wreck is outlined in the shallow water. Only the stern with the huge propellers can be seen of the 213 meter long ship before the visibility lets the rest of the shipwreck vanish in blurry shades of blue.

A single blade of the propeller is as big as a diver. Behind it is the giant and intact hull. A swim between the stern and the sandy bottom leads to the top side of the ship where the smooth current from the ocean side can be felt.

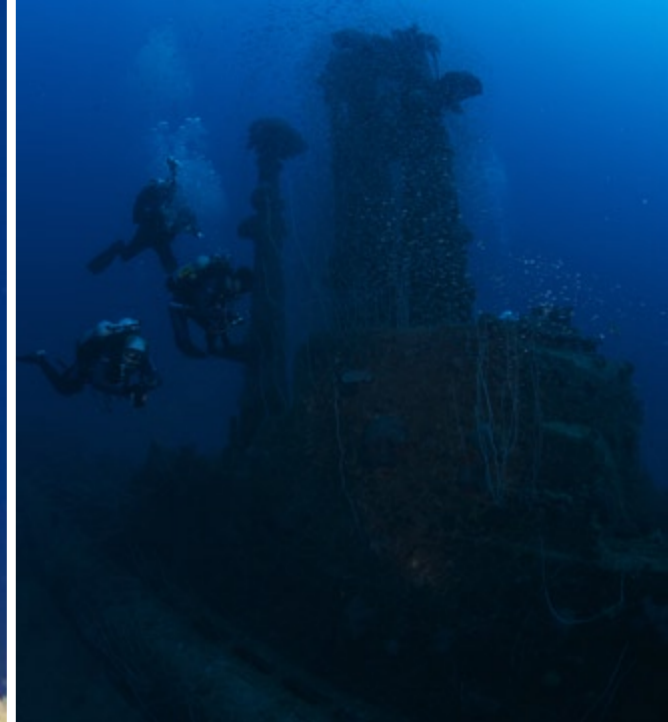
While moving deeper, a stroll alongside the vessel shows massive 8-inch battery guns. The canons are buried half in the sand.

The superstructure has collapsed due to the heavy weight of the ship itself. Everywhere, bigger parts of the ship are scattered in the sand. A huge obscure spherical object, the gun director sits right beside the ship. Torpedoes are sitting in their tubes, still as if ready to be shot.

Several doorways can be used to enter





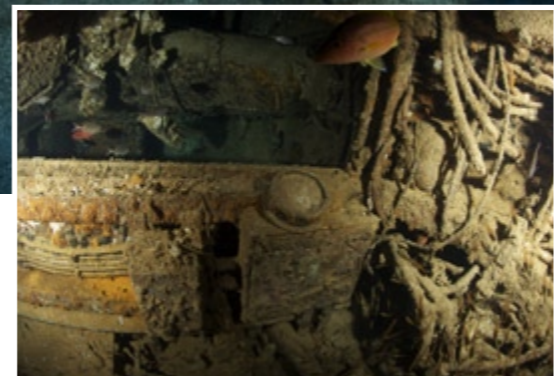


THIS PAGE: Gear wheels, relics and artifacts from the interior of the *Prinz Eugen* shipwreck. ABOVE: Divers swim past the rising towers of the wreck. PREVIOUS PAGE: A diver hovers over the wreck of the *Prinz Eugen*—divers find some torpedos still sit in their tubes

in years ago. Several sections of the wreck can be explored: galleys, storage rooms, bathrooms, generators, different types of shelves—more and more relics appear in the light of the torch. The officers rooms have chairs, tables and beds.

Everything is buried under several inches of rust. The long time under saltwater has had its impact. It's not unlikely to have to abort a penetration dive due to the fact that a ceiling of a deck has collapsed and bits and pieces prevent one from moving ahead.

