



Japan's
Miyakojima
Vast & Vibrant Coral Reefs & Marine Life

Text and photos
by Martin Voeller



Pristine beach of 17 End on Miyako Island in Okinawa prefecture of Japan (above); *Chromodoris nudibranch* (right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Coral reef of Yabiji

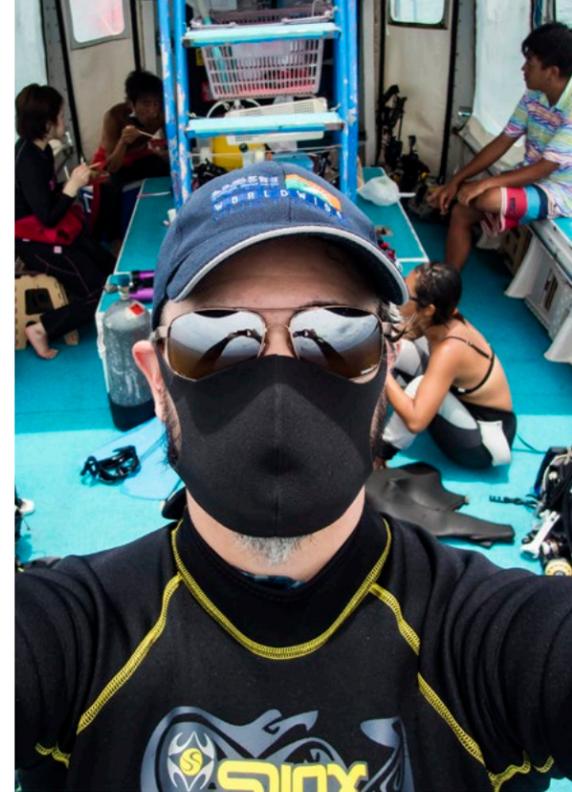
Year 2020. The coronavirus pandemic has confronted the world with an unprecedented situation. Many countries went into lockdown, and as a result, many people were forced to stay indoors, including myself in Japan. Although Japan never went into an official “lock-down”—it instead went into a so-called state of emergency—I could not wait to get out of the Tokyo metropolis as soon as restrictions were lifted.

I had stayed indoors for far too long—three months—and my body was craving the ocean as it never had before. As traveling to countries outside of Japan was not possible due to the pandemic, I decided to take on an excursion to the warmest place possible within Japan: the Okinawa Islands. However, there are many islands that comprise Okinawa, and given the grim situation that I had been in, I had to choose the island that most represented the opposite of it: the tropical paradise of Miyakojima, or Miyako Island.

Miyako Island lies 300km south of Okinawa Main Island and is the fourth largest island in Okinawa prefecture. The island is easily accessible from Tokyo—just



Shigira beach—corals are flourishing just a few steps away from the beach.



Pristine beach of Imugya Marine Garden, Miyako Island (above); A food court, with tables spaced apart for social distancing, is usually crowded during evening hours, but is almost empty now (left).

mode of transport.

Strolling through the rural, empty streets on the island, you will also come across many lion-like statues of mythical creatures called “shisa,” which are often placed around homes to ward off evil spirits. They are available in many souvenir shops as well. The island has its own unique cuisine, too; goya or luffa champuru (stir fry dish), Miyako soba (buckwheat flour noodles), and Miyako beef steak are some of the most famous dishes originating from the island.

The beaches are breathtaking. The island is known to host the best beaches in all of Japan. The white, sandy beaches and azure sparkling waters of Miyako Island will make you feel like you are in a tropical paradise. Most beaches on islands of Okinawa are often watched by lifeguards, and the waters have boundaries in which you are limited, where



Pristine beach of Imugya Marine Garden, Miyako Island (above); View overlooking Shigira Resort (top center); Since the COVID-19 outbreak, it has become mandatory for all guests to wear masks, even while on a dive boat (top right).

a three-hour direct flight. The island of over 50,000 people is easily accessible from Tokyo—just a three-hour direct flight.

It is home to sugarcane cultivation, and away from the beaches, you will mostly see land covered by sugarcane fields. One can even rent a scooter that runs on biofuel made from sugarcane, which can be an efficient





Pristine beach of Imugya Marine Garden, Miyako Island (above); Crab on a beach—a very common sight (below)

you can enjoy water sports, etc. This is not the case with Miyako Island—you are free to enjoy the boundless beaches without restrictions from lifeguards. And with so many pristine beaches from which to choose, you will be asking yourself where to even begin when you land on the island.

