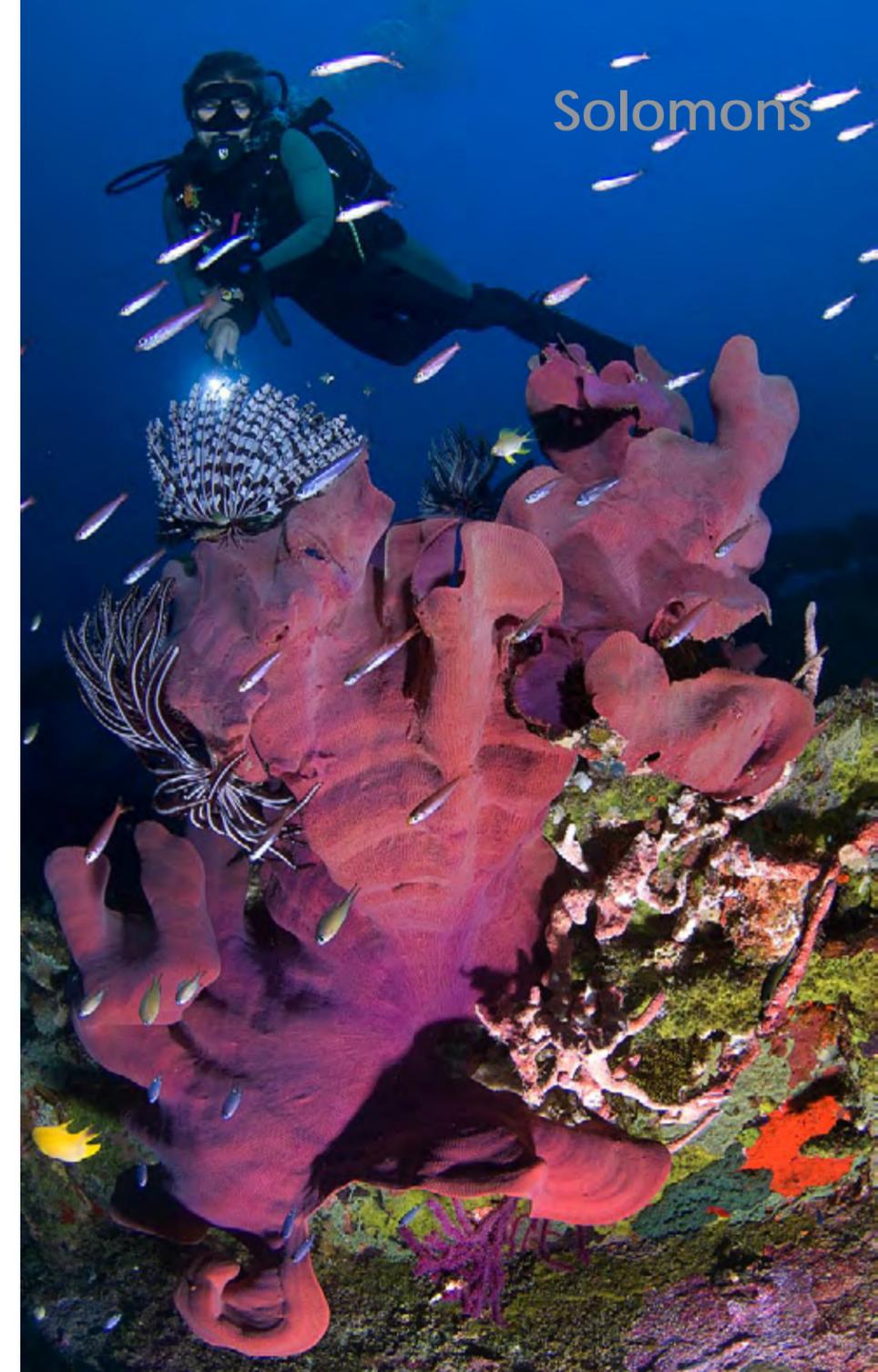


Diving in the South Pacific **Solomon Islands**

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.

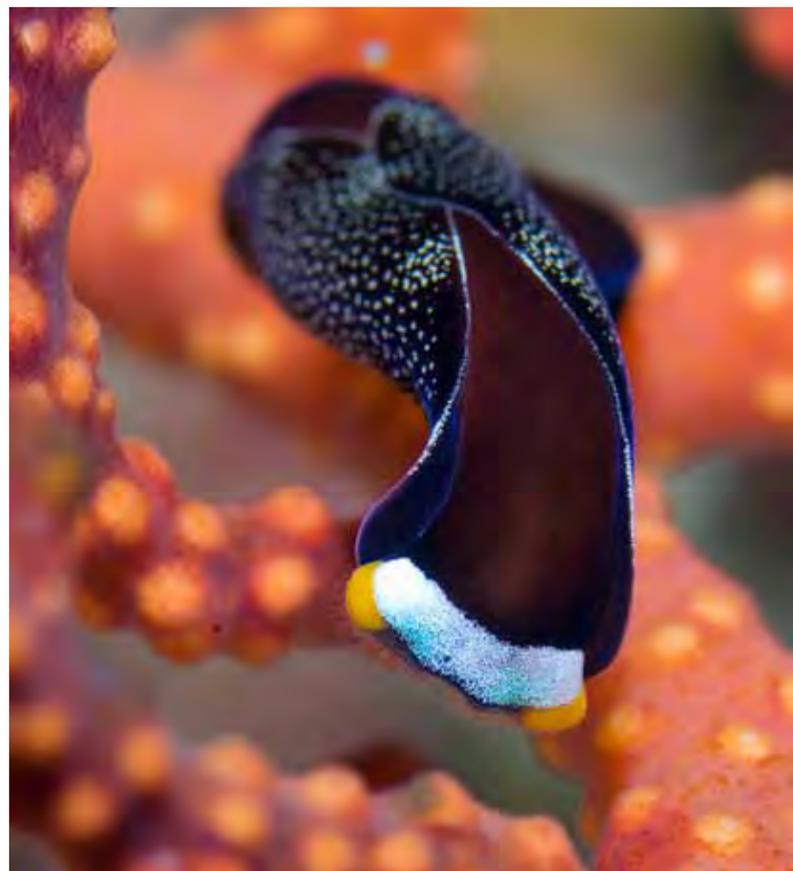
Coming to my senses I pluck up the courage and follow her in. So much for the wildlife photographer—when it comes to saltwater crocs, I'm reduced to fol-

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.

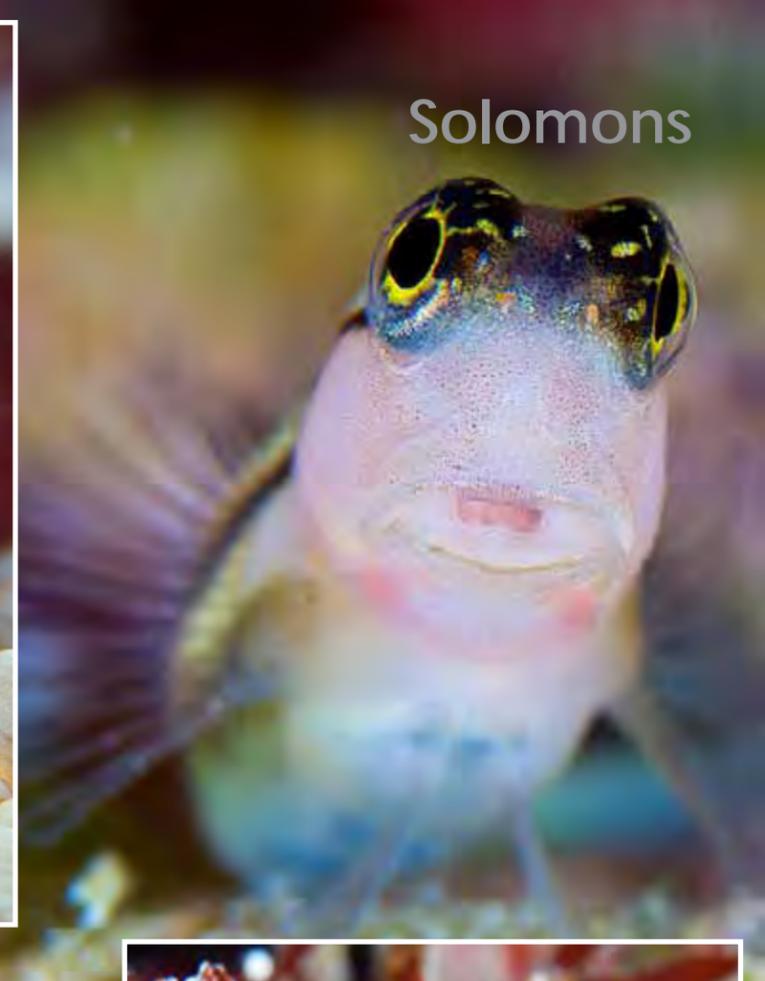
It would have been all too easy to have spent the entire dive around this gorgonian, but that would have meant missing the rest of this dive on Tanavula point. This steeply sloping reef is home to countless critters and

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 triggerfishes 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 its 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.

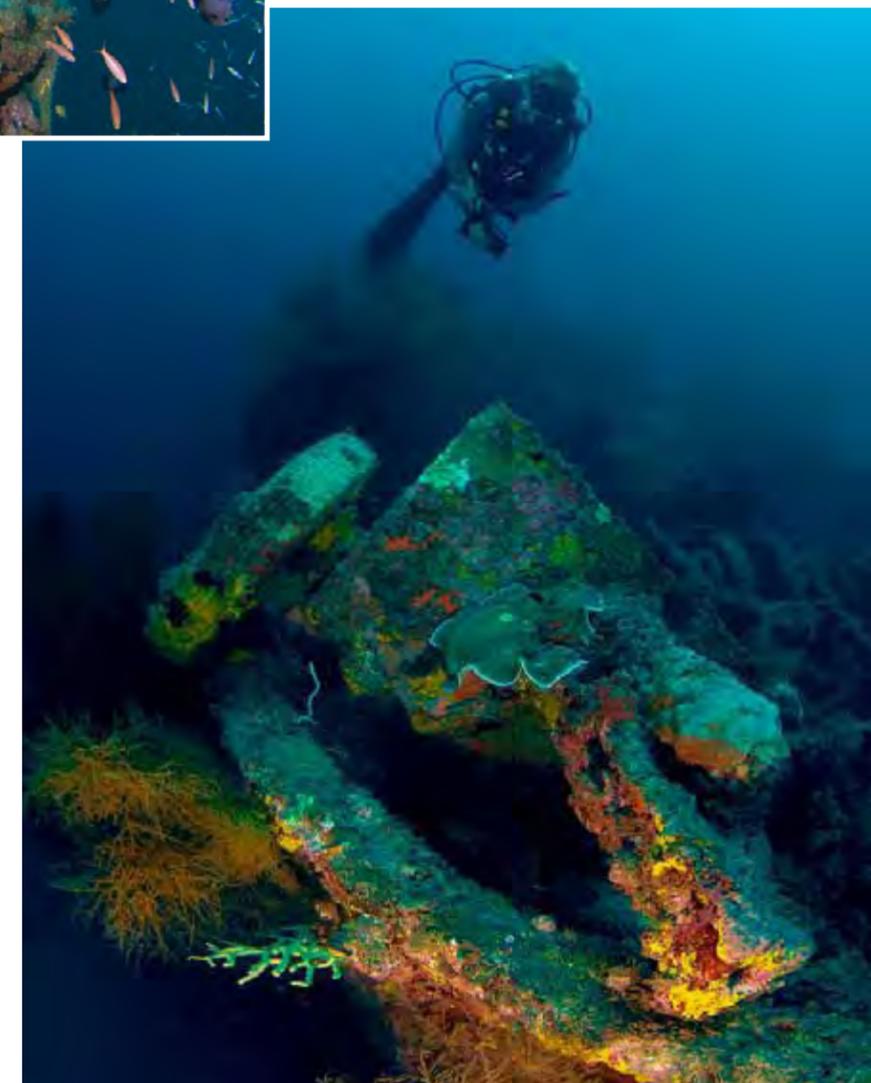
My tattered faith in fish is restored with the discovery of some of the most passive of marine creatures at the very same site. Firstly an ornate ghost pipefish, perfectly camouflaged to match the crinoid it shelters within, and moments later we discover a halimeda ghost pipefish, camouflaged to the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