Not far away from the *Prinz Eugen* are numerous Japanese freighters resting not much deeper than 60 meters in the lagoon. Some of them are sitting upright, some on their sides, and others upside down. The *AKIBASAN Maru*, *ASAKAZE Maru*, and *TATEYAMA Maru*, just to name a few, sunk very close to each other. These cargo ships are fairly intact but have been cannibalized over the years. Therefore, the smaller parts are gone, but bigger items, like ammunition, shells and spare props, can still be found on and inside the wrecks. Gauges are still mounted in the engine

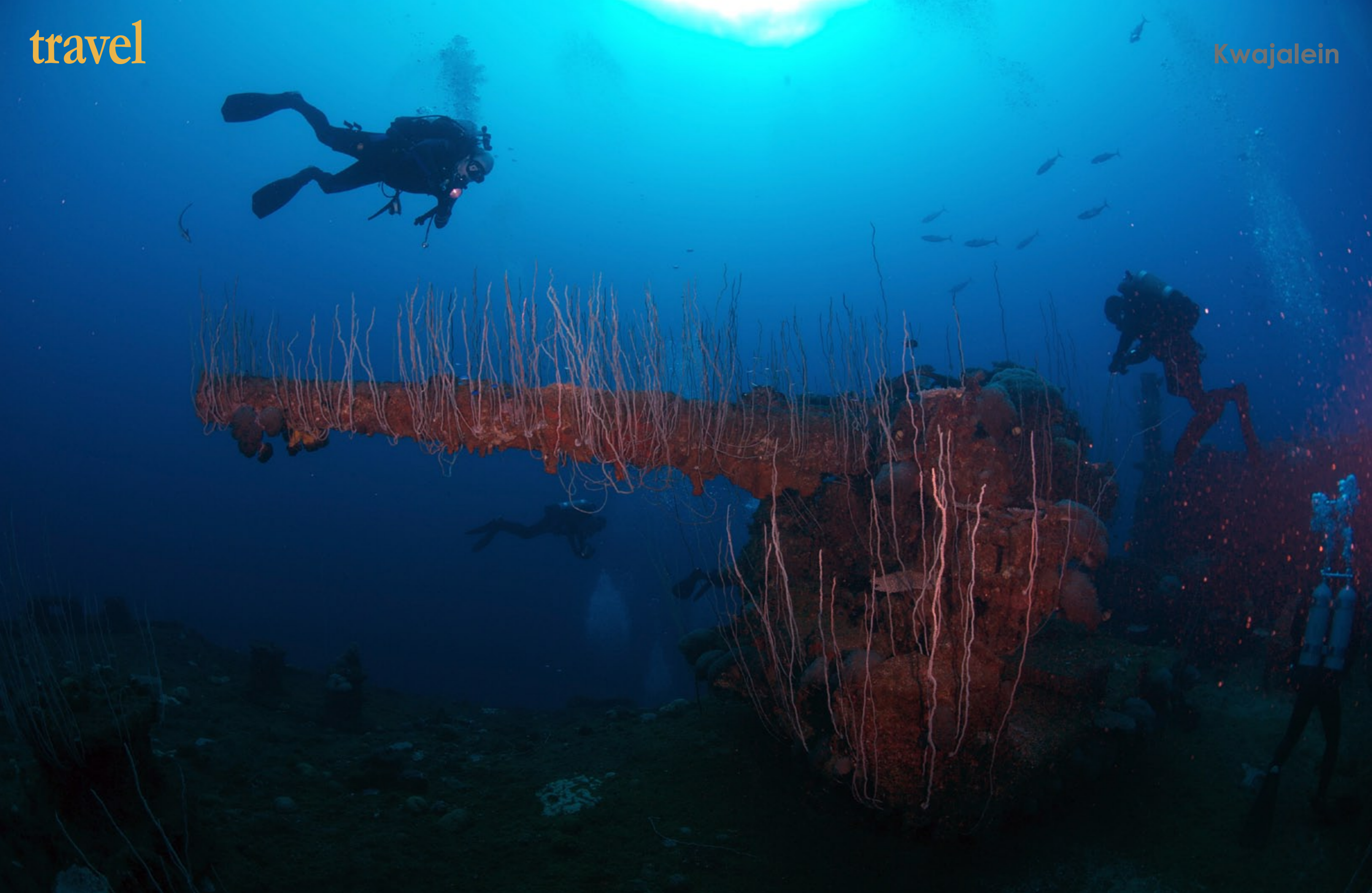


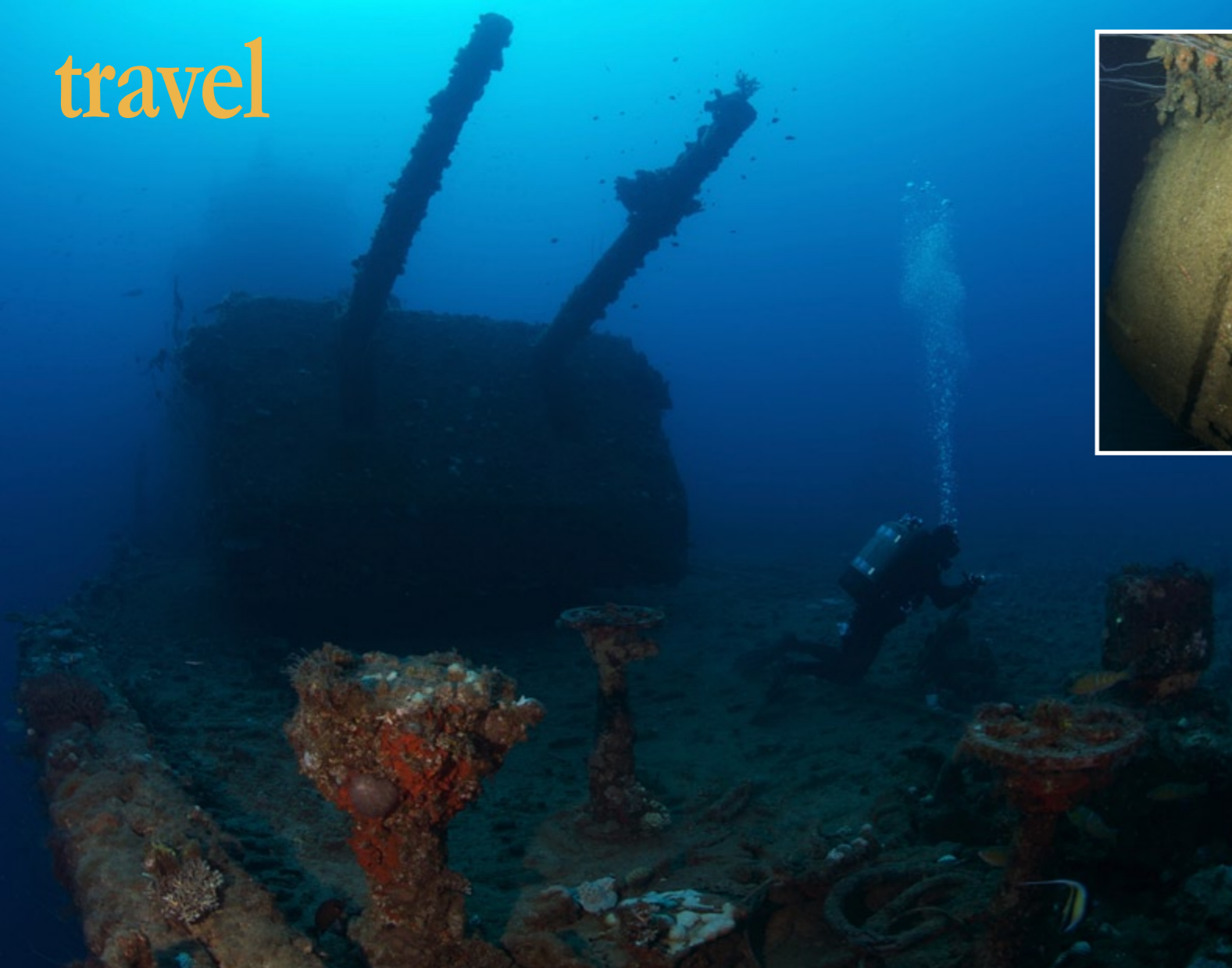
the inside of the wreck. A dive into these openings leads through rusty red alleys. These old walls

move slowly and statically back and forth driven by the current. It is a strange

ghostly scene.

Navigation demands concentration due to the fact that the wreck is lying upside down. Beds are mounted to the "ceiling". Divers can penetrate deeper into the wreck while moving along white ropes that were brought

