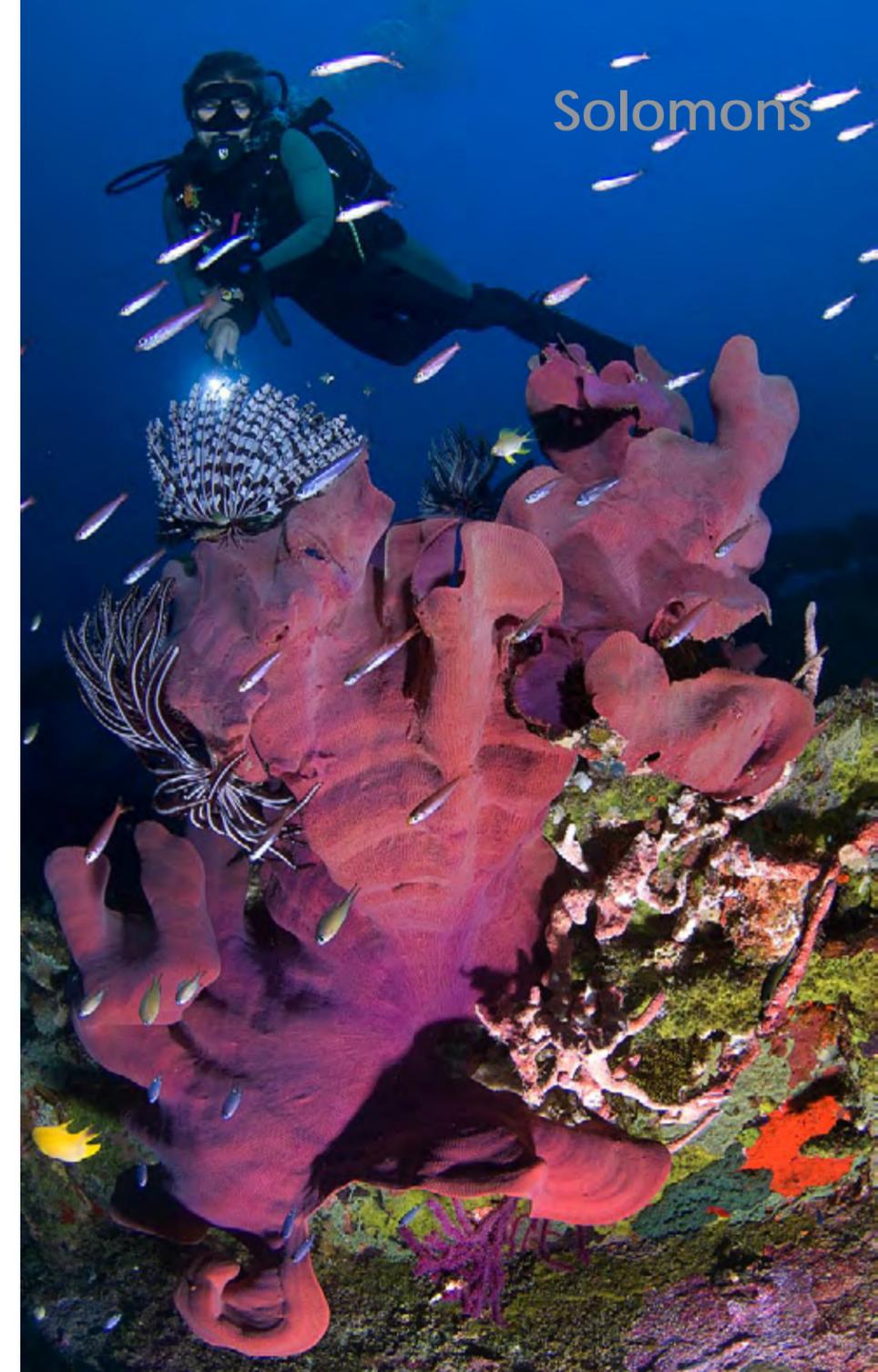


Diving in the South Pacific **Solomon Islands**

Text and photos by Steve Jones





Solomons

I'm nervous. That's not an unusual feeling for me when embarking on a challenging dive, yet I am in only two metres of water, the sea is flat calm, and there is no current to impede my progress at all. Indeed, the source of my apprehension lies just beyond the tunnel that I'm cautiously making my

way through. I will soon emerge into a shallow pool known as Mirror Pond, and it is here that saltwater crocodiles are frequently sighted.

They are the largest crocodilians on earth, and some say 'the animal most likely to eat a human'. They are opportunistic hunters and will eat anything they can get their jaws on, even

LEFT TO RIGHT: A diver enters the giant chasm of Leru cut (far left)...and eventually surfaces surrounded by overhanging jungle (center); Diver with an elephants ear sponge encrusted with crinoids

PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver with healthy gorgonians found in the Russell Islands





Solomons

LEFT TO RIGHT: All the colours of the rainbow: a coral encrusted wall leads the way into Morovo lagoon; A boy canoes home to Karumolun Island as sunset approaches; The Florida Islands seen from the deck of the *MV Spirit of Solomons*

sharks. Sadly, it is this reputation as a man-eater and the high value of their hides that is putting immense pressure on their population, as is the case for so many of the world's great predators. I have never dived with a 'saltie' before and the chance to photograph one in the wild was an opportunity that despite my nerves I could not forgo. The photographer in me had fearlessly fitted an ultra wide angle lens meaning that I would need an extremely close encounter to get those coveted shots.

Despite every natural fibre in my body screaming at me that what I am doing is insane I continue into the tunnel. Behind me a fellow diver must have listened to her instincts as I catch a glimpse of her reversing out of the tunnel. Unfortunately it is, I have to admit with a slight element of relief, clear that the pond is not concealing the awesome hunter that we seek. However there was one





LEFT TO RIGHT: Giant elephants ear sponges encrust the wreck of *Anne*; Porcelain crabs are easy to find in the Solomons; The Solomons are a critter spotters paradise. Here, a white speckled chelidonura

more place to try.

As we move toward a dark, overhanging corner of the pond my heart again begins to race. I stop, my nerves

forcing me to ponder my potential fate. It is then that I feel someone push past me. Di, one of my fellow passengers on the *MV Spirit of Solomons*, who only recently learned to dive, brushes past me torch boldly in hand, somewhat frustrated by the hesitating 'professional' in her way.

Coming to my senses I pluck up the courage and follow her in. So much for the wildlife photographer—when it comes to saltwater crocs, I'm reduced to fol-

lowing others. Alas, maybe just to further prove my humility, there is still no sign of the elusive croc. I can't help but feel somewhat relieved.

The Edge of the World

Of course, the lure of such thrilling encounters is not compulsory when diving in the Solomon Islands—the true variety of diving here will satisfy all tastes, but the mere fact that saltwater crocodiles have not been dislodged from their natural habitat by man's relentless expansion should give you a hint that this destination remains most definitely "off the beaten track".

Indeed, the Solomons receives less than 15,000 visitors each year, of which only around a third are tourists. Compare that with a popular destination such as the



The delicately camouflaged Ornate ghostpipefish, *Solenostomus paradoxus*



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Dolphin pods are a common sight in the Solomons; Diver illuminates Crinoid featherstar on fan coral; *Chromodoris lochi*, a species of nudibranch; Huge Jack schools gathered at Mary Island

but at only a 3-4 hour flight from Brisbane it is not difficult to reach. That said, there are places here both above and below the water that will simply make you feel like you ARE at the edge of the known world, so untouched by man's influence are they.

The nation consists of 992 islands lying to the north-east of Australia and the archipelago runs between Papua New Guinea to the north-west and Vanuatu to the south-east. The islands themselves are spread over a distance in excess of 1500 km and form part of the Pacific "Ring of Fire", the volcanic region that encircles the Pacific Ocean basin. It is this volcanic origin that has led to some

Maldives, which at 1/100th the landmass, still accommodated over 675 thousand visitors in 2007. Even more exclusive destinations such as Palau attract over 85 thousand visitors a year. With these statistics you could be forgiven for thinking the Solomons is at the edge of the world,



of the spectacular seascapes in these waters, which include huge caverns, crevasses and drop offs. Add to this the remnants of the Solomons historical past: this was the location of some of the fiercest battles of World War II with many of the wrecks within diveable depths, festooned with marine life.

Extraordinary biodiversity

Marine life, of course, is something the Solomons is renowned for. The marine biodiversity here is simply staggering. The Solomons is part of the "coral triangle", the region with the highest marine biodiversity on earth which also spans Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea,

Philippines and Timor-Leste. During a survey in 2004 by the Nature Conservancy (<http://www.nature.org/>), over 494 species of coral were recorded in this region, making the Solomons second in the world only to Raja Ampat in coral species diversity. The area is no less rich in fish life, with over a thousand species recorded here. A large number of sites exceed 200 species, which is considered the benchmark for an excellent fish count.

The diversity to be found underwater is not limited to the animal species. One overwhelming impression that the Solomons left on me was that the diving itself is





Solomons

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The *Soltai 61* wreck lodged in a crevasse as it sank and now lies vertically—a true multilevel wreck dive; Pygmy seahorses (this one is *Hippocampus denise*) are smaller than a thumbnail and perfectly camouflaged; The rare Velvet ghost pipefish, *Solenostomus* sp.; Slug spotters delight: *Glossodoris hikuerinis*



equally diverse, different not only from that to be found in neighbouring Papua New Guinea but even each island group itself differs, often drastically, from its neighbouring group. From abundant macro life in the Florida Islands, you move to crystal clear waters, drop offs and labyrinths in the Russell Islands, before encountering spectacular big school action in Mary Island. There are resorts that offer local diving on a number of the islands, however the only way to encounter this true diversity is by liveaboard.