Coral reefs

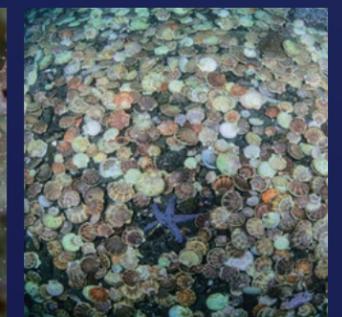
One of biggest attractions of Miyako Island are the beautiful, vibrant coral reefs. Yabiji is an area located in the northern seas of Miyako Island, and it has the largest nationwide coral reefs in all of Japan—it stretches over 25km! The water depth at this site is quite shallow, and during low tide, the seabeds are exposed and can be seen from above. Because of this

particular sight, Yabiji has been called the “Illusory Island.”

Not only divers but also snorkelers can fully enjoy swimming in this area, as reefs and marine life are much closer in proximity. Hard corals here are lush, abundant, colorful and gigantic. Among the coral reefs, you can expect to see large table coral, hump coral and stag-horn coral—just to name a few.

As for marine life, you can expect to see countless schools of anthias, hovering freely over the coral reefs,

as well as various types of blue damselfish, swimming and dwelling inside the countless corals. Clownfish darting in and out of sea anemones are a common sight, and you may encounter sea turtles taking a nice snooze among the reefs as well.



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Miyakojima



Large colony of lettuce coral (above); Blue damselfish among staghorn coral (top left); Black-lipped butterflyfish, anthias and sea fan on reef (bottom left); Sea turtles are commonly seen (left).

many corals were bleached and perished.

I have read many times in reports that about 70 percent of the reefs in Yabiji have been impacted. I tried to reconfirm this figure with my dive operator, and many dive operators are recently challenging it. Areas which previously did not have any stretches of corals are now starting to thrive, and it is now being speculated that only 70 percent of “known” corals have been destroyed; there

However, not everything is hunky dory here. As with many coral reefs around the world, the reefs of Yabiji have suffered. Especially during the harsh El Nino of 2016,

seem to be other “unknown” areas in which corals are thriving and have not been impacted.

Again, the reefs here are vast, which may explain the above rea-

son. Indeed, Yabiji consists of eight large coral reefs and the small clusters of coral reefs that surround them. “Yabiji” actually means “eight reefs on top of each other” in the local language.

Underwater topography

Another underwater feature of Miyako Island is the unique topography. It is an exact opposite of the lush coral reefs I mentioned above, comprising underwater arches, tunnels and caves formed over eons of time via seismic and volcanic activities.

Miyako Island is composed entirely of coral limestone, which can be eroded easily by rainwater, seawater, currents and waves. Some tunnels and arches can be as deep at 50 to 70m,



Coral reef of Yabiji (above); Miyako Island abounds with macro subjects, like this *Phyllidia varicosa* nudibranch photographed with a snoot (left).

mountains and rivers. Nothing flows into the ocean from land to stir up the visibility. Thus, one can often enjoy the ethereal effects created by direct sunlight penetrating sunbeams into



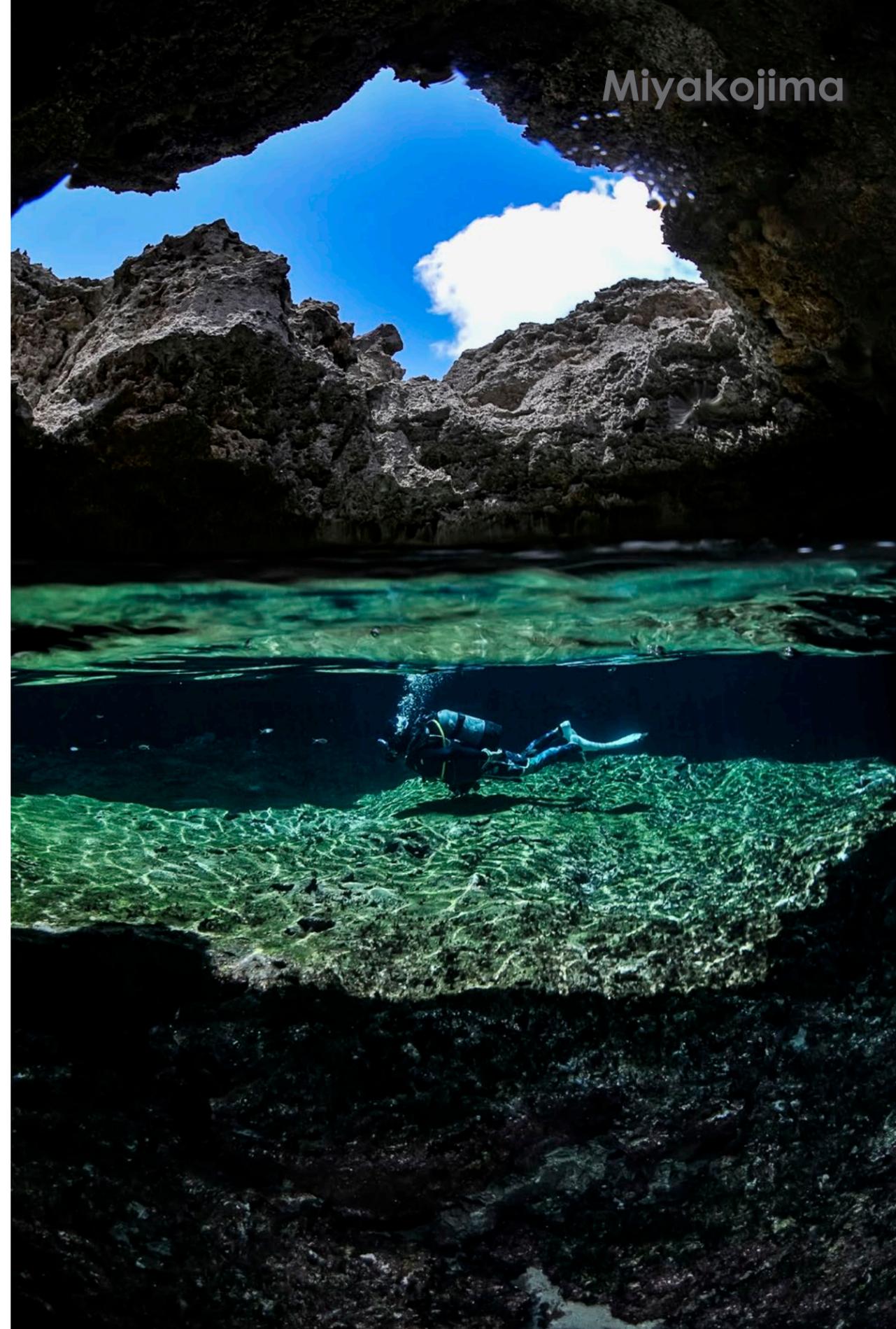
Sea fans on reef under the dive boat (above); Pair of *Chromodoris* nudibranchs (left)