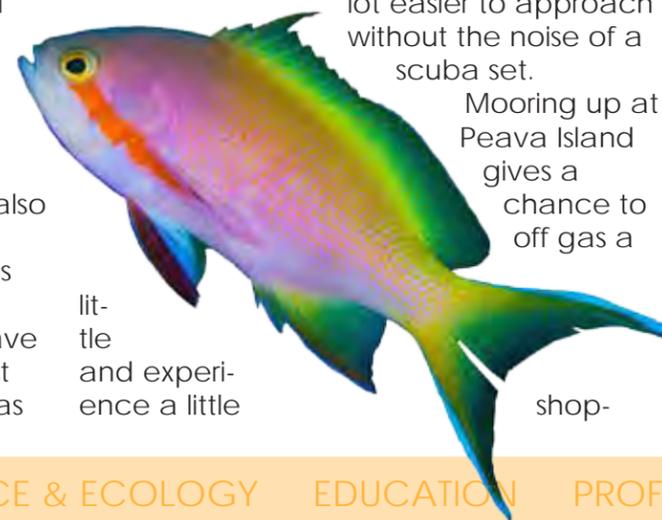
Shark populations in the Solomons have declined in recent years, along with just about every where else on the planet as

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



shop-

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.

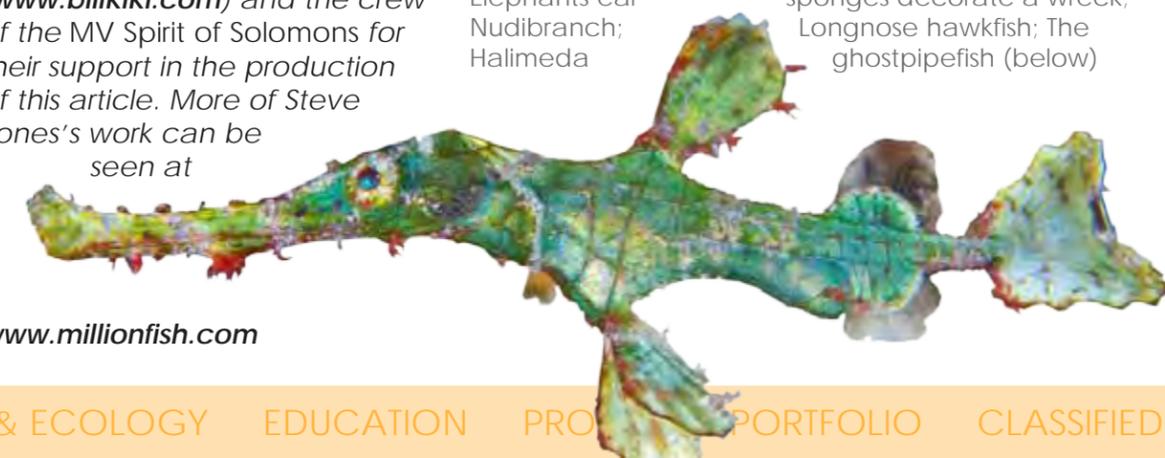
The Solomons possess incredible variety underwater—walls, caverns, critters, big schools, large animals and, of course, an abundance of wrecks, each of which has its own story to tell. The country displays a raw unrefined edge—far more exciting than the sterility to be found in mature tourist destinations. 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

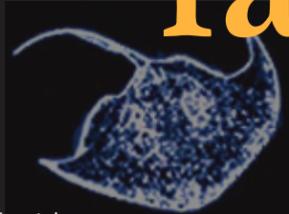


CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Lionfish; Velvet Ghostpipefish; Elephants ear Nudibranch; Halimeda sponges decorate a wreck; Longnose hawkfish; The ghostpipefish (below)



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.

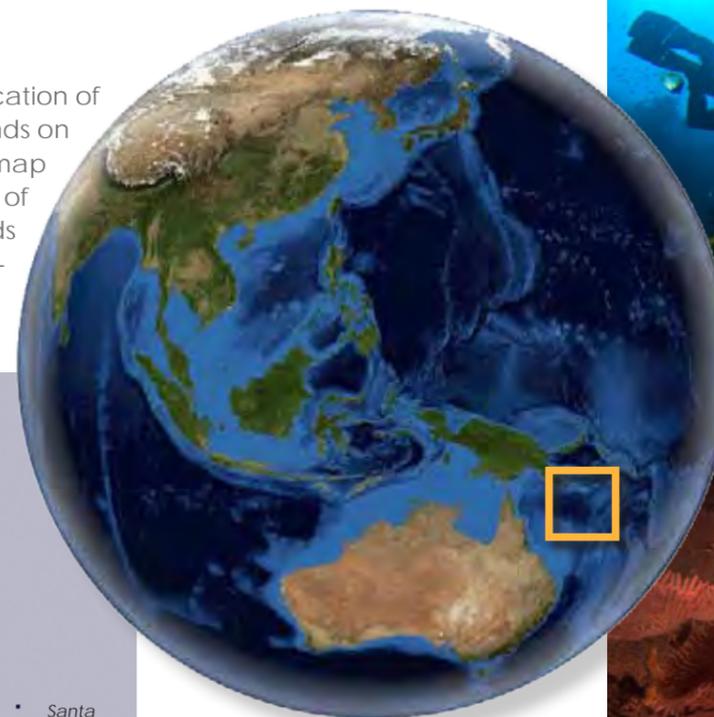


Security Even with its turbulent past, the Solomons is a safe destination for tourists. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) provides military and police forces from Australia and several other Pacific Island nations and has helped improve law and order since the troubled times 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





Scotland

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

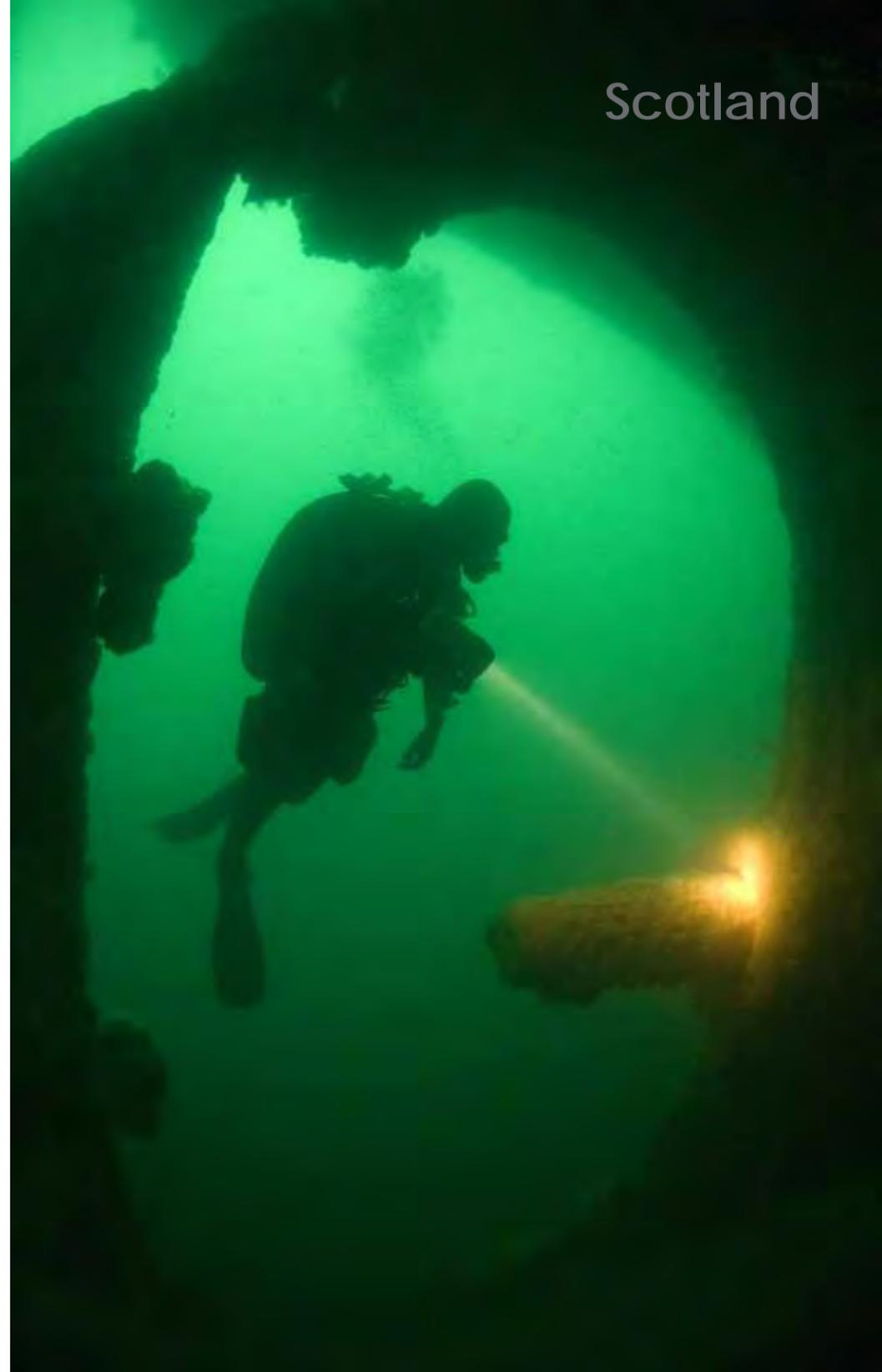


THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Hispania*

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

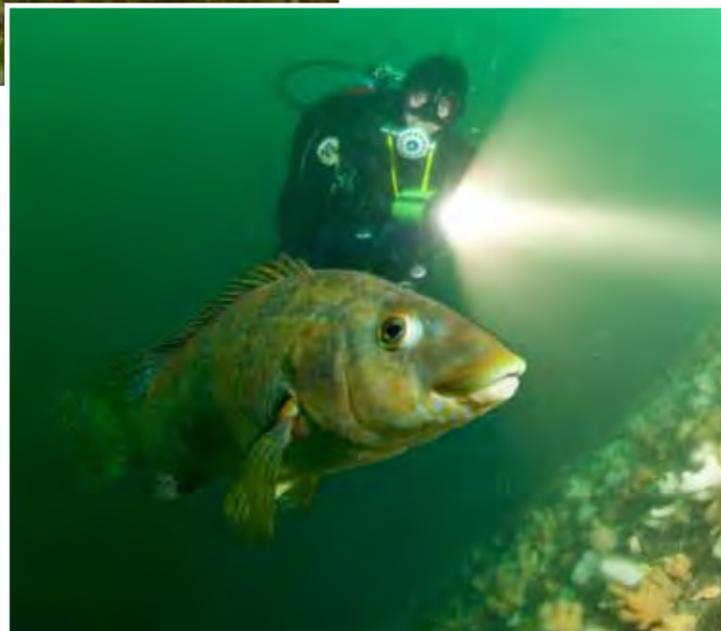


The Hispania

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.