The Florida Islands

The Florida Islands are a small Island group to the north of the Solomon's most famous island, Guadalcanal, and amongst others, the group contains the

islands Nggela Sule (also known as Florida Island), Tulagi, Gavutu and Tanambogo.

The Floridas have become popular particularly amongst technical divers. Whilst the majority of the ships sunk in the Solomons campaign in World War II lie in the unattainable (at least with scuba) depths of the aptly named "Iron Bottom Sound", there are still a number of notable wrecks that can be dived around the Floridas, with the destroyer *USS Aaron Ward* being at the top of most techies lists at a depth of 70 metres.

Wrecks however, make up only a fraction of what the

Floridas has to offer. As a taster of what was to come, less than five minutes into my first dive in the Solomons, dive guide Phillipa Dean casually illuminates a pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibanti*) in her torch beam.

Out of the 50 species of seahorse so far identified, this is one of the smallest at only 2cm long. However, it is not only its size that makes it so difficult to find, it is supremely camouflaged to blend in with its gorgonian coral habitat. Indeed, the species was only discovered



when a sample of the host gorgonian was being examined in an aquarium—so perfect is the pygmy seahorses’ camouflage.

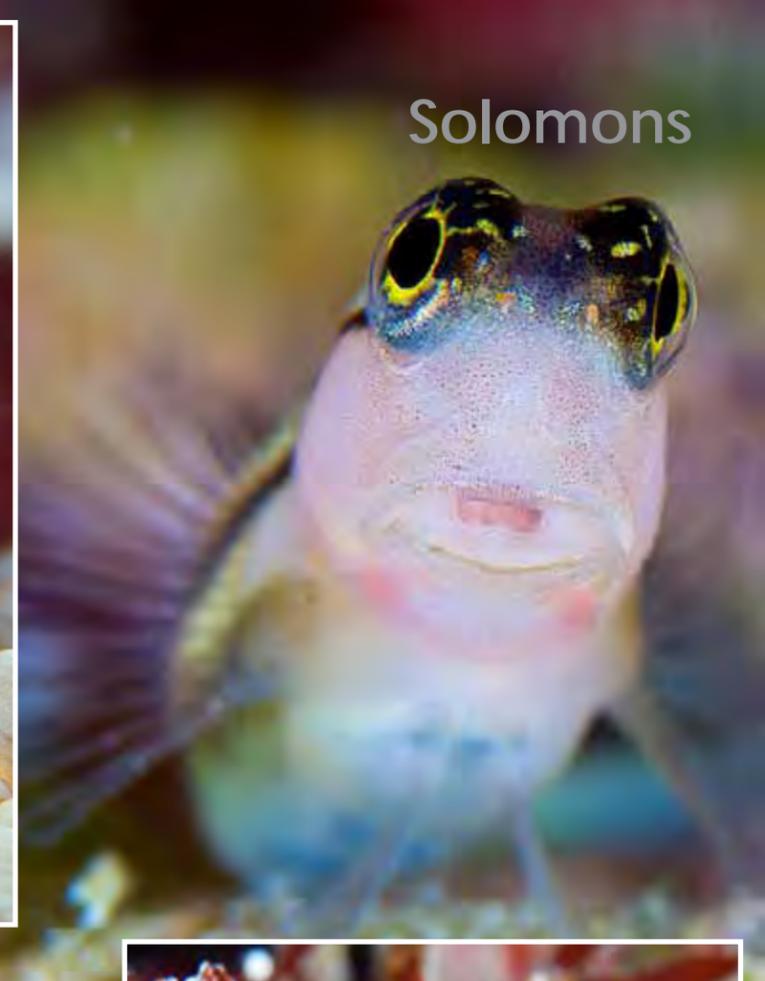
It would have been all too easy to have spent the entire dive around this gorgonian, but that would have meant missing the rest of this dive on Tanavula point. This steeply sloping reef is home to countless critters and

it’s an easy dive – a popular acclimation spot for the first day of a trip. Amongst the group of expats I’m sharing the boat with, there seems a healthy obsession with “slug spotting” identifying as many nudibranchs as possible. It would seem we are in the right place: every nudi I see on this dive is new to me.

The Floridas offers the more challenging dive sites also. Passage Rock, as it’s name suggests, is a shipping hazard rising from deep water as if out of nowhere. It’s swept by strong currents and frequented by pelagics. Within seconds of dropping into the water, an eagle ray swoops in close before speeding off into the blue and dog-

tooth tuna patrol the upstream side of the reef. The reef top itself has a healthy coral garden, but it is a struggle to hold our position as the current sweeps over the site. Despite my best efforts I’m put to shame by a green turtle that effortlessly glides upstream whilst I fight a losing battle and drift downstream.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Rebreather diver, Tim Armstrong, looks on at an unbothered turtle; The corals in the Solomons are untouched; A magnificent ceratosoma nudibranch



Solomons

LEFT TO RIGHT: It really is this atmospheric...Leru cut is a spectacular dive; The aptly named Orangutan crab, *Achaeus japonicus*; An ever inquisitive blenny; Ghost pipefish are common in the Solomons



The Russell Islands

How different the diving in the Solomons becomes after only an overnight steam. The Russell Islands lie approximately 48

kilometres north west of Guadalcanal and comprise of two main islands and a number of smaller ones. The water here is crystal clear, visibility in the 30 to 50 metre range and this area is all about spectacular seascapes: coral gardens, caves, drop offs and

huge crevasses. Dropping onto a site known as the bat cave, I'm distracted at the entrance by the discovery of an orangutan crab.

This small decorator crab of around a centimetre gets its name from the mass of red hair that covers its entire body, which it uses both for camouflage and to help collect the plankton on which it feeds. It's a tricky subject to photograph—the mass of red hair just doesn't provide enough contrast for my cameras autofocus to lock onto easily.

Dragging myself away we swim into the large chamber and surface. I'd been warned by dive guide Justin Anderson to keep my mouthpiece in, not because the air is bad—there is a large opening in the ceiling allowing fresh air into the cave—but rather because the mass of bats are not a bad aim when depositing their guano, as a visitor learned the hard way a few years earlier.

Exiting the cave, the reef drops away steeply into very deep water. Large red gorgonians, whip corals and giant barrel sponges adorn the wall and it's various ledges and amongst this spectacular vista a myriad of critters dwells: the biggest challenge for a photographer is

whether to shoot wideangle or macro, but with either choice you wouldn't go far wrong.

The bat cave is an excellent dive but it's soon overshadowed by Leru Cut—one of the signature dives in the Solomons. It's simply a jaw dropping experience. This chasm reaches some 100 metres into the island of Leru and the light was incredible, streaming in shafts down to the white sand floor through gin clear water. After the long swim in we eventually surfaced to see the roots of trees hanging down the steep cliffs from the encroaching jungle. Perfect.

The Russells isn't just about caverns and caves however: the hard coral garden at Leru Bommies is without doubt the finest I've ever seen whilst another stunning dive is Karumolun Point. This site shelves down to a depth of 30 metres before dropping off steeply. It's right at the edge of the shelf that we see grey reef sharks, including juveniles patrolling back and forth in the mild current. They of course, are no trouble at all, completely

disinterested in us.

The same cannot be said for all inhabitants of this reef however, for whilst swimming towards the shallows, I feel a sharp tugging on my fin and turn sharply. No one in sight. Turning back I'm face to face with a large female yellow margin triggerfish. Some species of triggerfish



become aggressive when they have eggs—and it's not just us human's they'll have a go at, any fish intruding into their area will be attacked. It's a fair approach when you think about it—the triggerfish's eggs are prime food for many predators—so the triggers are just doing what any animal would do, protect their unborn. Fortunately for the trigger, and

unfortunately for me, they are well equipped to defend their brood with teeth that are capable of crunching coral. Swimming upwards would be dangerous and serve no purpose, the trigger would simply follow me up. So, the only way is to move out of it's defensive arc.

Alas this leads me straight into an even larger, and angrier resident—



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: An inquisitive blacktip reef shark; An anti-aircraft gun on a Japanese supply vessel still points defiantly at the sky; The mighty Titan triggerfish; A coral encrusted field gun on a Japanese supply vessel

the titan triggerfish—well known for its aggressiveness towards divers. I swim out into the blue and give it a wide berth.