and the inner areas can be pitch dark. And because of the low energy of the seawater in such areas, the sediment along the sea bottom is not hard and rocky—instead, it is very fine.

Visibility is almost always clear and excellent as the island lacks

these caves and tunnels, and one such site is called Satan's Palace. This dive site name is derived from its complicated terrain, which includes a large vertical hole called a "palace," found after one swims and meanders through many narrow and dark arches. The





Cenote of Miyako Island? This is a giant pond called Tori-Ike, now connected to the ocean via a tunnel, allowing divers to explore (above); Diver at a dive point called Satan's Palace (left)

cathedral-like light that penetrates from above is mind-blowing.

At a symbolic cave dive site called Tori-ike, there are two large ponds linked to the sea by a cave with a diameter of 10m, and the water level of both pools varies with the tide. It is considered to have been formed from limestone caves, which admitted the sea over many years.

When the ponds are viewed from above, they closely resemble the cenote sink-holes of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. Legend has it that a fisherman hooked a spirit out of the sea, and as punishment, a tsunami was sent, so the fisherman's house caved in, forming a pool. Because there is freshwater in the upper layer and saltwater in the bottom layer, many layers of color

can be observed, as well as a chemocline phenomenon.

Wreck site

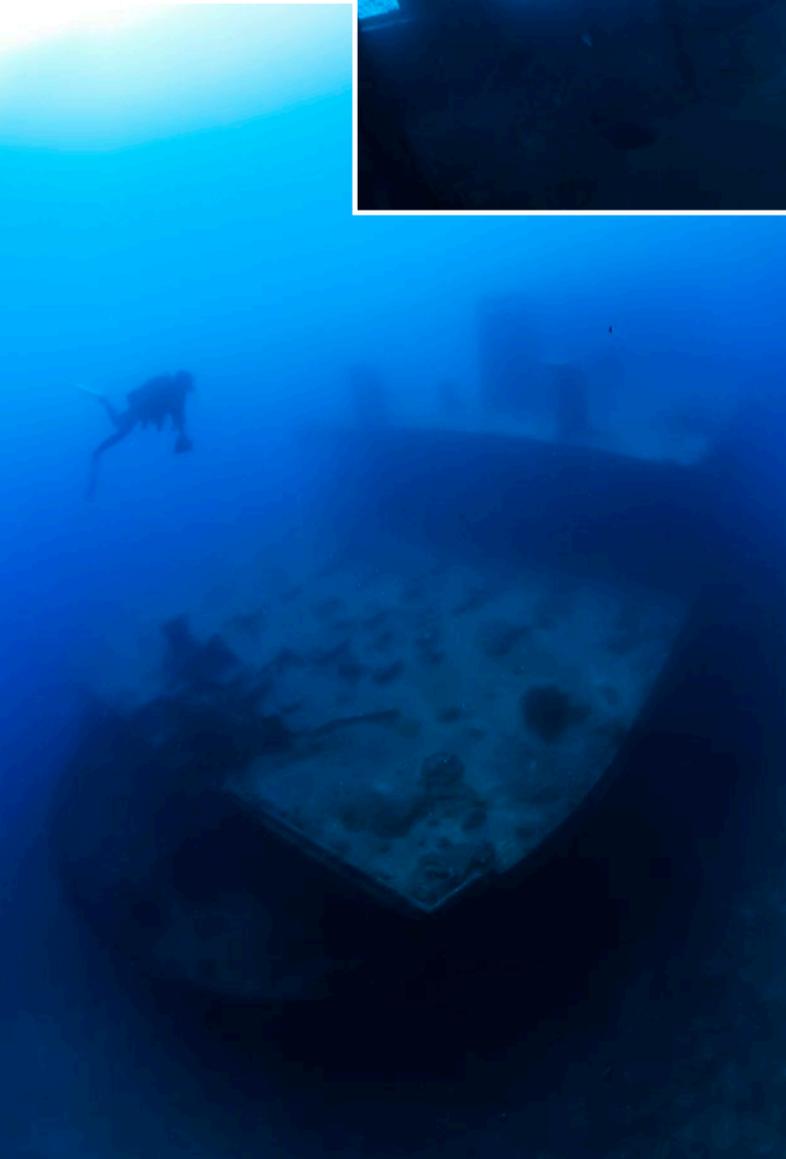
Another dive site of interest here is the Irabu shipwreck. Miyako Island is surrounded by several smaller islands, and one of the surrounding islands is called Irabu Island. In order to carry people between these Miyako and Irabu islands, a car ferry was used in the past for transportation. In 2015, Japan's longest toll-free bridge of 3,540m was completed, making the 40m-long car ferry no longer necessary. It was then sunk, creating a new dive site on the island.

Most divers may think wreck sites are deep and dangerous, but this particular shipwreck is not deep; it is a maximum of

Diver swims inside a cenote-looking pond called Tori-ike.



Diving inside the Irabu shipwreck can be very eerie (right); Overview of Irabu shipwreck (far right); Diver on Irabu shipwreck (below)



Large schools of luminous cardinalfish are often hiding inside the Irabu shipwreck (above).

18m deep, and there is hardly any current. Once you enter the shipwreck, it is eerie and haunting. It almost feels as if you are inside a ghost shipwreck frozen in time. On the other hand, when the sunlight shines through the openings of the ship, it feels as if you have been abducted by a U.F.O.

But once you turn your video lights on, you will soon notice that the wreck is teeming with