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



A diver investigates the interior of the *Thesis* wreck

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)

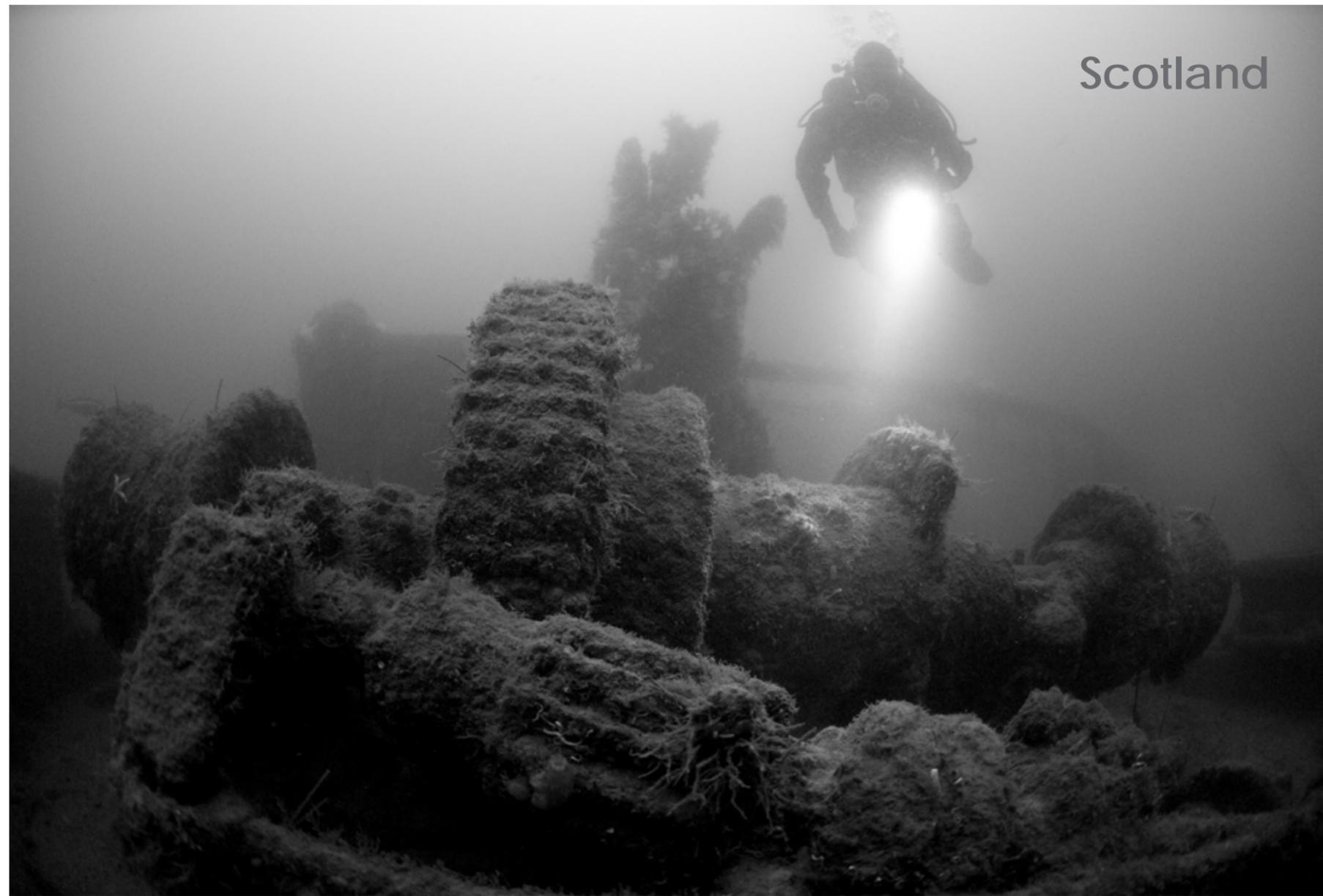
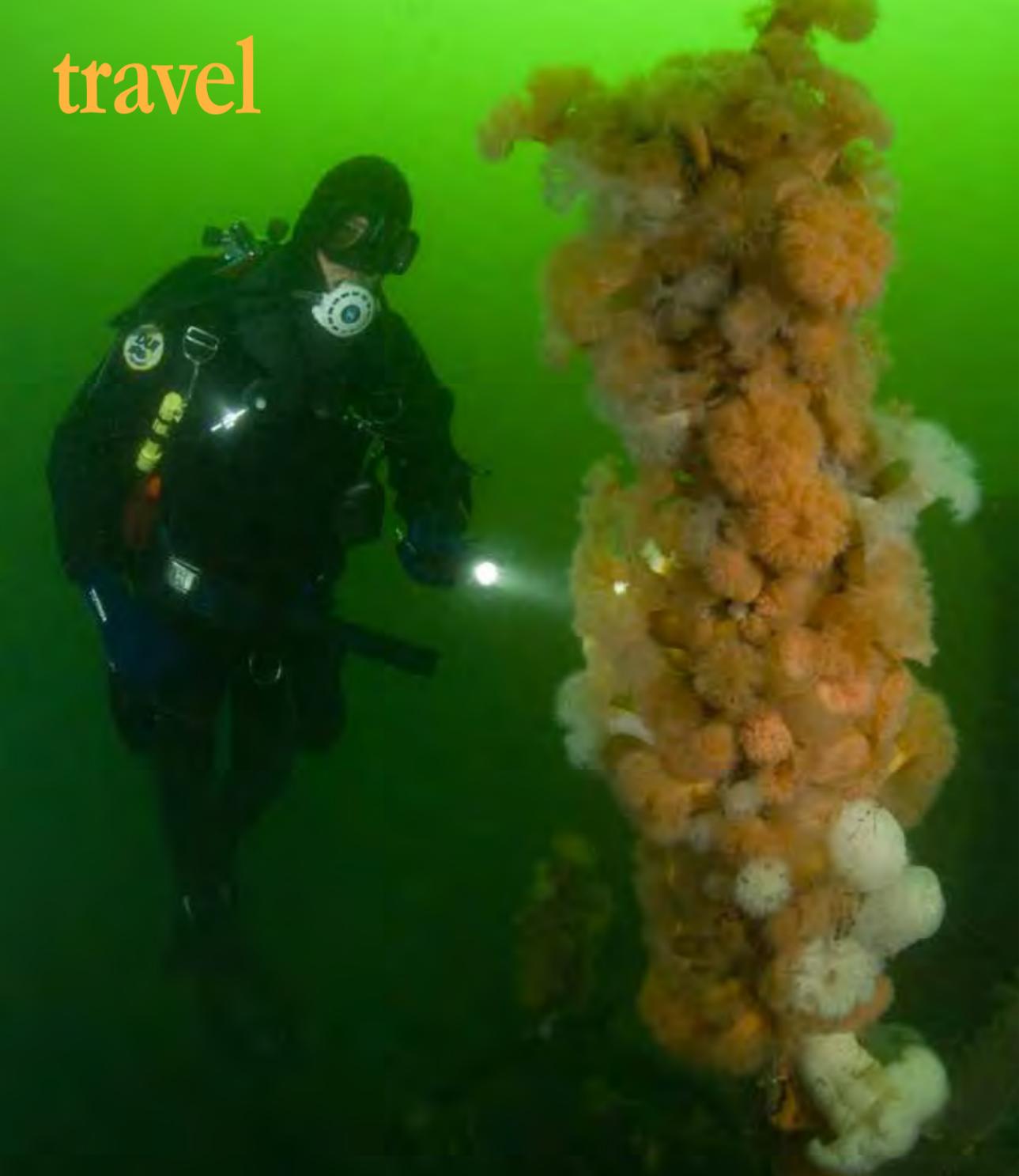
Without doubt one of the most atmospheric wreck dives in the Sound of Mull, the *Thesis* was a steamship that sank in 1889 carrying a cargo of pig iron. This 50-metre long wreck lies on a slope between 20 and 30 metres and must be dived at slack water, as the tides can be fierce whipping between the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

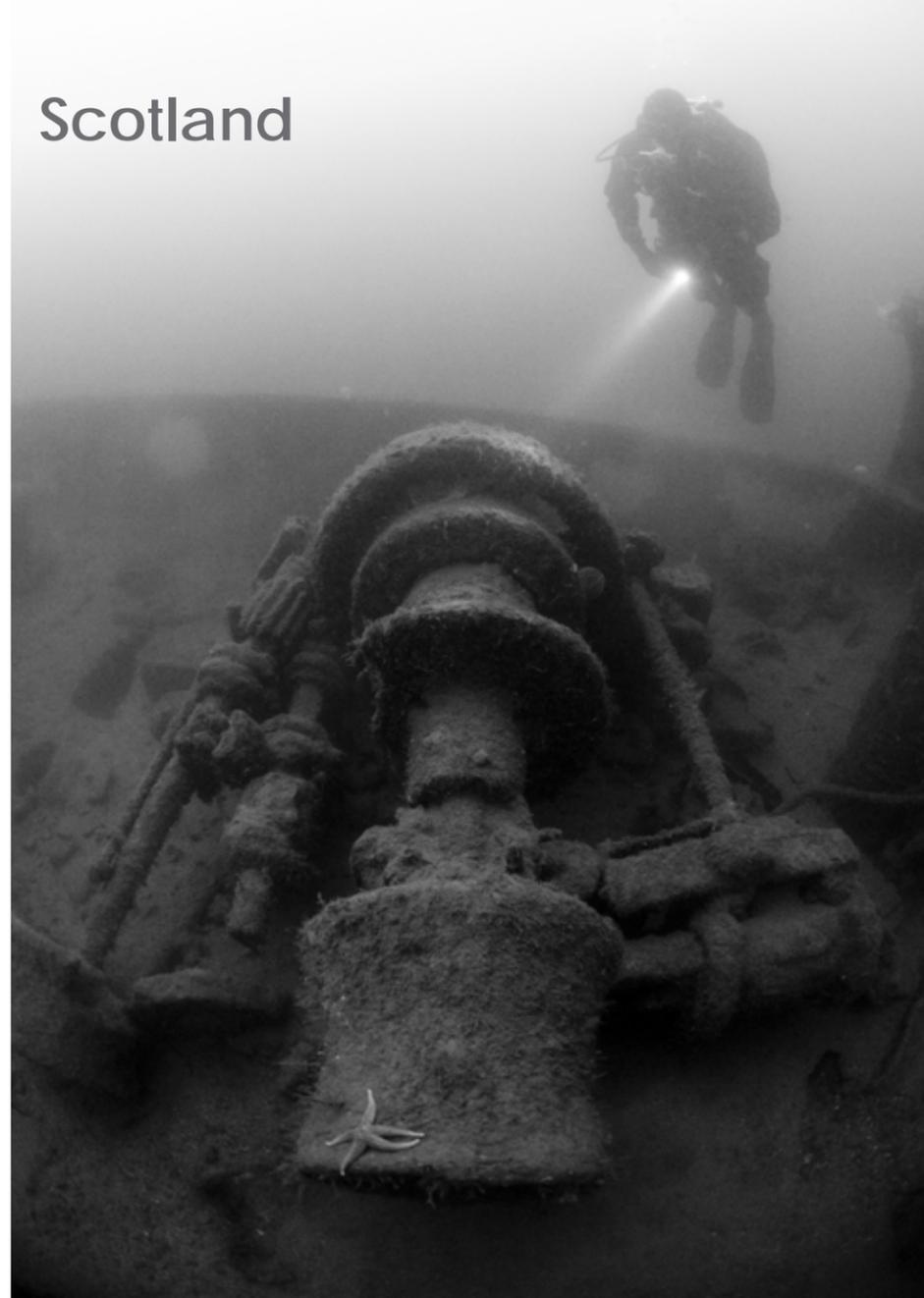
Dives outside of the Sound

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



Diving in Oman

Text and photos by Charles Stirling

A Story of Coral Reef Regeneration



Oman



JENNY FOWLER

Red gorgonian soft coral with shoal of blue line snapper; Junn Island beach with dive boat; Green sea turtle, *Chelonia mydas*, Daymaniyat Islands. PREVIOUS PAGE: Desert sand dunes. Wahiba sands dunes, notice little plants do grow here

I went to Oman to look at coral reefs that are regenerating from damage caused by cyclone Gonu in June 2007. Divers are just beginning to learn of the Sultanate of Oman; it's becoming yet another destination to consider. A country with a 1700km coastline extending from the border with the Republic of Yemen in the south to the Strait of Hormuz in the north. Its shores are lapped by three seas—the Arabian Sea, Sea of Oman and the Arabian Gulf—all within latitudes where coral reefs are expected. So what are you going to find if you visit?