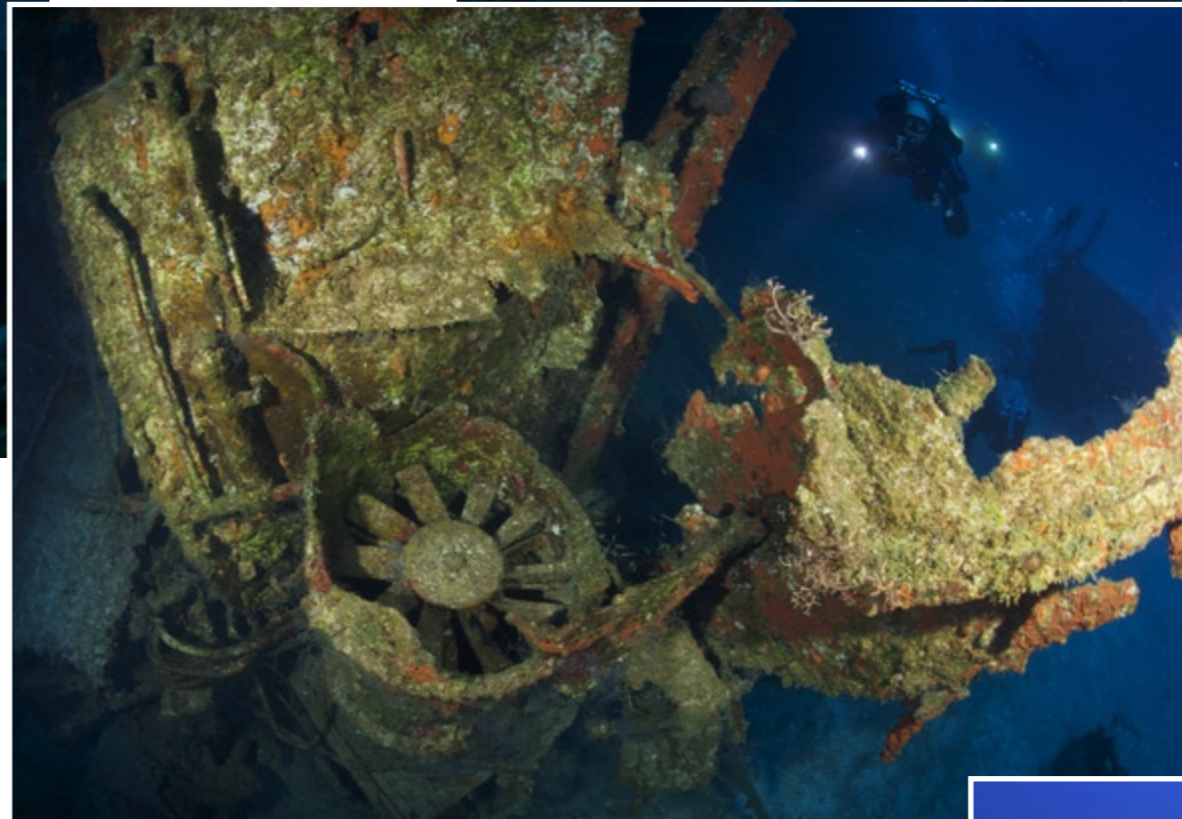




THIS PAGE: Scenes from the Japanese ship wrecks easily identified by their small ladders on the bow typical for their day



Divers check out relics and artillery shells left over from days gone by



PREVIOUS PAGE: Divers explore cannons on the decks of some of the wrecks of the Japanese built ships, some cannons are still pointing upwards towards would-be attackers



rooms. The huge cargo holds are almost completely empty.

Barracudas circle the wrecks frequently. Corals and sponges cover the wrecks, and swarms of smaller fishes often pass by. These wrecks lurk in the gloomy water, and the greenish color from the growth covering them makes them look like ghost ships.

The coral encrusted masts are interesting objects to observe during the ascent and descent. The anchor windlass and the canons, with their small ladders on the bow, are typical for the days when these ships were manufactured and make it easy to identify a ship as Japanese built.

Some canons are still pointing upwards towards the surface where the attackers were coming from. A number of these cannons are dismantled but some are fairly complete.

Inside, the ship's big gearwheels and iron plates are piled on top of each other. The huge engines ringed with the cat walks and small ladders are

usually easy to access.

Occasionally, a mast lays across the big openings of the cargo holes. The strange looking airscoops nearby the superstructure remind one of big tubas. There is so much historic material in the water that it is hard to decide what to explore next.





THIS PAGE: Scenes from downed planes, discarded US aircraft submerged in the waters around Kwajalein including B-52 bombers and transport aircraft, even remnants of a military truck can be found

Downed planes

Leaving the main bay and traveling up north to Roi Namur one can find many discarded US aircrafts that have been dumped in the water here; B-25 bombers, C-46 transport aircrafts and F-4 Corsairs can be found only a few meters below the surface.