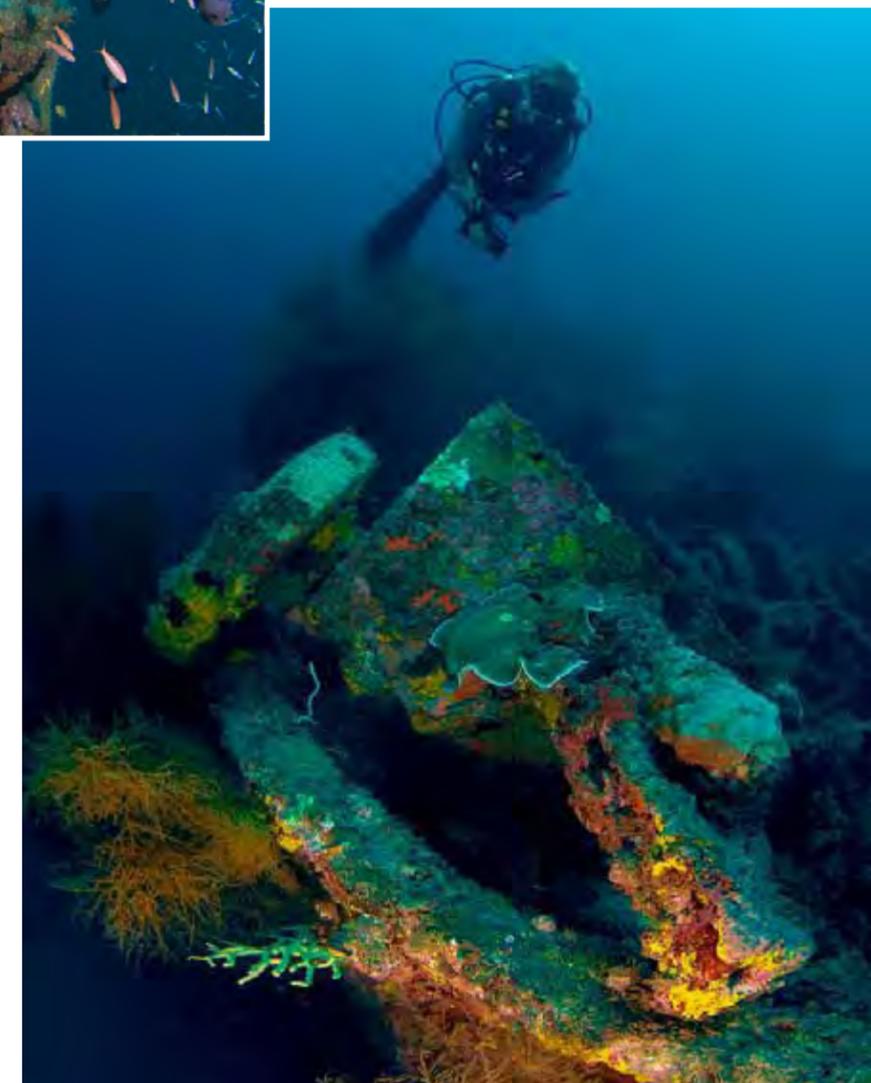
My tattered faith in fish is restored with the discovery of some of the most passive of marine creatures at the very same site. Firstly an ornate ghost pipefish, perfectly camouflaged to match the crinoid it shelters within, and moments later we, discover a halimeda ghost pipefish, camouflaged to the patch of algae it lives within.

Their exquisite camouflage serves to hide them from predators and also the tiny crustaceans they feed on. As with so many other areas of marine taxonomy, little is presently known about the natural history of these relatives of seahorses. There are currently only five identified species in the Indo-Pacific, so observing two within

metres of each other is a pretty special experience. Indeed, much of the uncertainty that surrounds the ghost pipe fish stems from the fact that they are so good at mimicking their surroundings; their incredible ability to camouflage themselves often makes it difficult to tell one species apart from another.

Karumolun Point is not alone in being the home for ghost pipefish in the Russell Islands. They can also be found at White Beach—a site where the US forces dumped all their machinery off the piers before they left at the end of the war. The site is now littered with artefacts: from trucks and cranes, to genuine 1940's Coke bottles, and it's muck diving at it's best.

One of the more unusual inhabitants here is the archer fish. These expert shots catch their prey by





Sunset in Morovo Lagoon (left); THIS PAGE: Hospitality, South Pacific style. Karumolun Islanders greet us with song, dance and gifts



stealthily hovering under the mangroves, then shooting a jet of water into the air at any unsuspecting insects crawling about above them. When the insect falls into the water,

its quickly devoured. They've evolved quite remarkably—not only do they compensate for the refraction in the water, but they can vary the power of their shot for different size prey, bring-

ing insects down from up to 1.5 metres above the water.

The diving in the Russell Islands impressed me. It was a mix of high octane, big seascape diving interspersed with incredible critter life. Before departing we made a visit to a Karumolun Island itself, and I can only say that South Pacific hospitality is something we should all attain to.

Our small group was greeted by the articulate village chief, Raymond, as we arrived, and the children presented us with the most beautiful necklaces of flowers, whose scent filled the warm air around us. Feeling more and more like visiting royalty, we were then treated to a magnificent display of dance and song by the women of the village. The tapping

of their feet drove the rhythm and structure of their performance, which was enchanting and hypnotic, their voices melodic and soothing.

We are given fresh coconut water to drink, and as if to demonstrate the contrast and diversity surrounding the island, the men of the village begin their dance. This is a more powerful and strong display that reverberates with tribal passion, fierce and vigorous. To close this impromptu ceremony, everyone from the village joins together for one final performance, and we are left feeling humbled by the magnitude of the hospitality that was offered to us.



Solomons

Mary Island

The edge of the known world—that's what this place feels like. Below me, I can see a huge school of jacks swirling like a silvery grey cyclone as if threatening to suck our small tinny down to the depths. As I don my mask, I look up and see a wall of greenery extending several hundred metres to the right of me, which then stops as abruptly as it begun—a startling emerald backdrop for the white outline of the *MV Spirit of Solomons* anchored before it. There is nothing else in sight except the distant horizon of the Pacific Ocean—no ships, land masses, nor any other signs of human influence whatsoever. It's all too easy to imagine this is the last human outpost, and everything that lies beyond is unknown, a wilderness. Welcome to Mary Island—as smile inducing a place as I have ever visited.

Dropping into the water, I slowly descended right into the heart of the jack school. They momentarily parted, and then I am engulfed as the school

closes around me their silvery scales creating the illusion of liquid metal. It's not even possible to take a picture; there are jacks everywhere, inches from my mask.

Dropping out of the bottom of the swirling mass, I'm distracted by a similarly sized school of barracuda only 30 metres upstream. The two schools keep a distance apart as if magnetically repulsed by each others rotation. The entire body of water here is alive with fish life. Reef sharks patrol the drop off, oblivious to the current that makes it so difficult for us land dwellers, whilst fusiliers frequently burst in unison avoiding the predations of the tuna that hunt them.

Mary Island (local name, Mborokua) is an extinct volcano to the west of the Russell Islands. It rises from deep water, is rarely visited and there are three sites here, all aptly named: Barracuda Point, Jackfish point and UTB, which, amusingly, means "under the boat". As you can gather from the dive site names, big fish schooling action is what Mary

THE SOLOMON ISLANDS CAMPAIGN

Some of the most intense fighting in the Pacific theatre occurred in the Solomon Islands during World War II. The Solomon Islands Campaign continued from 1942 right to the end of the war, however, it was the Battle of Guadalcanal, which took place between 7 August 1942 and 9 February 1943 that engraved itself in the annals of military history. There are few other, if any, campaigns where the fighting on land, sea and air was so violent for such a sustained period and where the outcome so frequently hung in the balance.

The aim of the Guadalcanal Campaign was both to prevent further Japanese expansion that might threaten Australia and to establish allied bases within striking distance of occupied Rabaul in Papua New Guinea. The initial landings on Guadalcanal took the Japanese by surprise, and the occupying forces were relatively quickly overwhelmed. However, Japanese attempts to regain their foothold on Guadalcanal resulted in a bloody campaign of attrition, which included seven major naval battles and a multitude of land and air engagements. The Japanese eventually abandoned Guadalcanal and evacuated their forces. This marked a transition for the allies from defensive to offensive operations and vice versa for the Japanese—it was the turning point of the Pacific war.

The legacy of this battle and the entire campaign still litters the seabed. Many of the wrecks are at diveable depths, and the others confined to the deeper waters of the aptly named "Iron Bottom Sound", only accessible by mini-sub and documented by Robert Ballard's, *The Lost Ships of Guadalcanal*, expedition.

During the entire course of the Solomon Islands Campaign in 1942-45, a total of over 90 ships were sunk between both sides, over 2300 aircraft destroyed, and upward of 90,000 men killed.

In addition to the world class diving, battlefield tours now form popular tourist attractions, bringing in visitors from both Japan and the United States. ■

THIS PAGE: Schooling Jacks at Mary Island



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Blacktip reef sharks gather under the back of the boat waiting for cooking scraps; The uncommon orange mantis shrimp, *Lysiosquilloides mapia*; The intensely coloured squat lobster, *Lauriea siagiani*, lives in the giant barrel sponges that adorn Solomons reefs; The name of this nudibranch is as extravagant as it looks. It's called "the much-desired flabellina"

Island is all about. Pelagics are frequently seen here as well as the resident, towering schools.

The *Spirit* allows open deck diving at this location; you can dive when you like, as there is no agenda to keep us motoring between sites. This gives a good opportunity to explore the third, and not to be overlooked site, "under the boat". This site contrasts and compliments the exhilaration of the other two sites, for here is a wonderful coral garden alive with critters including leaf fish and ghost pipefish.

Marovo Lagoon

The *Spirit of Solomons* spent only a day moored at Mary Island on this trip. Part of me didn't want to leave, and another

part was eager to push on further and see what other treasures she would lead me to beneath these turquoise waters.

We departed and headed for the New Georgia Islands. For the next few days we'd be diving at Marovo Lagoon, the largest saltwater lagoon in the world.

Marovo lagoon is bordered by lush tropical islands with thick forest and mangrove. Ideal territory for saltwater crocodiles. It was nominated as a world heritage site, such is its significance, although that nomination was rejected due to the controversial and destructive logging practices going on here—an issue that hopefully in time tourism may help alleviate by providing alternate revenue sources.

Some of the most exciting dives here are to be found on the entrances to the lagoon. Kokoana passage is a drift dive along a vertical wall, following the current in. The reef simply explodes with colour, alive with undamaged gorgonians and soft corals. Fish life is also rich here. A school of over 20 humphead parrotfish seem to follow me the whole dive. These are the largest of the parrotfish family growing to 1.3 metres in length and can weigh over 40 kilograms. We also see a number of reef sharks but it's not unusual to sight pelagic species such as hammerheads here.