Reef building corals normally need fairly specific conditions to survive: temperatures 22°C to 29°C, clear water, hard substrate to attach to, and low nutrient water. Then they need maintenance of the right biological diversity. Oman has four distinct areas that allow reef building. Much of its coastline is sand so does not provide the hard substrate. In the regions which have the hard substrates, it's a country which challenges some of the perceived concepts over the requirements. This, in itself, should make the diving of interest to the scientifically inclined coral biologists, but will be of lesser interest to the ordinary diver who is generally more interested in simply good dives.

In the far north west off the Musandam region in the Strait of Hormuz, most dives seem to be conducted off liveaboard boats, often



out of the United Arab Emirates but also out of Daba. The attraction is the rough mountainous coastline with narrow fjord like bays. This area of Oman is separated from the rest of the country by the UAE, which completely surrounds it—an exclave. I've heard that it's enjoyable as a dive trip with at least reasonable coral and good fish life, but haven't visited.

Hundreds of kilometres down the coast is the Daymaniyat-Muscat region with the Daymaniyat Islands my prime site of interest, and Muscat area a



Red tailed or Pakistani butterflyfish, *Chaetodon collare*; Reef stonefish, *Synanceia verrucosa*; Masked bannerfish, *Heniochus acuminatus*

of the Al Munassir, welcome the diver. This is rated second to the Daymaniyat Islands, and normally it should be possible to combine the two on a single week's trip, which I was unable to do as rather strong winds stopped all diving activity during my allocated time for Muscat.

Moving on down the coast, the diving infrastructure simply hasn't yet been well established, though corals are found in the Jazirat Masirah island and surrounding waters. Much further south, around Salalah and Sadah and the Hallaniyat islands, diving sounds possible, but it's almost virgin territory. Salalah is probably the best bet; an airport has recently been opened, and the diving is reported as very good.

There are wrecks in the area, including the "City of Winchester" the first casualty of WWI, a 19th century one and others.

The cooler water during the monsoons is nutrient rich along with temperatures below coral growth normal limits but almost uniquely in the world here it doesn't kill

the coral. Coral here will gain an algae covering for a few months but survive to continue growing after. The diving operators seem few, maybe one at the Salalah Hilton maybe one at the Al Jabal Hotel.

Diving the Daymaniyats

I went out of the expected diving season, January early February, with the primary objective to see the regeneration in corals which was reported as unusual. Some specific shallower reef areas on some of the islands had been scrubbed virtually clean down to bare rock by backwash from the extremely high surge waves generated by cyclone Gonu. Other areas with extensive table corals had many of them ripped from the substrate, washed into piles or broken up. This was evident on beaches all along the coast with a tideline of newly deposited coral debris, particularly from table but also small brain, pillow and fungi corals.

This is a natural phenomenon that must

OMAN'S MONSOONS

The monsoon system in Oman is a major climatic and oceanic influence with the dry North East monsoon winds prevailing November to April, which then reverses with the South West prevailing April to October. These South West monsoon winds bring cold, nutrient rich, waters up from the depths of the Arabian Sea which reaches more than 4000 metres deep. In the south of Oman, corals have adapted to survive both the cool temperatures and algae growth which results. In waters with adequate nutrients, other organisms generally out-compete corals, which is not always happening here. Further north, from Ras Al Hadd to Muscat and even the Daymaniyat Islands, the seas are shallower and can warm considerably, sometimes above the normal high temperature for coral growth. The cold upwellings here arrive as intermittent cool packets of water being pumped by surface waves. It's thought this occasional cooling helps to keep the good coral growth, as they do bleach but quickly recover. Even in constant temperatures above those that bleach coral in other regions of the world, corals here may not bleach. Water temperatures in the Daymaniyats can change by ten degrees in an hour. ■

TOP: Bluespotted Cornetfish *Fistularia commersonii*

close second. This region is the most popular destination, which effectively splits into the two sub areas.

The Daymaniyats are tiny, isolated islands, about 20 km off the coast from Al Sawadi, an hour's drive north of the capital city of Muscat. This distance limits boats visiting from the far side of Muscat to exceptionally fine days, and most will use Al Sawadi Beach

Resort or the centres near the closer outskirts of Muscat. The islands are a marine reserve, established in 1996, consisting of a nine-island archipelago with many submerged rock pinnacles.

In the Muscat area coral reefs, a couple of small wrecks and the artificial reef created by the deliberate sinking of the 84m-long, 2991-ton landing craft, wreck



COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Damaged table coral, *Acropora valenciennesii*, with upward growing regeneration; New growth *Acropora* table coral polyps; Upturned table coral with regenerating branches

TABLE CORAL

This table coral looks like it is *Acropora clathrata* as the branches coalesce to form solid plates. In this species, which is a common one in Oman, branchlets seldom turn upward so giving the flat table appearance. The closely related species *Acropora valenciennesii* is frequently confused with *A. clathrata*, but its branches do not fuse being more loosely branched while it will have branches which do turn upward. I'm not a coral taxonomist; these identifications show some of the difficulties with describing behavioural differences particularly when circumstances are unusual. This observed regeneration response is dramatic, and the sheer quantity makes it noteworthy regardless of species. It's a natural response to an environmental change, which will keep the reef alive and doing well. Coral is reported to cover 70+ percent of available surface, and the reefs are expanding on the Daymaniyat Islands. ■

cut both by a plankton bloom and stirred sediment. Visually one could see 8 to 12 m at many of the sites, which was reduced from the expected, but photographically the plankton had matured to sizes large enough it might almost be identified in some photographs so ends up in most images. This said, the diving was still very enjoyable.

I managed diving with Roger & Emma Halliday's Al Sawadi Beach Resort dive centre five days out of a possible six, one lost to the wind, but had planned another

five days diving out of Muscat which were blown out. The Daymaniyat Islands have some shallow bays, but most of the diving was on variously contoured walls often progressing along near the bottom regions at 16 to 20 metre depths. Some of these were billed as drift dives possibly having strong currents, but our drift dives ended up at about half a knot or under so just enough to behave fish like with head toward the current and gentle finning to hold position or slightly less finning to slowly drift to see the landscape unfold.



have been happening in this region for thousands of years when the occasional strong cyclone hits every 30 to 60 years. It's one aspect of beach and land development.

Underwater it was exciting to see how quickly recovery had started. I wasn't doing sampling or measurements, just acting as an inquisitive diver, but the scrubbed rock looked to be gaining a covering of coralline algae, bryozoans and small soft and hard corals.

The surprises came with the table coral, upturned and maybe in a pile, sending new branches up from what had been the undersides. In Hawaii some damaged table corals have

experimentally been turned right side up by divers and cemented back to the substrate either with a quick setting cement-adhesive mix or cement. This seems to work but is a skilled, expensive, labour intensive task okay for a few specimens, but not with the quantities here.

General Diving

Not as surprising was that most reef areas dived appeared to have seen little damage. The wave energy is near the surface and quickly dissipates with depth, also leeward sites are protected. Being out of the best diving season sea conditions were sometimes a bit rough reaching the islands and the visibility was





Prickly alcyonarian soft coral, *Dendroepthya* sp. TOP: Cuttlefish



Crown of thorns Starfish, *Acanthaster planci*, preying on hard coral but not destroying all the reefs

Often the proposed dives would start with dropping off the boat over a coral garden, finning a short distance to catch the current and drift to another coral garden to surface. The diving is easy, each site, each island has differences, but sometimes subtle.

The islands offer reef diving somewhat similar to the Red Sea to which it inevitably gets compared. One of the big differences is the lack of crowds. I was out of season, so comparisons are misleading, but on some days my guide/buddy and I were the only two divers in the whole nine-island archipelago, while in peak season I was told there might be a few other dive boats scattered among the islands. It's not crowded!

The coral species diversity isn't as

great as the Red Sea with about 120 now known, and new ones still being discovered, but you would need to be a coral taxonomist to tell the difference, as all the various types are present. Other invertebrates and fish are both diverse and abundant; lobster, various crabs, urchins, starfish, cuttlefish, turtles, cornetfish, a number of species of eel, trevally, grouper, turkeyfish, stonefish, angelfish, butterflyfish, anemonefish, parrotfish, shoals of snapper, wrasse and more are all here.

Our boat sometimes took snorkelers out with us, either dropping them at a sandy beach on Junn Island where we would all meet for the midday offgassing and packed lunch, or at the destination point of the planned dive. They seemed to enjoy the days.

Again, this was January, The Sultanate of Oman's shores attract great numbers of sea turtles to nest all year round, but particularly a little latter in the year.

The critically endangered Hawksbills turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), in local Arabic called 'Al Sherfaf', nests particularly on the Daymaniyat Islands, which are consequently closed to boat landing in the months of May-October on conservation grounds. Out of these closed months, exploring the islands' deserted beaches is possible. A traditional dhow was being added to the Al Sawadi stable to make snorkeling more enjoyable and overnight dive trips possible, as it can be used as a floating base for activities when the beaches are closed. The larger dive boat, *Noora*, was away for a refit, and



GREEN TURTLE NESTING SITES

The mainland shores all along Oman offer nesting sites for four species of sea turtles and feeding grounds offshore for visiting Leatherback turtles. For loggerhead turtles these are the world's most important nesting sites particularly around Masirah Island where 30,000 come ashore. The Olive Ridley also nest around Masirah Island. The major nesting area for the Green turtles is about 400 km south-east of Muscat along the Ras al Hadd peninsula, not far from the dhow-building port of Sur where they nest year round. Green turtles nest in numbers that exceed any other single location in the Indian Ocean. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Green sea turtle, *Chelonia mydas*;
Bedu tribesman exercising racing
camels; Green desert plants in wadi
east of Ras al Hadd



the new planned catamaran for diving was at the design stage, so trips were on the smaller *Thimsa* or the soon to be decommissioned *Shadiya* dive boats.

Diving, I encountered a number of Green turtles while the snorkellers had a Hawsbill turtle investigate them on Junn West, which I missed as I took my time drifting in that direction along the wall and didn't make the distance in my 70-minute dive, too much else to see.

Topside Attractions

A diving trip isn't all diving even if you want it to be. My trip was partly organised by Muscat Dive and

Adventure Centre. We had planned on my also diving out of Muscat for a second week for some wreck dives, but winds prevented this. The air was filled with fine sand, the evening temperatures were cool, the seas rough. Normally, these winds only last for one to a few days, but not for my visit—they lasted for two weeks using up my stay completely. It's these cooler temperatures that make this winter weather high season for land activities. Summers reach 45°C to 50°C inland. Instead, I was able to explore more of the impressive mountains, wadis and desert sands along with Muscat itself.