Colorful fishes circle the aluminum bodies of the wrecks, which are resting on white sand surrounded by nice corals and

sponges. From a certain angle the sunlight is reflected by the lines of rivets. Some planes are still in good shape while others have been completely dismantled.

A truck right beside an upright C-46 on white sand makes a strange scene of an artificial underwater airfield.

A variety of interesting wrecks can be found in the waters of Kwajalein, but unfortunately, the atoll is a military off limits area; therefore, basically no tourism exists, and only one abandoned hotel is located on the island. It is truly a challenge to get there, but it's worth all the effort as soon as the first wreck comes into view. ■

fact file



Marshall Islands



SOURCES: YANN SAINT YVES, MICHAEL AW, US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, SCUBADOC.COM

History After almost four decades under US administration as the easternmost part of the UN Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, the Marshall Islands attained independence in 1986 under a Compact of Free Association. Compensation claims continue as a result of US nuclear testing on some of the atolls between 1947 and 1962. The Marshall Islands hosts the US Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA) Reagan Missile Test Site, a key installation in the US missile defense network. Government: constitutional government in free association with the US; the Compact of Free Association entered into force 21 October

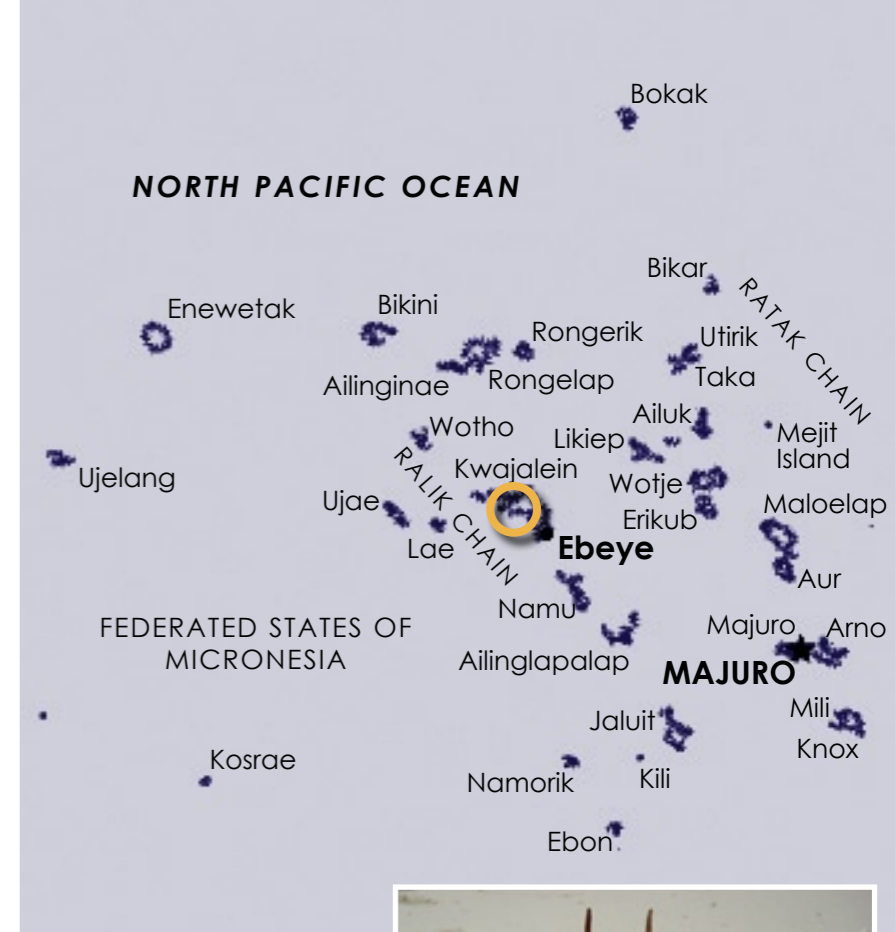
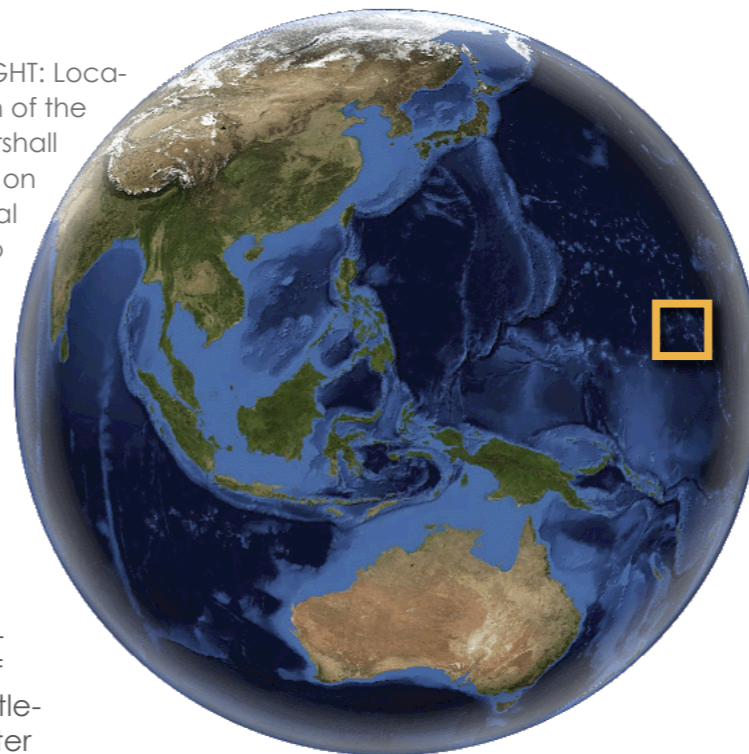
1986 and the Amended Compact entered into force in May 2004. Capital: Majuro.