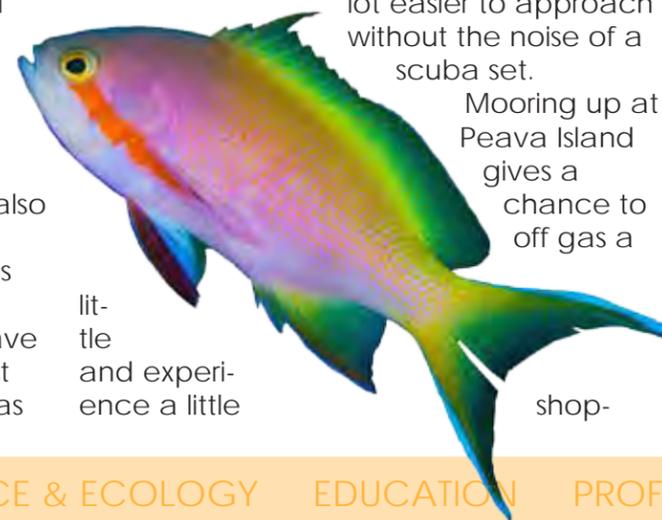
Shark populations in the Solomons have declined in recent years, along with just about every where else on the planet as

mankind's abominable lust for shark fin soup is pursued. Nonetheless, shark sightings are relatively common here, at least for the time being.

That night, we moored on Karunjou Island, and it wasn't too long before black tip reef sharks gathered at the back of the boat. Over the years, they have become used to the *Spirit of Solomons* and her sister ship, *Billikiki*, throwing fish scraps overboard whilst moored, so they assemble for a free dinner. This also provides an opportunity to snorkel with them—this normally quite shy species is a lot easier to approach without the noise of a scuba set.

Mooring up at Peava Island gives a chance to off gas a

little and experience a little



TROUBLE IN PARADISE

The Solomon Islands have made the headlines for all the wrong reasons in recent years. Ethnic tensions and breakouts of violence has threatened the country to such an extent that an Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Islands peace keeping force has been present on the islands since 2003.

After a relatively peaceful period following World War II, trouble boiled over into society in 1998 when militants on the island of Guadalcanal began a campaign of intimidation towards settlers from a nearby province. It wasn't long before civil war threatened.

The government struggled to respond to the growing crisis, attempts at reconciliation failed, and by 2003, the country was bankrupt. Foreign aid was drafted in to help restore order and get the country back on its feet, which came under the banner of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Even though tourists were never targeted, such internal turmoil did not help the industry to develop. Combine this with a complicated land tenure system, which makes it a real challenge to purchase land on which to build resorts, and it's easy to see why tourism remains low, even though it's a safe destination to visit. ■





ping, Solomons style. The Solomon Islanders are famous for their wood carvings, and on the jetty, every carver in the vicinity has gathered to display their work.

The carvings being shown are works of art, formed meticulously from ebony, kerosene, sandal wood or coconut in the shapes of manta rays, sea shells or the distinctive “nguzunguzus”—classical figureheads that were used to decorate canoes to ward off evil spirits. Bartering here is not common and there is an etiquette to be followed in the whole transaction.

With a voice no louder than a whisper, I ask the price after complimenting the carver on his craftsmanship. The price is quietly stated by the carver. I then ask for the second price. After a little thought, the carver quietly responds—and that’s as far as the barter goes, any further would serve as an insult to these craftsmen. The

deal is done, money is discreetly exchanged and we bid farewell. It’s all so very far removed from the boisterous dealings to be found in the bazaars of Egypt, but no less enjoyable.

Our final dives in the New Georgia Islands take us to some of the relics of the war. The unidentified Japanese cargo ships, known simply as Japanese Maru 1 and 2 were bombed by allied aircraft and sunk at their moorings whilst supplying Japanese forces in the area. A field gun lies on the deck of one of the ships and an anti aircraft gun points defiantly at the sky on another, both the colour of a rainbow, they are so encrusted in coral.

The wrecks are a haven for marine life and even the submerged mooring buoy is covered in life—sea spiders, tiny decorator crabs even blenny’s live on the coral encrusted sphere, no bigger than a football. Safety stops have

never been this interesting.

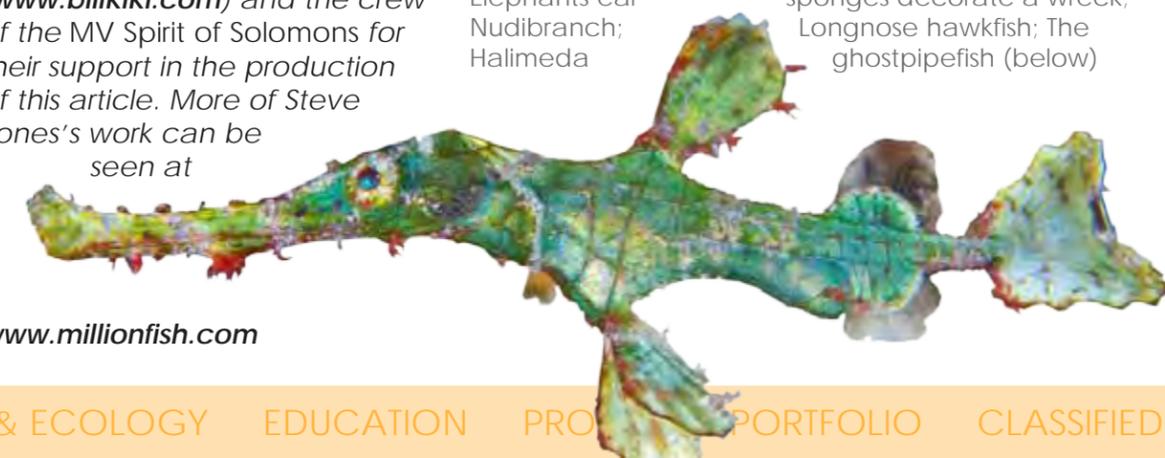
The Solomons possess incredible variety underwater—walls, caverns, critters, big schools, large animals and, of course, an abundance of wrecks, each of which has its own story to tell. The country displays a raw unrefined edge—far more exciting than the sterility to be found in mature tourist destinations. It is one of those places that has so much to offer but is seen by so few, and this simply adds to its appeal. ■

Special thanks to Bilikiki Cruises (www.bilikiki.com) and the crew of the MV Spirit of Solomons for their support in the production of this article. More of Steve Jones’s work can be seen at

www.millionfish.com

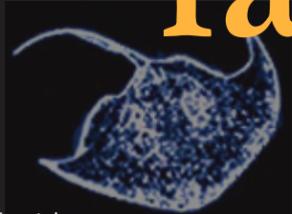


CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Lionfish; Velvet Ghostpipefish; Elephants ear Nudibranch; Halimeda sponges decorate a wreck; Longnose hawkfish; The ghostpipefish (below)



fact file

Solomon Islands



Text by
Steve Jones



History Early settlement in these lands began between 30,000 BC and 10,000 BC when Papuan settlers are believed to have reached the Eastern Solomons before the sea levels began to rise with the end of the Ice Age. Austronesian settlers, skilled with canoes, settled throughout the remainder of the area from about 4000BC.

Polynesians reached the outer edges of the country between 1200 and 1600 AD. In the 1560s the Spanish explorer Don Alvaro de Mendaña y Neyra led an expedition to find islands in the western Pacific, cited in Inca legends. He returned to Peru and by 1570 the name Yslas de Salomon was in common use.

In 1893 Britain proclaimed a protectorate over the southern part of the group, extending it further in later years. After the Second World War, British authority was restored until independence was granted on 7th July 1978.

Geography The Solomon Islands are a double chain of 6 large islands and many smaller ones (992 in total!) lying just over 2000 km from Brisbane, Australia. Brisbane is by far the easiest gateway into the country. The Solomon's extend 1667 km south east from Bougainville Province in Papua New Guinea. 347 of the islands are populated.

Climate South Easterly trade winds and mild weather accompany the dry season which runs from late May to early December. Higher temperatures, humidity and rainfall occur in the summer months from mid December to mid May, with the winds coming predominantly

from the west or north west. Coastal breezes keep the climate fresh on and near the sea, whilst temperatures and humidity make it tropically muggy further inland.

Environment Much of the Solomons is covered with dense rain forest, with mangrove swamps common along the coastal region. The country has suffered in recent years from deforestation, although an awareness that eco-tourism is a far more sustainable industry is starting to sink in. As far as topside animal life goes, land mammals are few whilst insect and reptile life are abundant. The Solomons is part of the highly volcanic Pacific "Ring of Fire", where the Indo-Australasian and Oceanic Tectonic plates meet. Volcanic activity here is much lower than in neighbouring Papua New Guinea and there are 3 volcanoes on land.

Currency The local currency is Solomon Island Dollars. Australian and US dollars can be readily exchanged at hotels and banks

Population The estimated population of the Solomon Islands is 581,318. Of these the majority are Melanesian in origin, with Polynesian and Micronesian making up most of the balance.

Language The official language in the Solomons is English but Solomons Pijin, which contains many English words, is the more widely spoken language. There are 68 other living languages spoken throughout the country.

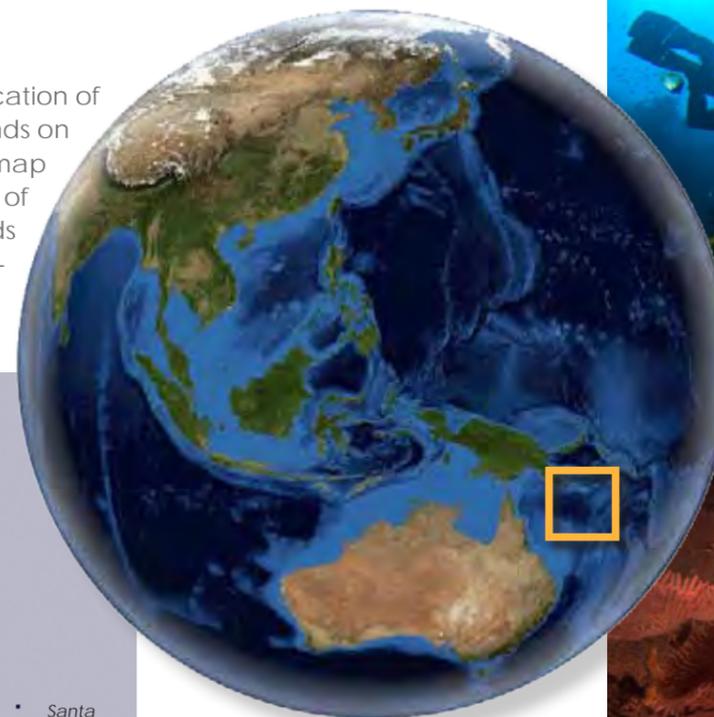


Security Even with its turbulent past, the Solomons is a safe destination for tourists. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) provides military and police forces from Australia and several other Pacific Island nations and has helped improve law and order since the troubled times before 2003. It's important to note however, that even during the troubles, tourists were never targeted. On Guadalcanal, expats are advised against certain activities such as walking alone at night and tourists should follow the same advice – exercise the same precaution as when travelling in any developing nation.