Culture

Oman's religion, its culture, its personality strikes almost as soon as leaving a resort, some before that, as incredibly warm and friendly. Walking on the street people make eye contact, smile, say hello—yes, in English, though Arabic is the main local language. A handshake, with a light grip, a firm one is seen as aggressive, is often extended and a conversation started. That conversation not trying to sell the tourist trinket of your desires but simple friendly banter.

Oman is not an Anti-Western country; though conservative Islamic, it's tolerant of others and has much





captions this page

enjoyed historic ties to Britain. Its civil law is modelled on a mix of Islamic and Western practice, Shari' ah (Islamic) law is used within the family so applies to marriage and inheritance but doesn't seem to dominate outside the family.

Yes, changes are happening here, but it is still conservative even in cities, and more so in smaller villages. To be comfortable away from the dive boat, dress conservatively, i.e. covered up. Normally, I would be in shorts in warm climates. Here, that would, in all likelihood, bring stares if not comments. It's long trousers time.

For woman, loose fitting, non-revealing dress is the order of the day. Long trousers are ideal, or skirts and dresses with a hem below the knee, and a loose fitting sleeved top. A headscarf could be handy at times. Bikinis are okay around the hotel pool, beach or dive boat, but

not in the hotel, certainly not elsewhere.

Most Muslim women still wear the abaya, a full-length black covering. Almost all Omani man wear the dishdasha (ankle length shirt) but not non-Omani, emigrant worker men.

The country doesn't have classes per se, but does have family, monetary and tribal hierarchies. If you know the system, the dishdasha and the men's hat tells a lot about social connections. Both men and women cover the head. Inside the home women can have significant authority. Outside, it is the male, and elder males are dominant. I noticed outside, even young boys have authority over much older girls and may try over adult women.

Women in Oman do have equal legal rights, many work in city offices or with livestock and agriculture in rural communities. In higher education,

there are now more women than men, and women are finding a place in government. But culture dictates the need for women to be back in the family home during the evening with one consequence being they don't take jobs distant to the family. Marriages are normally arranged, preferably to cousins, with consequences that can be seen in villages, and families tend to be large also limiting women's role.

The Omanis number about two million, with an additional half million or so immigrant workers mostly from India or Pakistan in a country about the size of Great Britain, or the state of Utah in the USA. Much of Oman's present wealth is coming from oil but with significant additions from fishing, and agriculture, livestock particularly. The current sultan, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, has recognised oil revenue will not



Omanis in traditional dishdasha dress leaving Ar Rustaq fort after prayers
TOP LEFT: Blue hazy mountains above wadi and town of Birkat Al Mawz



Oman
CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Inside Mutrah Al Dhalam Souk Muscat; Clothing shop in souk; Dried fish stall in Seeb souk; Main prayer room Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat; Fisherman with the days catch of a reef fish

a meal for two at under US\$6 to \$10, sometimes down to \$2. In the hotels it could be \$20 to \$60 for an evening meal. I wish British fast food was as good, but the choices are a little limited. Try the local shuwa in a restaurant, meat slow cooked in an underground clay oven, and in the cafes the Indian



tourism as a new potential income stream. Tourism has been limited by the lack of hotel beds and transport infrastructure. The transport side is being addressed with the road building and new airports, the hotel beds with new, mainly high end, resorts. Traditionally not many Omanis have travelled, even within their own country, so middle ranking hotels are very limited.

Night Out

Going out at night isn't likely to be for a beer. Alcoholic drinks can be found in western oriented hotels and I gather in a few clubs and restaurants in Muscat. The fresh fruit juices make up for this, absolutely excellent, or it is tea, soft drinks or maybe coffee. Getting out of the hotel/

resort complex and mixing with the local population is highly recommended, you will experience more of the real country and eating out will save money compared to hotel fare. It also spreads any spending money to the local economy. What will be noticed is that it is an almost exclusively a male environment, females will be noticed by their absence. Female tourists, well covered, won't have problems. It's local women who will only be seen in limited situations and then chaperoned.

Eating

Most of the time my partner, Jenny, and I went to small local cafes. They are plentiful, almost always the food was good to very good and generally inexpensive (or even cheap). We often had



go on forever, and he is endeavouring to educate and modernise the country along with looking at



Oman

opportunities.

With our enforced extra non-diving days more mountain, desert and Muscat exploring was possible.

The mountains and countryside around Nizwa are easily reached from Muscat with a days drive including scenic stops, giving good areas to explore and walk. A 4X4 would get you deeper into some of the impressive narrow mountain valleys but some can be seen from saloon car accessible roads. From Nizwa we headed across vast flat expanses of wadis and desert, on good uncrowded paved roads, to the Wahiba sands to be collected by Reinhold Thaumuller of Desert Discovery in a 4X4 for a night out in the desert. More dune bashing of an even more impressive nature than Al Abyad, a campfire and star filled sky with a cold beer made



paratta wrapped around chicken, and I'll reiterate, try the fresh fruit drinks. We both particularly liked the freshly prepared mango, cost, under \$1, and the mango milk shakes with excellent ice cream. Restaurants do exist serving international foods, mainly in Muscat and hotels but were beyond our finances. The Omani's main meal is midday at least in theory, but the men out on their own in evenings seemed to have reasonable appetites. We joked that maybe the woman's authority at home forced them out to eat in evenings as streets were full till 22:00 to 23:00 (10 to 11 pm) hours without much else to do but eat and play cards.

Exploring the Countryside

Oman is primarily an arid country with a coastal plain backed by mountains and desert interior. Exploring might break into two or three distinct categories: Evenings out, will mainly be to eat, then day and longer trips. Day trips might be most easily done with a tour. We had one organised by Muscat Dive and Adventure taking a 4X4 up into wadi Al Abyad, not

far from Al Sawadi, first seeing the local small village at the foot of the mountain wadi, then off road up into the valley with its always flowing spring. Continuing from this rugged mountain area to desert sand dunes and the classic dune bashing illustrating that a 4X4 can go places, do things not expected of a vehicle. Dune bashing makes a roller coaster seem rather tame.

Multi-day trips you really will want to rent a car. Oman now has a few thousand kilometres of new world class roads. In the early 1970's they had about 10 km. The paved roads can get you to all the towns, most villages and some areas of mountain or desert but off-road or gravel track is necessary for some more interesting desert and mountain exploring. Due to the wadis and mountains long circuitous routes can be necessary. We hired a small sedan car at a third the cost of a 4X4, but it did have its limits. If you are going to drive, hire it at the airport on arrival for the full stay, a long taxi trip costs a day's hire charge, and driving opens up a lot more



Dune bashing, Wahiba sands. TOP LEFT: Wadi Al Abyad with 4X4 car and spring water. TOP RIGHT: Sand dunes and notice the vegetation



Oman

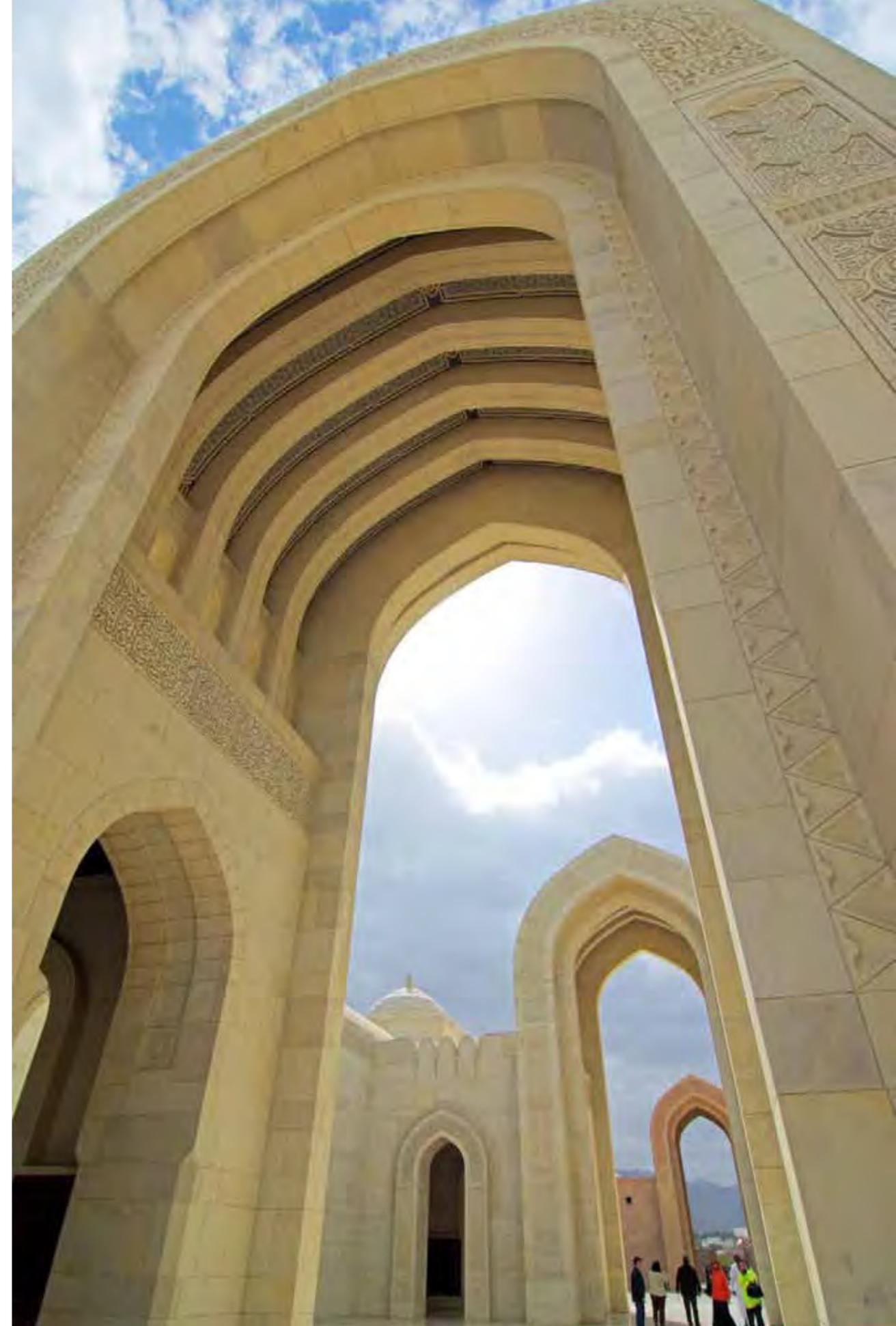
for a pleasant hospitable evening. The countryside is spectacular and worth visiting, but maybe you would want to limit this in summer when even the locals consider it too hot.

Muscat

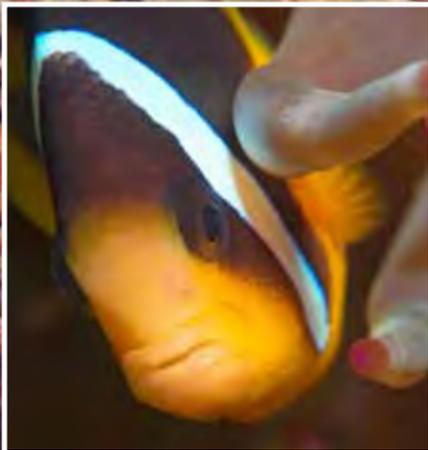
Muscat, the capital, is a long city stretching something over 70km driving distance along the narrow coastal plain backed and constrained by rugged mountains. The place for larger traditional Arabic market places, the Souqs, modern shopping malls, museums and government departments. All over Oman, in every village even out in isolated desert outposts are mosques but here is the new and superlative Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque which is impressive in size, architecture and sheer grandeur. The Mutrah souq is the classic one to visit with its gold, food, clothing, souvenirs, and more, arranged in a labyrinth of narrow passageways (we couldn't find our way out it was so large and complex), but it did seem very slightly touristy. The smaller but still large souq near the waterfront of Seeb, on the outskirts of Muscat, almost seemed more interesting with no concession to visiting tourists. Museums eluded us. We tried to find the Natural History Museum, but maps are a bit limited in detail and we drove for ages near but never finding it. Asking locals drew a blank, none knew of it, as so often is the case when the subject is natural history or science.