Geography Oceania, two archipelagic island chains of 29 atolls, each made up of many small islets, and five single islands in the North Pacific Ocean, about half way between Hawaii and Australia. Coastline: 370.4 km. Terrain: low coral limestone and sand islands. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0 m. Highest point: unnamed location on Likiep 10 m. Note: the islands of Bikini and Enewetak are former US nuclear test sites; Kwajalein atoll, famous as a World War II battleground,

surrounds the world's largest lagoon and is used as a US missile test range; the island city of Ebeye is the second largest settlement in the Marshall Islands, after the capital of Majuro, and one of the most densely populated locations in the Pacific

Economy US Government assistance is the mainstay of this tiny island economy. The Marshall Islands received more than \$1 billion in aid from the US from 1986-2002. Agricultural production, primarily subsistence, is concentrated on small farms; the most important commercial crops are coconuts and breadfruit. Small-scale industry is limited to handicrafts, tuna processing, and copra. The tourist industry, now a small source of foreign exchange employing less than 10% of the labor force, remains the best hope for future added income. The islands have few natural resources, and imports far exceed exports. Under the terms of the Amended Compact of Free Association, the US will provide millions of dollars per year to the Marshall Islands (RMI) through 2023, at which time a Trust Fund made up of US and RMI contributions will begin perpetual annual payouts. Government downsizing, drought, a drop in construction, the decline in tourism, and less

RIGHT: Location of the Marshall Islands on global map
FAR RIGHT: Location of Kwajalein Atoll on map of Marshall Islands



income from the renewal of fishing vessel licenses have held GDP growth to an average of 1% over the past decade. Agriculture: coconuts, tomatoes, melons, taro, breadfruit, fruits; pigs, chickens. Industry: copra, tuna processing, tourism, craft items (from seashells, wood, and pearls).

Climate tropical; hot and humid; wet season May to November; islands border typhoon belt. Natural hazards: infrequent typhoons.

Environmental issues inadequate supplies of potable water; pollution of Majuro lagoon from household waste and discharges from fishing vessels. Agreements: party to: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Wetlands, Whaling.

Currency 20.5 Maldivian rupies (MVR)= 1€ (2008), but many resorts show prices in US dollars and in Euro.

Population 63,174 (July 2008 est.) Ethnic groups: Marshallese 92.1%, mixed Marshallese 5.9%, other 2% (2006). Religions: Protestant 54.8%, Assembly of God 25.8%, Roman Catholic 8.4%, Bukot nan Jesus 2.8%, Mormon 2.1%, other Christian 3.6%, other 1%, none 1.5% (1999 census). Internet users: 2,200 (2006)

Language Marshallese (official) 98.2%, other languages 1.8% (1999 census) note: English (official), widely spoken as a second language.

Links Marshall Islands Visitors Authority www.visitmarshallislands.com

Embassy of the Marshall Islands www.rmiembassyus.org



White beaches of Kwajalein Atoll

Some of the local wildlife