Electricity 240 volt, Australian style plugs. The liveaboards additionally provide 110 volt US style plugs for chargers etc.

Getting There Solomon Airlines and Virgin Blue fly to Honiara from

RIGHT: Location of Solomon Islands on global map
BELOW: Map of Solomon Islands
FAR RIGHT: Diver explores reef with large fan corals



Brisbane. The Solomons can also be reached from Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea, Port Vila in Vanuatu and Nadi, Fiji.

Dive Season The Solomons are located in the tropics, not far from the equator.

Dry season runs from May to December, with rainfall very light. Summer runs from mid December to mid May and this is known as the wet season, but the surrounding sea tempers the effect and there is no persistent monsoonal type rain. January to March are the wettest months. You can dive here year round.

Health & vaccinations There is a decompression chamber in Honiara, which is manned by volunteers. Medical facilities are very basic throughout the Solomon Islands – insurance for diving and general travel insurance is essential. Dengue fever and malaria occur in the Solomon Islands, although not on the scale of African countries – preventative medication and insect repellent are advised.

Visas and Permits US, Australian and EU countries do not require visas, just a valid passport and return ticket. A



Visitor's Permit will be issued on arrival. Other nationals should check with their foreign office.

Communication & GSM GSM roaming is limited in the Solomon Islands and will also depend on whether your service provider has a roaming agreement with the operators here. Wireless broadband is available in some hotels in Honiara, but bandwidth is limited. The MV Spirit of Solomons and MV Bilikiki have satellite phones on board for guests to make use of, subject to standard satellite phone call charges

Timezone Standard time zone: UTC/GMT +11 hours

Links
Solomon Islands Tourism
www.visitsolomons.com.sb ■



silver



www.seacam.com

The Sound of Mull & Oban Western Scotland

Text and photos by Steve Jones





There is a point in the journey to the west coast of Scotland just a little way north of the City of Glasgow that the landscape changes from “merely” pretty to the full on highland spectacular. It seems as if you are driving into the wilderness. Modern life, along with its stresses, seems to become a distant memory, and it’s not difficult to imagine you’ve travelled back hundreds of years in time; relics of this country’s rich history, castles and ancient ruins, adorn the stunning hills and deep green valleys. The tranquility of the Lochs help to define a place that simply possesses a “kind of magic”.

I am heading towards Oban—a former Victorian seaside resort that has retained all its old-world charm. It appears quite at odds with the rugged beauty of the western Scottish landscape. Oban has become an attraction for a whole range of adventure tourists. Hikers, climbers, wildlife enthusiasts all flock here in droves year round. For Oban is not only the gateway to the Scottish Highlands, but also to the less visited Hebridean Islands with their deserted white sand beaches and crystal clear blue waters—favourite destinations of wildlife filmmakers. The attractiveness of this place is not restricted to the topside, however. This region has some of the finest diving in the British Isles.

Tucked away in a sheltered cove amongst the cliffs south of Oban, is Puffin Dive Centre—an ideal location to base activities given the fact that it is fully self sufficient—boats, gas, accommodation, all conveniently located right at your feet. Indeed, the location is also superb for families. Whilst mine went off to see

the many topside attractions in this area, I headed off to the see those under the water.

We are heading out first and foremost to the Sound of Mull—the channel of water that lies between the Isle of Mull and the mainland. This place is a graveyard for wrecks and coupled with sheer submerged cliffs, clear water and fast currents, it has all the ingredients for excellent diving. It’s a two-hour boat journey to the Sound, and Puffin’s large dive boat is fully enclosed—a welcome feature given the unpredictability of Scottish weather.

Within an hour of leaving our base at Oban, we see Duart castle standing like a sentinel guarding the waters that lie at the foot of hauntingly beautiful Mull. The view is simply awe inspiring.

Mull is the second largest of the inner Hebridean Islands, which lie close off the coast of Scotland. At first, it can seem quite foreboding, as the grey clouds circle the highest peak, “Ben More”. The view in the other direction is of the high-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Duart castle sits majestically atop a stony outcrop; Wildlife abounds in the rugged hills of western Scotland such as these wild deer grazing on the slopes; A view of the rocky landscape from the pier. PREVIOUS PAGE: A tall ship graces the waters of the Sound of Mull, as it glides past the austere hills of western Scotland

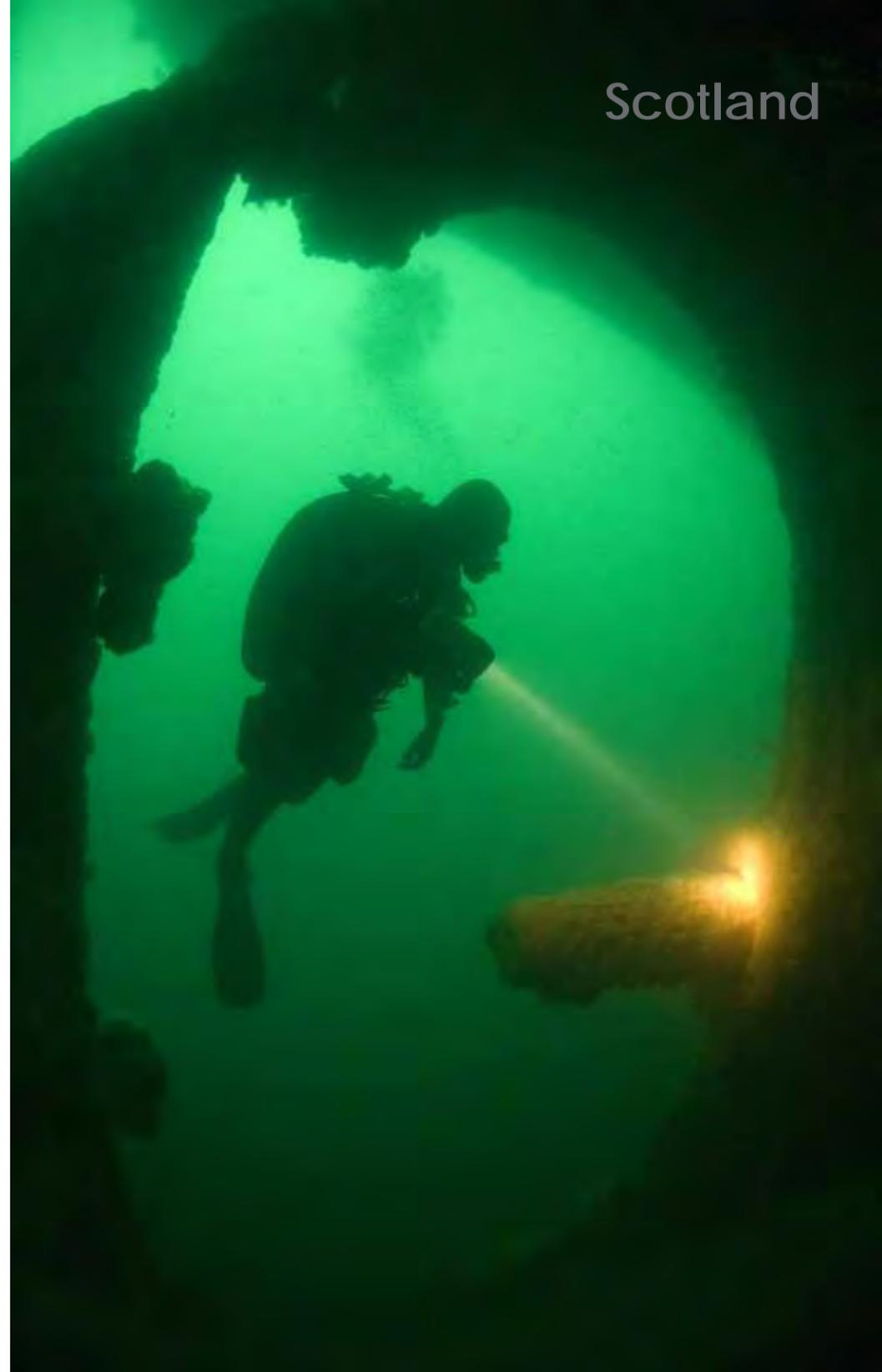


THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Hispania*

short wait and a thorough safety briefing later, and we are in.

The water is a deep emerald green. Eight or nine metres into our descent down the buoy line, we see the wreck looming below us. Torches are essential in these waters if you really want to bring the colours out, and my beam soon illuminates the wreck in its true spectrum—bright orange. The wreck is simply covered in plumose anemone.