Environmental Policy

Oman is aware of, and trying to do a lot to conserve both natural habitats and its archaeological history. With the important turtle populations, regulations on disturbing nesting beaches are in place and it's illegal to catch them. They do accept visitors want to see



THIS PAGE: Views of Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat



LEFT TO RIGHT: Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat; Pile of damaged table coral with regenerating branches; Clark's or Yellowtail clownfish, *Amphiprion clarkii*, in anemone—yes, they are even here; Vase Coral, *Turbinaria mesenterina*, Daymaniyat Islands

turtles struggling onto beaches, hatchlings leaving nests for the sea. This is often in more isolated areas without tourist accommodation so regulations are also in place trying to control tourist infrastructure development. Theoretically they are doing more for the turtle conservation than other countries, but in practice sometimes the enforcement evidently falls a little short, particularly since cyclone Gonu when so many resources have been involved in reconstruction.

The longer term worry for the marine environment, I think, stems back to the comments on culture, the large family sizes, combined with fishing seen as an economic area to expand. We see how the corals can recover from natural disasters, ones which have been recurring since the reef started. If the conditions are right coral reefs are stable biological communities as can be seen by thousands of years of growth, wrong for them and something else will replace

them. To produce more of the "right" conditions Bluezone Watersports has teamed with the British School Muscat to produce an artificial reef structure using clay pots just out of Muscat with the side benefit of introducing young students to marine biology and conservation. Oman is interested in conserving its natural environment but like everywhere else conservation and economics co-mingle to an ever changing end.

In the past the local fisherman had their small, slow, boats which probably limited catches. To help the 4,000 plus fisherman economically they have had grants to upgrade outboard motors, new larger boats are being built. Its illegal to catch turtles, but many are accidentally killed by nets or fishing line. The same

protection for turtles doesn't apply to sharks which are caught for local markets nor to reef fish needed to keep reefs in balance. The fish catch is on the increase both for local consumption and export. At the moment the marine environment seems reasonably healthy and stable but the debate on limiting fishing doesn't seem to be happening. Will stability be compromised?

Inland, it was great fun to do the dune bashing, to do the little bit of off road exploring. But, sand dunes and deserts often have very fragile ecosystems. We were visiting in the winter, the dunes and the desert had green shoots aplenty but driving over this, though fun, is unregulated and vehicle tracks are rather frequent. Yes, the dunes move, cover

tracks quickly with the freshly blown sand but the scarce plant life does get damaged, the same with wider desert ecosystems. At least some consideration of this ecosystem needs to come into local thinking.

Oman offers some good diving and its a spectacular, safe and very friendly country. Tourism here is seen as a long term economically good thing being aimed particularly at the discerning, more independent, visitor not the mass market. The diving could suit any level of experience, the country nearly anyone. Let's hope the economic needs for its growth doesn't outstrip concerns for the environment so both locals and future tourists can enjoy it. ■

fact file



Oman



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK AND CHARLES STIRLING

History Indian Ocean trade has long sustained the inhabitants of the area of Oman. In the late 18th century, the first in a series of friendship treaties with Britain was signed by a newly established sultanate in Muscat. Over time, Oman's dependence on British political and military advisors increased over time, however, it was never a British colony. Qaboos bin Said al-Said succeeded in overthrowing the restrictive rule of his father in 1970; Since then, he has ruled as sultan. The sultan put into place an extensive modernization program, which has opened the country to the outside world while maintaining its historical close ties with the UK. Oman practices a moderate, independent foreign policy, which has sought to preserve good relations with all the countries of the Middle East. Government: monarchy. Legal system: based on English common law and Islamic law with ultimate appeal to the monarch. Capital: Muscat

Geography Oman is located in the Middle East, between Yemen and UAE and borders the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, and Persian Gulf. Coastline: 2,092 km. Terrain: central desert plain with rugged mountains in the north and south. Lowest point: Arabian Sea 0m. Highest point: Jabal Shams 2,980m. Note: Oman holds a strategic location on Musandam Peninsula next to the Strait of Hormuz, an important transit point for the world's crude oil trade.

Climate The best time of the year to visit Oman is between October and April for land activities when temperatures

are warm in the day, cool in evenings. For diving September to December and March to May. Oman is mostly dry desert, being hot and humid along the coast; hot and dry in the interior; with strong southwest summer monsoons from (May to September in the far south. Natural hazards: periodic droughts and summer winds, which frequently raise large sandstorms and dust storms in the interior.

Economy As a nation, Oman is a middle-income economy heavily dependent on diminishing oil reserves. However, it has sustained high oil prices in recent years, which have helped build Oman's budget, foreign reserves, and trade surpluses. In anticipation of its oil resources running out, Oman has initiated a development plan focusing on diversification, industrialization, and privatization. An objective of the plan is the reduction of the oil sector's contribution to GDP to 9% by 2020. These projects may be thwarted, however, by lack of natural gas to power them. Private foreign investors, are being sought, especially those in the industry,

information technology, tourism, and higher education. Gas resources, metal manufacturing, petrochemicals, and international transshipment ports are the focus of industrial development.

Environment Oman is experiencing rising soil salinity and beach pollution from oil spills. It also has limited natural fresh water resources. The nation is party to the following agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Whaling

Population 3,418,085 includes 577,293 non-nationals (July 2009 est.) Ethnic groups: Arab, Baluchi, South Asian

RIGHT: Location of Oman on global map
BELOW: Map of Oman



(Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi), African. Religions: Ibadhi Muslim 75%, other ethnic groups (including Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, and Hindu) 25%. Internet users: 465,000 (2008)

Language Arabic (official), English, Baluchi, Urdu, Indian dialects

Travel Details

We took the new direct Oman Air flight from London Gatwick to Muscat. Other flights often go through Dubai or the many other hubs then on to Muscat. Oman Air: Omanair.aero

Visas Single entry short visits, pay 6 OMR or equivalent on arrival at airport. Caution, some tour operators and visa touts at the airport may try and help while charging double or more.

Health No jabs required. Very safe country. Recompression chamber is available at:

Currency Oman Rial, OMR (£1 = 0.74OMR). Better exchange rates at Muscat airport or at one of the few currency converters—banks not as good, shops and hotels, poor. Exchange on the credit card was okay, but sometimes had problems using it. In smaller towns, credit cards may not be accepted.

Time Zone GMT +4

Hotels Not large numbers to choose from, when diving we stayed at: Al Nahda Resort Alnahdaresort.com About a 20-minute drive to dive centre, but near town of Barka, which could be reached by hotel taxi.

Al Sawadi Beach Resort Alsawadibeach.com Has the dive centre, but is a little isolated with only a very small local village, but right on the beach.

In Nizwa for visiting mountains: Falaj Daris Falajdarishotel.com Very pleasant small hotel on the outskirts of Nizwa with rooms set round two courtyards each with a swimming pool. Easy drive into town with its fort and souk to visit.

In Wahiba sands for desert: Desert Discovery Desert-discovery.com Desert camp with thatched rooms, can only reach by 4X4. They also have a hotel in Al Qabil which can be reached by salon car and acts as collection point for the camp.

In Muscat: Muscat Diving & Adventure Centre Holiday-in-oman.com Omandiving.com They have hotel/hostel properties used by participants on their various adventure activities. Proved incredibly helpful to organise our activities.

For smaller hotels, see, *Oman: The Bradt Travel Guide*.

Opening times Thursday afternoon and Friday are traditional weekend closing days, but this is slowly changing to Friday and Saturday. Nearly everything will be closed between 1:00 - 4:00pm. Banks are open from 8:00am to noon. Shops and businesses are open from 8:00am - 1:00pm, 4:00 - 7:00pm or later.

Oman Government Tourist Office www.omantourism.gov.om ■





Beating Jetlag

takes the average person about a week to adjust to the new time zone after a transatlantic flight.

The traditional model stated that the clock and the brain communicated to the rest of the brain via the number of electrical impulses that the brain cells were producing. These impulses would travel around the brain, tell-

As dive travelers, we occasionally find ourselves traversing many zones in our pursuit of the next great underwater adventure often feeling completely out of sorts on arrival thanks to jetlag. What can the latest research tell us about this annoying condition?

Our daily sleep cycles, behaviour and metabolism are regulated by a powerful master clock, which resides in an area of the brain known as the suprachiasmatic nucleus. This "circadian" clock is regulated by some special brain cells, which in turn, are highly sensitive to daylight. Because the body's biological clock can only shift a small amount each day, it

ing it what time of day it was. These cells had been thought to be inactive during the day, but the recent research by a University of Manchester team has found the opposite to be true.

The brain seem to keeps the body clock on track by firing more cells during daylight and very few during the night. It is hoped that these new findings will

lead to new approaches of being able to tune our body clocks. This new understanding may also pave the way to combating sleep disorders triggered by body clock malfunctions and help develop drugs to counteract things like jetlag.

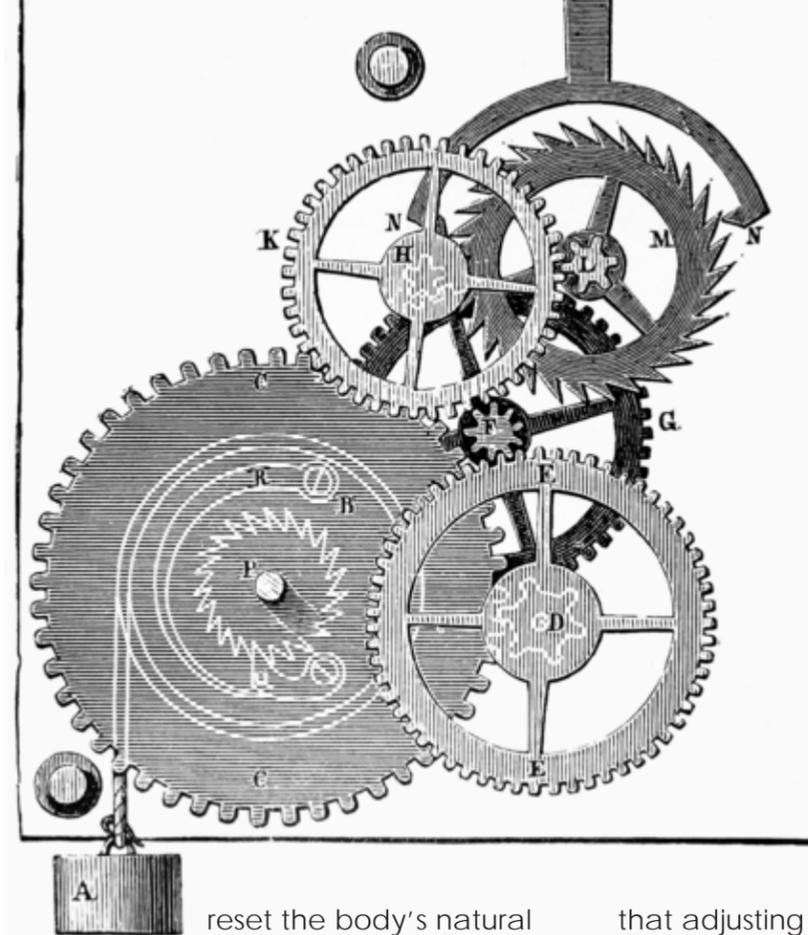
"What we've found is in fact that there are at least two types of cells in this part of the brain." Professor Hugh Piggins, an expert in neuroscience at the university told the BBC World Service's Health Check pro-

gramme.