life. Dusky batfish and longfin batfish are seen gently swimming around. Large schools of luminous cardinalfish or pigmy sweepers will be hiding in corners of the ship, and when lit with your lights, they shine and create luminous reflections. As you exit the ship, you will be greeted by numerous anthias swimming over the corals, which have been growing on the shipwreck for the past five years.



Colony of hard corals on reef at Miyako Island (above); Beautiful anthias can be found among the many corals (center inset).

Afterthoughts

Visiting and diving in Miyako Island was exactly what I needed—stress-relieving, abundant nature. Here, you can expect to experience clear and pristine ocean, untouched and lush greenery, and rich fauna and flora.

The summer in Miyako Island is long, and one can easily enjoy warm months from April until October. Temperatures will rise over 30°C, but the steady, light breeze from the sea regulates the heat quite well. The typhoon season arrives in August and September, which should be avoided. January and February are the coldest months, with the mercury reaching around 18°C, making Miyako Island a popular destination even during the winter. Moreover, ocean conditions tend to be calmer, with better visibility during the

winter months.

There is so much diversity underwater at Miyako Island. From massive and lush coral reefs to underwater tunnels and caves, you get to explore the best of both worlds. Dive sites are filled with macro life as well, and if you visit the island during the right season, you may also be lucky enough to see big animals such as manta rays.

I had brought both of my wide-angle and macro rigs with me this time, as I did not want to miss out on any opportunity. Just my underwater camera rig alone weighed over 40kg, but I think I made the correct choice. ■

Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) has launched a site called "Japan Diving" to welcome divers from all over the world. You can choose from a menu

of over 170 dive locations in Japan. For further information about diving in Japan via JNTO, please visit: japan.travel/diving/en/.

Martin Voeller is an avid diver and underwater photographer based in Tokyo, Japan. Diving since 2011, he is a certified NAUI Divemaster and serves as a dive guide in the Kanto area. Having dived from the southernmost tip of Japan (Okinawa) to the northern tip (Hokkaido) and much more in between, he enjoys the variety of diving that Japan offers, ranging from tropical to cold water. He continues to explore Japan's diverse undersea formations and topography, and his mission is to share this with the rest of the world. See more of his underwater images at: poseidonphotos.com.

Coral reef of Yabiji (above); Green sea turtles are a common sight (top right).