This once proud ship is lying upright and intact. With a little caution, it's safe enough to explore

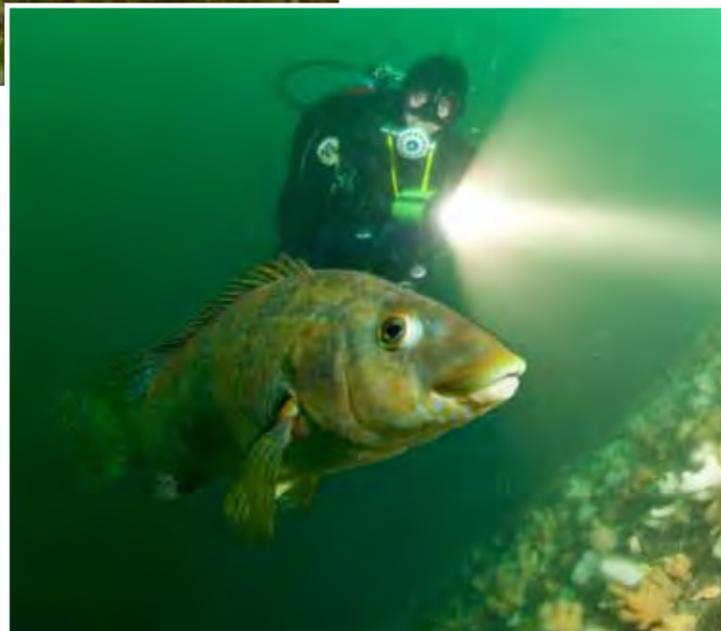


The Hispania

We are diving the *Hispania*—one of the most famous wreck dives in UK waters. A Swedish steamer, she was en route from Liverpool to Sweden in 1954 when she encountered atroc-

Captain Ivan Dahn chose to stay with his sinking vessel and went down with his command, allegedly saluting as she sunk beneath the waves—one of the few modern day examples of a captain choosing to go down with his ship.

We are at the mercy of the strong tides in this area—tides which also ensure the marine life on the wrecks is rich. Each day's diving is planned by the dive centre, so you are in the water when the tides are changing, and the waters are still. A



the open, beckoning holds.

We glide over the railings of the ship and drop into her dark belly. Fish life is plentiful, with schools swimming in and out of the ship's superstructure whilst the venomous Lions Mane Jellyfish drift by

oblivious to our rude intrusion into their world.

Average dive depth on this wreck is around 22 metres, making the use of nitrox ideal, and dry suits are really essential this far north for all but the bravest of

souls.

The best of the dive is saved for last, for the bridge of the ship, open as it is to the tides, is bursting with life that would rival a tropical wreck. The decaying hull has created a catacomb

est Scottish peaks including Ben Nevis. If you dive here in the winter months, you will invariably surface to the view of snow-covered peaks in the distance.

cious weather. The captain chose the more sheltered route between the Scottish Islands, but in poor visibility, the ship struck a reef close to the Mull shore.

The crew abandoned ship but



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

that allows safe exploration, always having clear exit points and no overhead environments. Until recently, even the captain's bath tub was still intact in his quarters.

Sixty minutes into the dive, it's time to return to the surface—the cold is starting to creep through my suit, and the currents are beginning to flow.

The *Hispania* lies at the northwest side of the Sound, so the boat spends the next few hours slowly making its way back towards Oban. In the afternoon, there is an opportunity to sample the natural rather than the man-made reefs in this area—a scenic dive on the shores of Mull itself.

The reefs here are dominated by kelp forests for the first 15 metres of water, and it's amongst these forests that much of the marine life can be found—sea urchins, squat lobster and large crabs make the protection of the kelp forest their home, whilst species of wrasse orbit above.

As abruptly as the kelp forest ends, the reef plummets away vertically into deep water. The sound is abound with drop-offs, as it's over 100 metres deep in places—the underwater topography matching the rugged steepness of the topsides.

The Sound of Mull

The Sound of Mull is formed by the deep

stretch of water, some 25 miles long and one to two miles wide, which separates the Isle from

mainland Scotland. Many a ship sought out this sheltered passage for refuge from the fiercest Atlantic storms only to fall prey to the many islets and shallow reefs that bespeckle this channel.

The appeal of this area lies not only in the number of wrecks, however. The fast currents that flow here also make for a rich marine biodiversity and set the

scene for exciting drift dives; currents can exceed three knots on many of the drift dive sites. At these speeds, it's possible to cover over a kilometre of ground in one dive!

This area is often described as having one of the best collection of shipwrecks in the British Isles. In addition, there is diversity in the wrecks themselves. Most

of the wrecks are relatively deep, sitting on the seabed at around 30 to 35 metres. Since many are upright, however, the average dive depth is more likely in the 20 to 25 metre range, making long dives possible with the use of nitrox.

There is one wreck, however, that stands out from the rest for the particularly adventurous dive it offers. The *Rondo's* stern lies in three metres of water whilst its bows are in 50 metres. The whole ship lies at an angle of around 70 degrees. This is one of the few wrecks where a true deep multi-level dive can be carried out, starting in the deep water areas and finishing your dive around the shallow stern. The bows themselves lay in dark but crystal clear water due to the nature of the tides in these waters.

The last time I dived these waters was over 20 years ago, and it was amongst some of my first ever open water dives. Since then, I have travelled the world and dived a myriad of waters. So, on this return visit to Oban, I was unsure of how



A diver sheds his light on the wreck of the *Thesis*
 RIGHT: A diver examines the coral growth on the wreck of the *Shuna*

as I gaze across the incredible scenery, that Scotland is breathtaking and mysterious both above and below the water.

Top Sites

The wreck of the *Hispania*

(position: 56.34.55N 5.59.13W)

Undeniably a masterpiece amongst the Sound's dive sites, the *Hispania* is often described as one of the best shipwrecks in the UK. A Swedish steamer, which sank in 1954 in bad weather, the captain chose to go down with his ship. Today, his ship lies as a beautiful shrine, absolutely covered in orange and white anemone. Virtually intact on the seabed with a slight list to starboard, the gangways and handrails are all still in place, and the cavernous cargo holds are an oasis for exploration.



A diver investigates the interior of the *Thesis* wreck

my maturity and knowledge would affect the experience.

Diving in clear tropical waters, may be easier and require a lot less equipment, however diving in green waters is often more rewarding due to its challenges. I have grown to appreciate the variety of temperate marine life and the atmospheric qualities that totally absorb and surround one.

Rejoining my family after my last dive, for a barbeque on the chalets veranda, I am reminded

The wreck of the *Rondo*

(Position: 56 32 18N: 05 54 45W)

One of the most thrilling dives in the area can be found further down the Sound. The *Rondo* was lost in 1935 after breaking her anchorage in a fierce storm. She ran aground on the islet of "Dearg Sgeir", and after a salvage attempt, she slipped down the cliff coming to rest almost vertically. The bows are in 50 metres of water, whilst the stern is only a few metres from the surface! Only the hull remains, along with various debris, but the wreckage is rich with anemone, and large fish schools are always to be seen. The *Rondo* has to be

one of the few wrecks where one carries out a true deep multi-level dive, starting midships or deeper and finishing in the shallows at the stern. The only apt description for this dive is spectacular.

The wreck of the *Thesis*

(Position: 56.29.56N 005.41.28W)