One such new cure for jet lag could be on the market in the matter of few few years after clinical trials show a pill can

Jet lag may last many days, and recovery rates of one day per eastward time zone or one day per 1.5 westward time zones are mentioned as fair guidelines

There is much debate about whether it is better to fly eastward or westward. It may be largely a matter of personal preference, but there is some evidence that flying westwards causes less jet lag than flying eastwards.



reset the body's natural sleep rhythms.

In trials, published in the esteemed medical journal, *The Lancet*, a drug called Tasimelteon helped troubled sleepers nod off quicker and stay asleep for longer, by shifting the natural ebb and flow of the body's sleep hormone melatonin, which peaks at night.

Experts said the drug would also be a welcome alternative to addictive sedatives.

Natural melatonin is a popular treatment for patients with body clock-related sleep disorders. Various melatonin products are often sold over the counter as non-prescription drugs and researchers warn the potency, purity and safety of melatonin pills is largely unregulated. Also it is inconclusive whether they work in shift-workers and people with jet lag.

The new drugs, which work through the same neuro-receptors and pathways as melatonin, are said to improve daytime performance and alertness without any carryover sedative effect.

Adjust your meal times

Meanwhile, another study suggests

Showers

During extended stop-overs on a long haul flight, showers are sometimes available. A shower not only freshens you up but gets the muscles and circulation going again and makes you feel much better for the rest of the flight. Trans-Pacific pilots have told us taking a shower in Hawaii helps them recover more quickly from the general effects of jet lag after the flight

that adjusting meal times may also help travellers recover from jet lag.

Harvard University researchers believe the brain has a second clock that keeps track of meal-times, rather than daytime. To understand the relationship between the two clocks, the Harvard team studied mice, which were missing a key clock gene. By observing the behaviour of the mice closely, the researchers discovered that when food is scarce, the feeding clock would override the circadian master clock, keeping animals awake until they had the opportunity to eat.

Thus, shift workers and travellers may be able to use the feeding clock to adapt to changes in time zones and keep tiredness at bay by not eating, they suggested in the journal *Science*.

"A period of fasting with no food at all for about 16 hours is enough to engage this new clock," explained lead researcher Clifford Saper. "So, in this case, simply avoiding any food on the plane, and then eating as soon as you land, should help you to adjust and avoid some of the uncomfortable feelings of jet lag. It's never going to make the symptoms disappear entirely, but it could certainly make them a lot more manageable." ■



Technical Diving Paradise

In the Northern Pacific

Text by Ron Akeson

Photos by Ron Akeson and Barb Roy

I often raise a few eyebrows when I exclaim, "I'll take diving in the Pacific Northwest over anyplace else in the world." And it's true. We have a great variety of diving off the northwestern coast of Washington State, USA, and British Columbia, Canada. There are fabulous walls full of thriving marine life, historic shipwrecks and huge retired Canadian Navy ships placed as artificial reefs of steel. The drift diving is unmatched, complimented with a rich diversity of unique marine life including wolf eels, giant Pacific octopus, and six-gill sharks. Although recreational diving opportunities are also unsurpassed, technical diving is equally as good throughout the Pacific Northwest.

So what makes this area one of the best technical diving hotspots in the world? I personally am partial to our deep 300-foot walls adorned with ancient sponges and populated by immense lingcod and healthy schools of rockfish. But my real passion lies in the opportunity to explore such a selection of very different deep wrecks, few have seen. Many of these wrecks often attract technical divers from around the world for exploration, research, or just the challenge of facing our temperate environment. Whatever the reason, the Pacific Northwest seems to fully accommodate a technical diver's needs.

Although many tech sites in the Pacific Northwest are easily accessible from the shore, most of the choice sites require a boat for access. Browning Wall near Port Hardy on Vancouver Island in British Columbia (BC) is a local favorite and arguably one of the best dives on the Pacific Coast for any level of certified diver! You can easily spend an entire dive trying to find a single square meter of rock not adorned with red soft corals or yellow bread-of-crumb sponge. This current-bathed wall stretches from the surface down to 73 meters (240 feet), where we often find 20-25 centimeter (8-10 inch) tall pink and white gorgonian

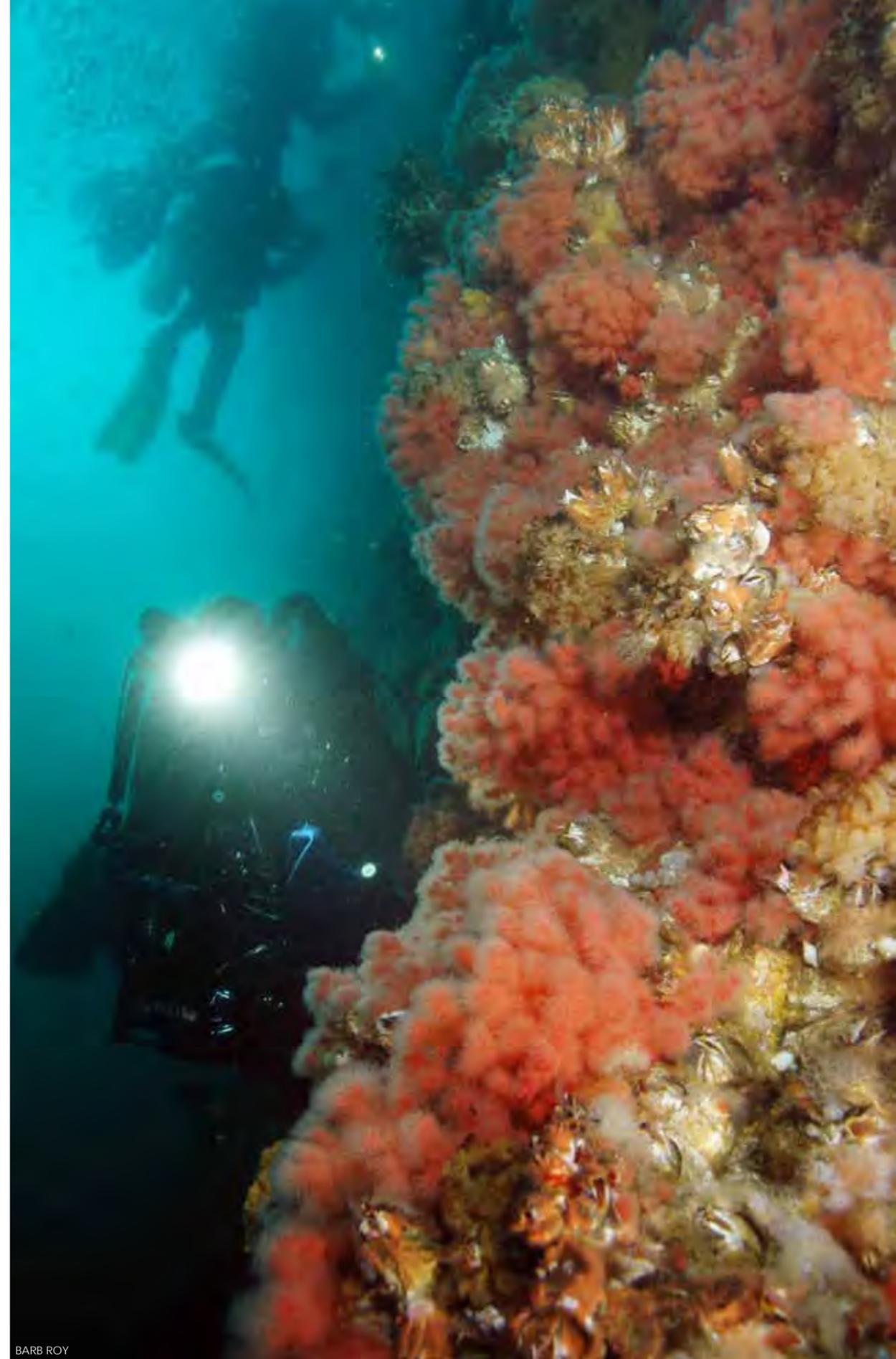
sea fans intermingled with the other soft corals, anemones, and basket sea stars.

At this point the ocean floor slopes off into deeper water with little to see. I like to dive the deepest parts of the wall with Trimix, but extended range and decompression procedure-trained divers can pick their depth based on their comfort level.

Two other popular deep walls are; beneath the power lines in Agamemnon Channel and at Whytecliff Park, both in BC. Agamemnon Channel is located on the Sunshine Coast, north of Horseshoe Bay and the town of Sechart. Here, we find huge yellow and white cloud sponges starting at 15 meters (50 feet) and 1.2 meter (4-foot) high red gorgonian sea fans at 56 meters (185 feet). The deeper you go the bigger the gorgonians get, but watch your depth, as this wall bottoms out around 182 meters (600 feet)!

Underwater photographers also enjoy this dive because it hosts an array of different rockfish. You can often find juvenile yellow-eye rockfish hiding in the cloud sponge openings and along the rocky terrain. Adult tiger rockfish are very colourful and quillback rockfish bravely hold their ground.

The wall at Whytecliff Park is popular among shore divers for parking, entry/



BARB ROY

Divers explore Browning Wall at Port Hardy



RON AKESON



BARB ROY

bring the whole family. So, when diving here on weekends, make sure to arrive early for parking. The wall is a short walk down a paved road and then a relatively short swim from the shore.

Historical sites

While the marine history of the Pacific Northwest isn't as lengthy as the East Coast's, nor did our coast have the maritime military action of

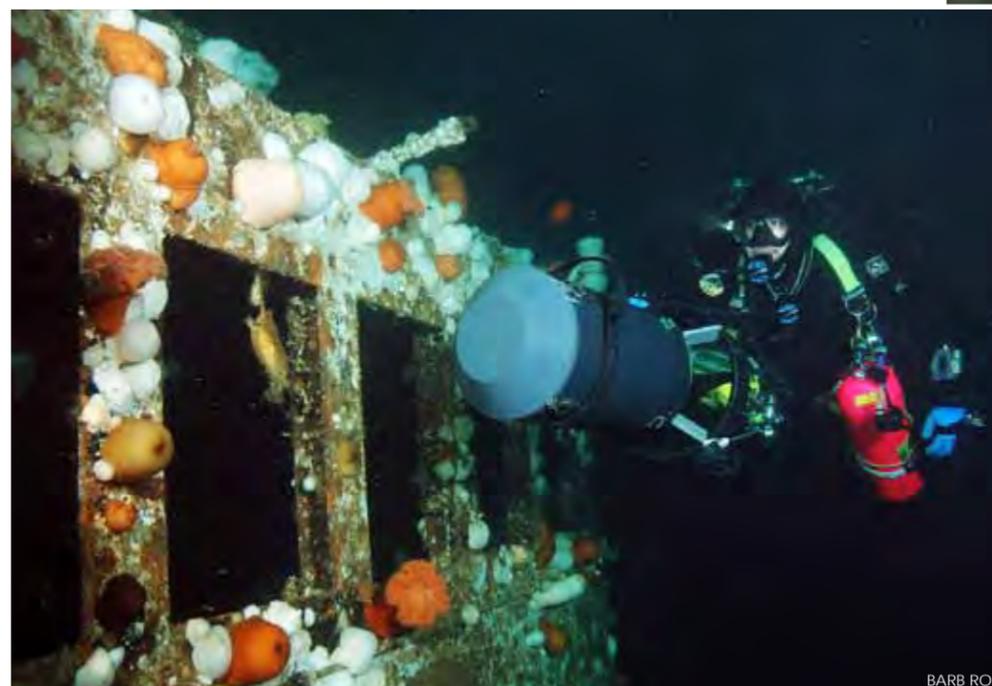
World War II, we still have a good selection of technical diving shipwrecks. But what sets us apart from the eastern US coast and the rest of the world are the extensive training sites we have.