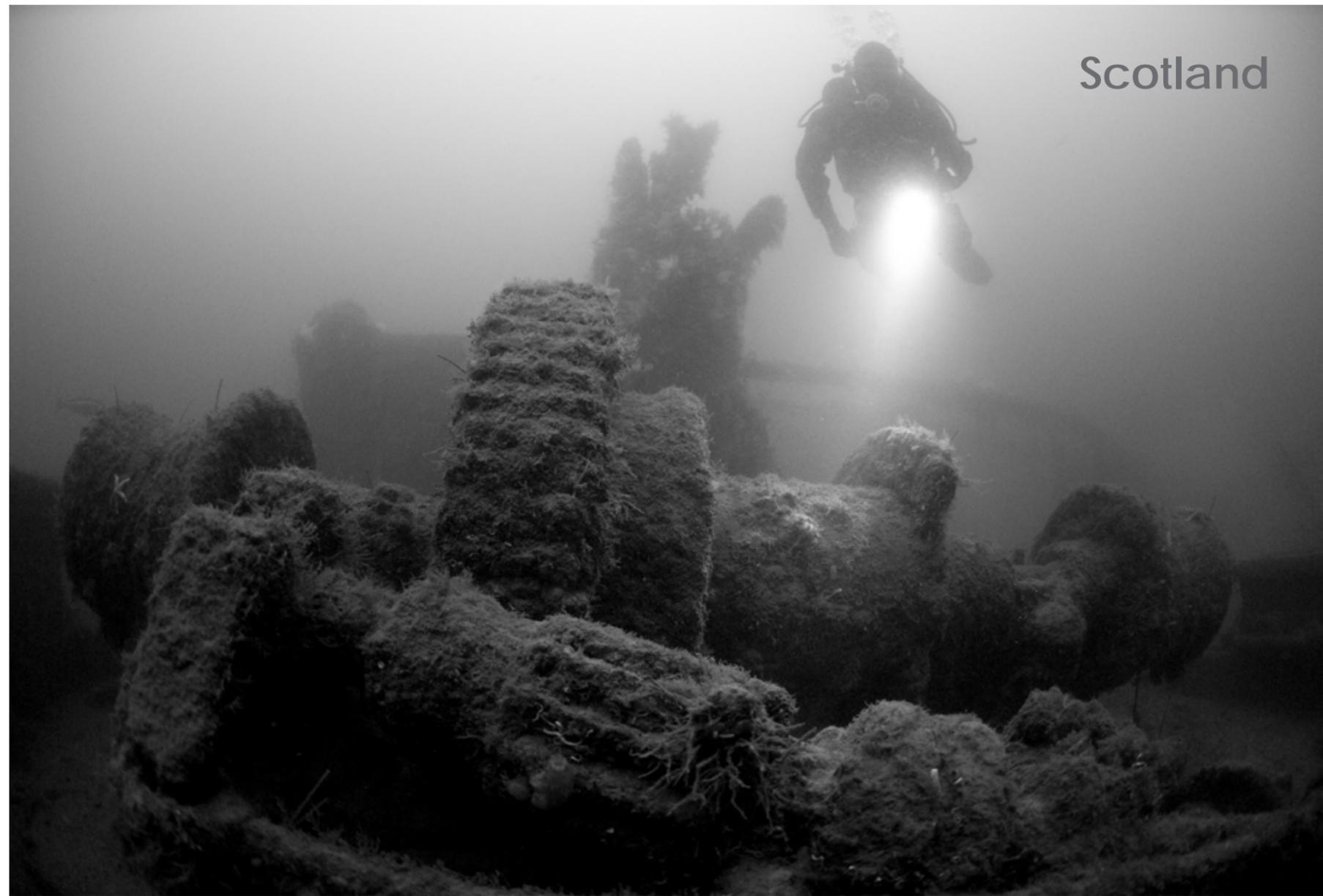
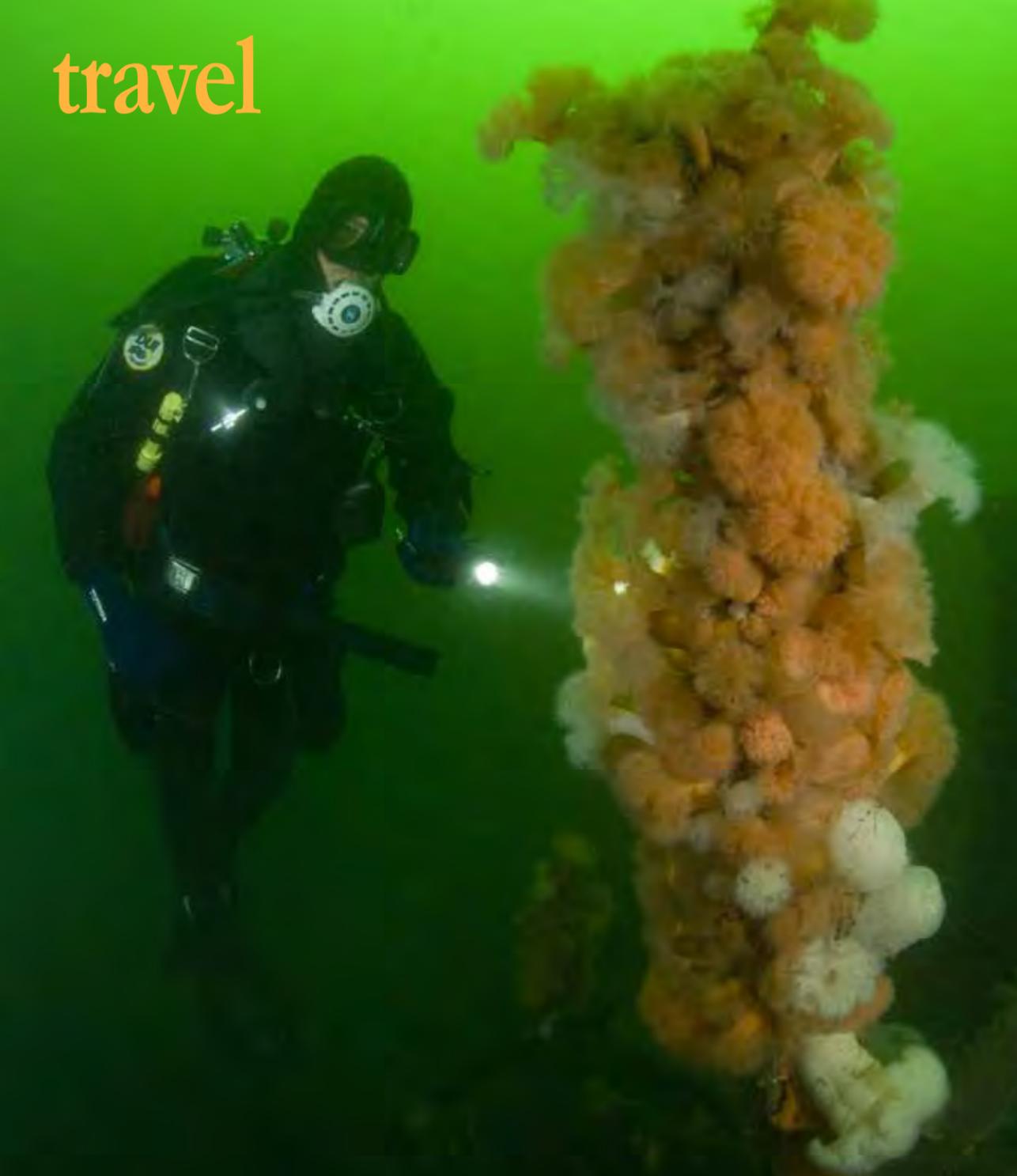
Without doubt one of the most atmospheric wreck dives in the Sound of Mull, the *Thesis* was a steamship that sank in 1889 carrying a cargo of pig iron. This 50-metre long wreck lies on a slope between 20 and 30 metres and must be dived at slack water, as the tides can be fierce whipping between the Sound of

Mull and the Lynn of Morvern. The superstructure and decking of the ship have all but disappeared, leaving the ribs of the hull exposed in many places. It is possible to swim the length of the ship below deck level. The deep emerald light beaming through the many holes in the ship's side make it a truly unforgettable dive.

The wreck of the *Shuna*

(Position 55.33.26N 5.54.52W)

This 73 metre long steamship sunk in 1913 after running aground in a storm. She was the last large wreck to be located in the Sound, being accidentally



discovered by a commercial diver. Sitting upright in 30 to 36 metres of water, her decks are only in 16 to 20 metres depth. The sides of the ship are covered in thousands of brightly coloured sea squirts and, as a rare treat for wreck divers, the propeller is still attached. The holds carried coal, and as she lies in a sheltered spot, the *Shuna* is covered in a layer of silt. Careful finning will keep the normally good visibility intact.

Lochaline Pier

The waters beneath the pier at Lochaline slope steeply before dropping off vertically to depths exceeding 70 metres. The upper reaches of the cliff are kelp covered, giving way to gullies and overhangs profuse in marine life. It's a stunning wall dive and can also be dived from the shore, although advice should be sought on the tides as danger-



THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *SS Breda*

ous downward currents can occur at certain times.

Calve Island

One of the finest scenic dives can be found on the north-west of Calve Island, which lies just outside Tobermory Bay at the North entrance to the Sound. Dropping away to over 45metres, chimneys and gullies covered in life drop off vertically in places. The town of Tobermory is also worth a visit, having one of the most colourful of sea fronts.

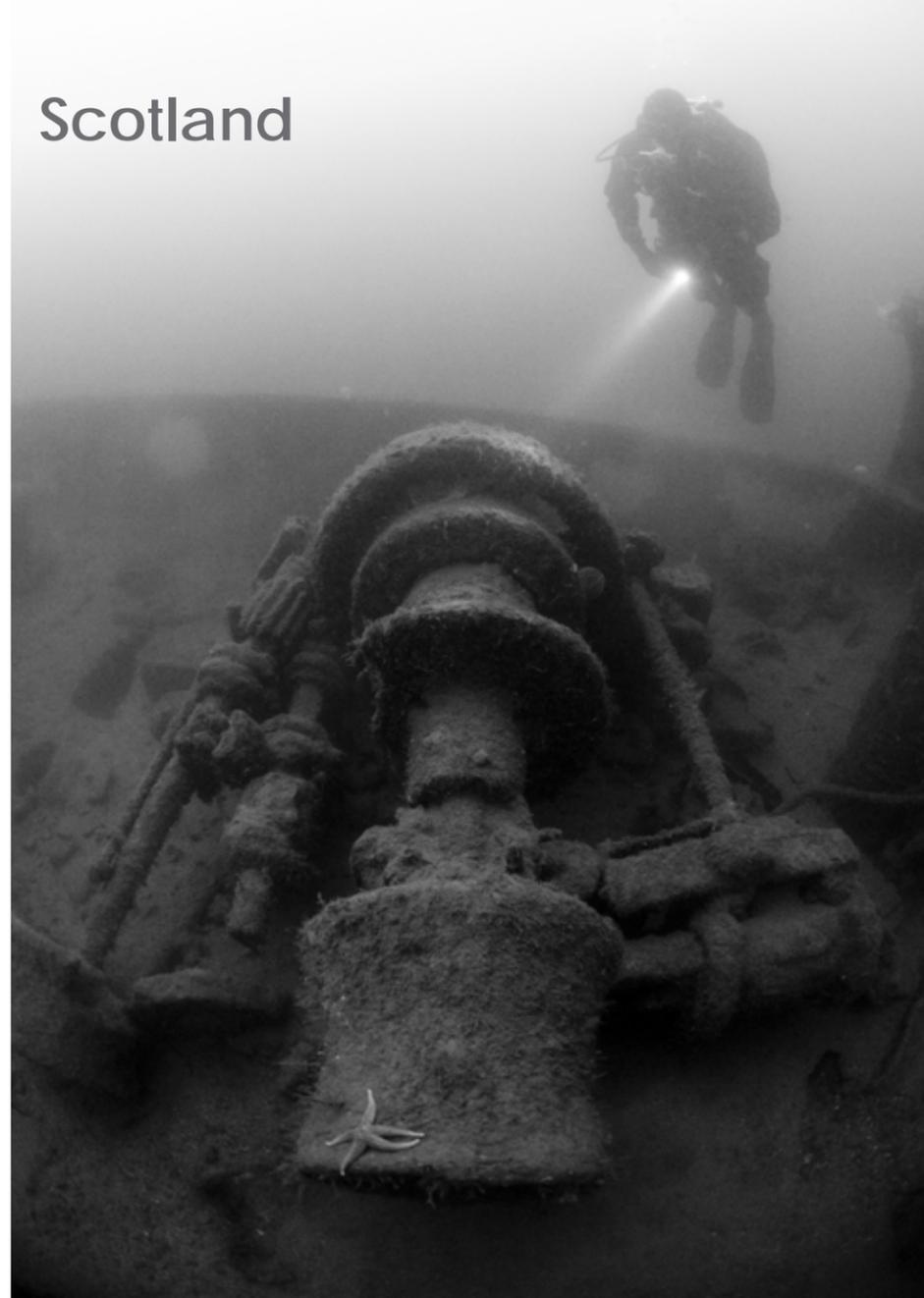
Dives outside of the Sound

SS Breda

(GPS location: 56°28'32"N; 05°25'07"W) In addition to the superb array of dive sites on offer within the Sound of Mull, one should not overlook the sites closer to Oban. The *SS Breda* has long been a favourite amongst divers. Requisitioned as a supply ship during World War II, she met her fate on 23 December 1940 whilst anchored in the Lynn of Lorn. Damaged by the bombs dropped by a German



Scotland



OBAN Oban is the quintessential Victorian resort town, possessing a unique character. Here, you will not find the pre-packaged entertainment to be found in so many more accessible resorts. The activities on offer put you firmly at one with the countryside, the history and the nature of the surrounding area. Spectacular walks, whale watching, historic castles, wildlife parks, island hopping—this is a destination for people who want to experience the countryside's natural beauty rather than man-made entertainment. Or of course you could soak up the atmosphere in the Oban Inn following a visit to the world famous whisky distillery.

DIVING Puffin Dive Centre (www.puffin.org.uk) offers a comprehensive shop, full recreational and technical training facilities, and a variety of well-equipped dive boats, ranging from large offshore rigid-hulled inflatable boats to a jet-powered catamaran. These make light work of the journey to the Sound of Mull. Puffin caters to groups and individuals of all levels of experience and provides thorough briefings covering the wrecks and all safety aspects before each dive.

CONDITIONS Despite the foul weather that can occur in this region, there are very few days in the year when diving is completely impossible. There are many dive sites, so finding a sheltered one merely requires some flexibility. The region is therefore one of a few in the British Isles where year-round diving is possible. With water temperatures peaking at around 15°C between July and September, they will drop to a refreshing 4°C by winter. This is drysuit territory, all year round, if you want to make the most of it.

USEFUL LINKS
 Puffin Dive Centre www.puffin.org.uk
 Oban Tourist Board www.oban.org.uk
 Isle of Mull www.isle.of.mull.com
 Visit Scottish Heartlands www.visitscottishheartlands.com/areas/oban/index.cfm



seabed that slopes from 24 to 30 metres. Standing upright, the superstructures have largely disappeared following the work of salvage divers in the 1960's. However, her cavernous cargo holds are full of interesting artifacts, and the stern of this 127-metre long behemoth is covered in dead mens fingers and anemones. Good buoyancy control is a requirement. The wreck catches the silt deposits from Loch Etive, so normally good visibility can quickly deteriorate if divers are not careful. Because of this, great care must be taken when venturing into the holds.

The Falls of Lora

Loch Etive itself also holds one of the most challenging and exciting drift dives for the advanced diver. The Falls of Lora ("Lora" being a rough translation of

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver explores the wreck of the *Hispania*; Thousands of tunicates decorate the wreck of the *Shuna*; The *SS Breda* wreck

the Gaelic word for noisy!) are caused by many millions of litres of water rushing between Loch Etive and the Firth of Lorn through a narrow constriction under the bridge at Connel, about six miles north of Oban. Nicknamed the "washing machine", only the most experienced drift divers should attempt this dive when it is flowing. Currents can exceed six knots, and downward currents are common. The most established dive centre in the region,

Puffin Dive Centre, offers a series of build-ups to this dive, taking divers in for familiarity dives at lower current strengths before the real thing. Excellent boat cover is essential. ■

Special thanks to Puffin Dive Centre www.puffin.org.uk for their support in producing this article. More of Steve Jones's work can be seen at www.millionfish.com

Heinkel 111 bomber, she limped into Ardmucknish Bay before finally sinking. She remains one

of the shallowest intact wrecks in Scottish Waters, with her decks standing eight metres above a



Books & DVDs

Edited by Robert Sterner

POINT & CLICK
ON BOLD LINKS

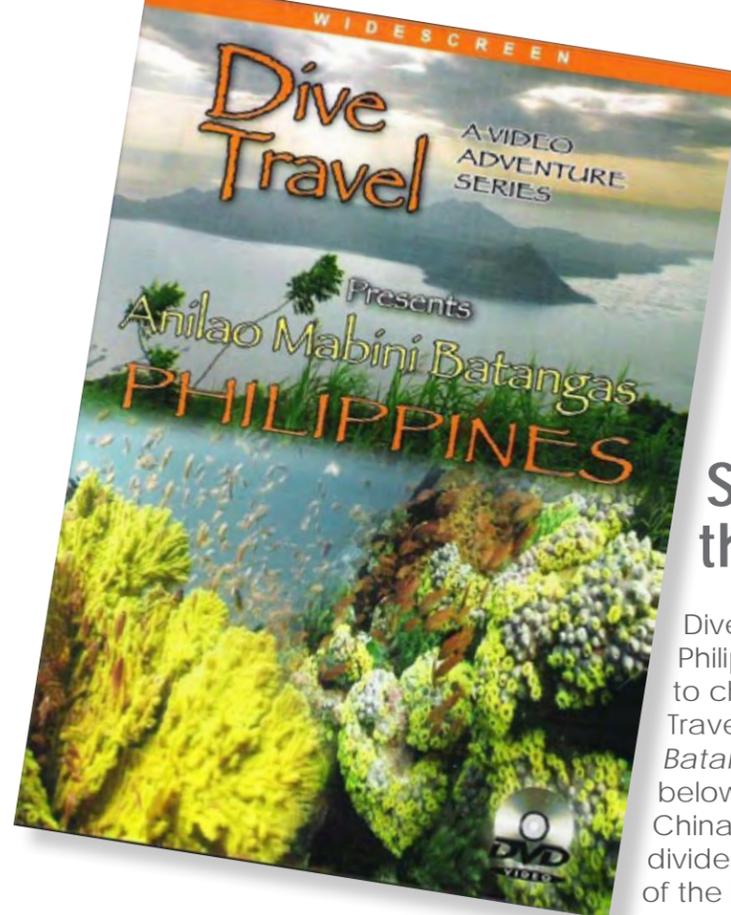


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What a book for a dive dream

Undecided where to spend a winter vacation? Pick up Beth and Shaun Tierney's *Diving The World* from Footprint books. In 18 chapters the 360-page soft cover presents vignettes on Egypt, East Africa, Maldives, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Micronesia, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Solomons, Fiji, Galapagos, Mexico, Central America and Grenada. Each section kicks off with an introduction on historical or geological aspects that make it unique, and then provides details on sites, customs, depths, visibility, currents, sea life, air and water temperatures and suggested protection suits for

above and below the water. Tips on surface interval activities and operators are provided as well. Icons and tables provide info at a glance and color photos spruce up every page. An introduction opens the book with general suggestions on trip planning and it closes with an appendix of resources on marine biodiversity, conservation, first aid, photo tips, training, an advertising directory with contact info for many of the operators plus an index. It's a handy resource for daydreams that'll help divers find their ideal destination. ISBN: 978 1 906098 76 6. www.footprintbooks.com.



See more in the Philippines

Divers considering a trip to the Philippines this winter may want to check out Gary Knapp's Dive Travel DVD on *Anilao Mabini Batangas*. This swath of water below Manila links the South China and Andaman seas and divides the 7,100 volcanic islands of the Philippines roughly in half. The two seas are renowned for

their biodiversity. The 47-minute high-definition video does not disappoint on documenting critters and plants. Much of the video is filled with glimpses of sea life, including many like leaf sea-horses, giant clams, and exotically colored morays, nudibranchs and octopi that can be found only in the region. That many are drawn to the nutrients swept through the waters with strong currents is evident in the footage. Knapp's episodes always have a "tip of the week" which was "stay close to your dive master to see more." Knapp must have followed the advice, for many of these creatures would be tough to find except by a local who knew exactly where they live. Oddly for the island's significance in World War II, the only wreck that was visited appeared to be a small fishing craft or work boat. Wreck divers may be disappointed here, but those who enjoy cruising through warm turquoise waters in a thriving Day-Glo garden will watch this again and again. www.DiveTravelDVDs.com.



Tween war and an Xbox

Parents who want to inspire their tweens and early teens to do something other than play with the Xbox over the holidays might try giving them Scott Westerfeld's *Leviathan* from Simon Pulse, Simon & Schuster. Okay, it's not about diving per se. However, it may captivate young minds with its Jules Vernesque sci-fi retake on World War I as fought with a 19th century version of high technology. It starts with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, of course, and the escape of his fictionalized son, Aleksandar. He meets Deryn, a Scottish girl who has disguised herself as a boy to join the British Air Service. Together, they get swept into the world of war fought with zeppelins, walking machines and other half-beast half-machine creatures. One of them, the leviathan, is a dirigible that was grown on the genetic chassis of a whale.

Heroes and heroines hark back to Victorian days of exploration for adventure and a strong sense of what is proper. It's a fast-paced plot that caroms between opposites of boy / girl, commoner / aristocrat, man / machine, Darwinists / and bio-engineers, which presents an underlying theme of acceptance of others' ideas and people. ISBN: 978 1 416971 73 3. www.books.simonandschuster.com.