British Columbia has four retired Canadian Destroyer Escorts (111 meters/366 feet in length) for both recreational and techni-

cal divers to enjoy. Add to this a 53-meter (175 foot) freighter, a 30-meter (100 foot) tugboat, a 122-meter (400 foot) Victoria-Class ship (equivalent to a US Liberty Class ship), and a 737 jet plane, all within recreational depths, and you have an endless playground to explore or train on!

These artificial reefs are commonly used by serious wreck divers to stage practice penetration

dives and learn in a semi-controlled environment. With outside entry to almost all deck levels, depths range from about 26 meters (85 feet) on the main decks to over 42 meters (140 feet) within the belly of the *HMCS Cape Breton*. For those looking to challenge their skills, the *HMCS Chaudiere* is located in Sechart Inlet positioned on



BARB ROY

Diver with scooter on *Cape Breton* wreck



Pacific Northwest

BARB ROY

THIS PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT: Barb Roy, with underwater camera, prepares to dive a deep wreck; Divers at *Gulf Stream* wreck; Diver on *Capilano* wreck

its side. This provides a different and often disorienting perspective when penetrating.

Unfortunately, none of the natural wrecks in Washington State or British Columbia are accessible from shore, but most are only a short boat ride from a local port of call. My favorites in BC include the wreck of

the *MV Gulf Stream*, a 44-meter (147-foot) vessel with its bow at 33 meters (110 feet) and the stern in approximately 50 meters (165 feet), near Dinner Rock off Powell River. Visibility is often excellent, particularly at depth. While the *Gulf Stream* can be done on air, a light Trimix makes the dive more enjoyable.



The *Capilano* is a 36-meter (120 foot) steamer located near Mitlenatch Island. Although this may not be a hardcore technical site at 42 meters (140 feet) of depth, it is worth a visit to see the amount of resident marine life, particularly the large lingcod and rockfish. While diving here last September we had over 30 meters (100 feet) of visibility—about as good as it can get.

A reel and lift bag is recom-



BARB ROY

mended for this dive as a back-up for safely doing decompression stops if the main ascent/descent line is not located. Be sure to check out the prop if gas permits.

Mitlenatch Island is also an enjoyable dive, especially if the curious Stellar sea lions come out to play. Across Georgia Strait near Comox is the wreckage of the *Scepter Squamish*, a 54-meter (180-foot) long barge, previously owned by the company Candive. There are many things living on the deck and various pieces of machinery for visiting divers to see.

The *Black Dragon* is a 45-meter (150-foot) freighter used as an illegal Chinese migrant ship transporting illegal people from China to British Columbia. It now lies in 45 meters (150 feet) of water near BC's capitol city of Victoria, on southern Vancouver Island. The *Black Dragon* is a great training site for some of the deeper more current laden wrecks, as there seems to always be a mild to moderate current present at some depth between the surface and the wreck.

These are just a few of the great natural shipwrecks in BC.

Depths of wrecks

Washington State shipwrecks tend to range in depth with the deepest feasible site at 106 meters (350 feet). The majority are only accessible with Trimix.

In the Straits of Juan de Fuca leading in from the Pacific Ocean, is the wreck of the 99-meter (326-foot) freighter *Diamond Knot*. The *Knot*, as local divers fondly call it, was inbound from Alaska with a full load of canned salmon when it collided with the *Fenn Victory* in a thick fog. Sitting in approximately 42 meters (140 feet) of water, the *Knot* can be quite a challenge due to strong currents and unpredictable weather. However, it is one of the wildest dives on the coast. Be sure to bring the camera on this one.

At the top of Admiralty Inlet, where the Straits of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound meet, we have the wreck of the 125-meter (412-foot) passenger steamer *SS Governor*, in 70 meters (230 feet) of water which sank in 1921. This is often considered the toughest technical dive in the Pacific Northwest, if not in North America. It requires special US Coast Guard permission, as do most of Washington's deeper wrecks, because they are located in active shipping lanes.



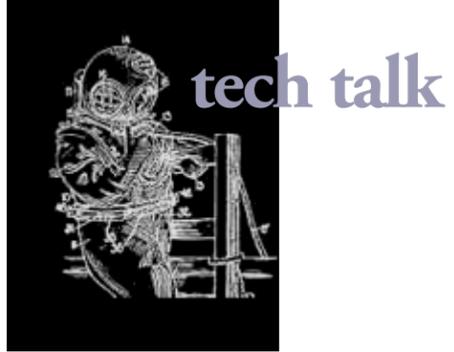
BARB ROY



BARB ROY

Pacific Northwest

THIS PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT: Ron Akeson with camera checks out a gorgonian fan at *Agamemnon*; Divers with John deBoeck; Diver Wayne Grant at *Saskatchewan*



The complexity increases from here due to the very treacherous currents to deal with, which have been known to be moving in layers of opposite directions at the surface and on the bottom. The *Governor* is truly the 'Mount Everest' of Pacific Coast technical diving, fueling the drive even more.

The 91-meter (300-foot) wreck of the *Bunker Hill* is another challenging dive due to low visibility conditions. The oil tanker sank in two separate pieces in 86 meters (285 feet) of water after an explosion in an empty cargo hold blew the ship apart while in transit to Anacortes. This left the bow and stern sections about one and a half nautical miles apart.

I have been on the bow section numerous times and due to low visibility (typically 4.5 meters/15 feet) and currents, I have yet to identify the mid ship bridge, if it survived the explosion. This is an advanced Trimix dive not for the faint of heart.

The *SS Admiral Sampson* is at the bottom of Admiralty Inlet, in 99 meters (325 feet) of water off Point No Point near Seattle, due to a collision in the fog. This



85-meter (280-foot) passenger steamer is only visited by a handful of local technical divers due to its depth and location.

The *Sampson* was commercially salvaged with the ultimate goal of retrieving the Purser's safe (still waiting to be found, as is the *SS Governor's* safe). As with the *Governor*, the *Sampson* is in the shipping lanes and not only requires permission from the Coast Guard to dive it, but permission from the individuals who own salvage rights.

Wreck alley

Elliott Bay, bordered by the Seattle waterfront, is often referred to as 'wreck alley'. Here a large number of wrecks can be found at various depths, some still waiting to be discovered.

I routinely dive a 69-meter (229-foot) long ship here with a group of fellow tech divers, on a wreck believed to be the *AJ*

Fuller. At 73 meters (240 feet), the *Fuller* is an easier technical Trimix dive because currents are not always an issue (but visibility can be). Also found in the Bay are the *Multnomah*, an old paddle wheeler

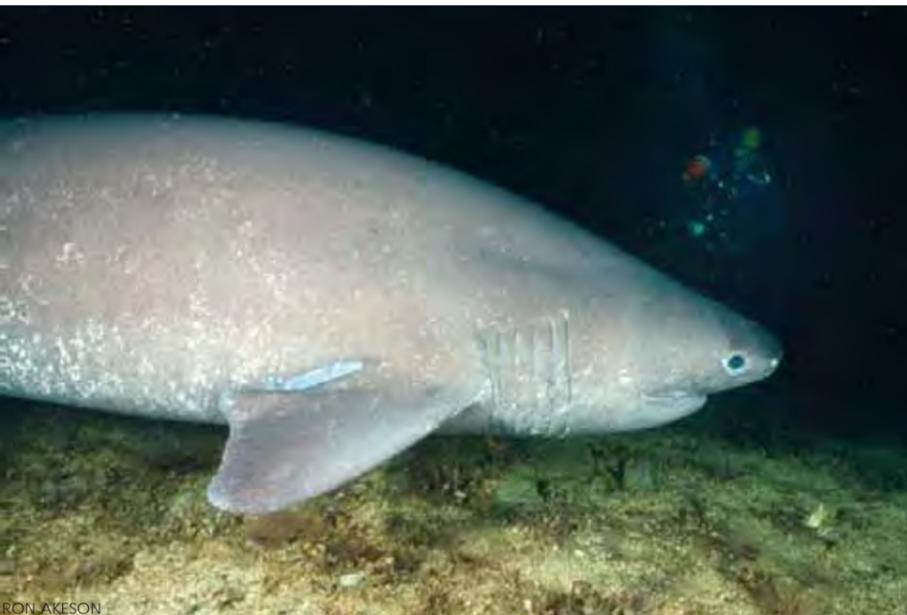


that sunk in 88 meters (290 feet) with livestock still chained to the deck.

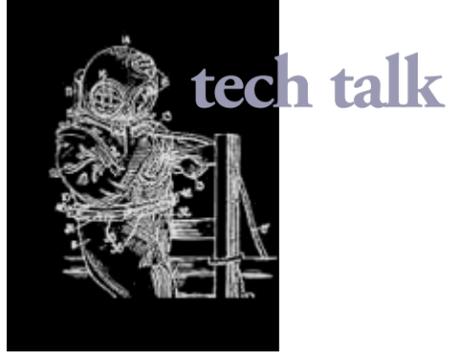
An easier training dive in this area is the *MT6* barge sitting in 61 meters (200 feet). This barge was a railway barge sunk during a collision in 1949. The *MT6* actually carried Teddy Roosevelt's personal train



Pacific Northwest



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Six gill shark; Captains bath tub on *Governor* wreck; Browning Wall at Port Hardy; Tiger rockfish (inset)



BARB ROY

across the Columbia River when he visited the Washington territory—before it was a state.

Practical information

It should be noted that while a number of dive charter operators run trips to BC's technical sites, there are not many open-boat charters offered to the wrecks within Puget Sound, Washington State, except through qualified technical dive organizers. Currently, only Adventures Down Under in Bellingham and Northwest Sport Divers in Bothell do such trips.

While many of the above sites can be done on air, many charter operators require Trimix to be used due to the complexity of currents, low visibility, and cold water. As with most

temperate locations with water temperatures ranging from 5.6-9.4°C (42-49°F), the length of time underwater suggests the use of a dry suit. Many of the dive locations also only offer a handful of suitable current diving times throughout the year.

So, no matter what type of technical diving you prefer, the Pacific Northwest has something to offer both resident and visiting technical divers. You can bring your rebreathers or doubles, scooters, and find mixed gas

fills at many shops in the Pacific Northwest. Don't forget the photography or video systems because you will not be disappointed in what you find. Limited technical rentals are available through dive stores (usually double tanks) but it is wise to check first. A bit of logistical homework ahead of time will save numerous headaches or perhaps an entire dive trip. ■

Ron Akeson is a technical diving Instructor Trainer for several training agencies and commonly organizes trips to the various technical diving sites in Washington State and British Columbia (for over six years). He can be reached by phone at 1+360-676-4177 or via email at ron@adventuresdownunder.com. Ron's technical diving experience spans over 14 years with close to 4500 cold-water dives.

Travel Links

- Adventures Down Under www.adventuresdownunder.com
- Dive Industry Association of British Columbia (DIABC) www.diveindustrybc.com
- Tourism British Columbia www.hellobc.com



BARB ROY



BARB ROY

Mamro charter boat at Port Hardy



BARB ROY



BARB ROY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Underwater descent; Porthole Charters dive boat in Washington State; Divers at Sunshine Coast; Diver Craig Linburgh diving in Washington State