

TRUK LAGOON

For 20 years I'd dreamed of diving this legendary place. Perhaps those circling sharks were puzzled because these new 'scuba trespassers' were a little quieter than normal. We'd brought our AP Evolution closed circuit rebreathers and crates of the latest high def video and still camera technology to explore, film, and photograph the deeper and less-dived wrecks in the 29-degree water.

Half an hour later the sharks were replaced by American divers with single cylinders, shorts and T-shirts; they plummeted down the shotline towards the San Francisco Maru, their liveboard blocking the sunlight above. Within a few minutes they reappeared on a non-stop ascent. One brave contender had doubled his bottom time, accumulating a few minutes of decompression. After he left and the shadow of the boat moved away, we finished our own deco in peace.

We'd spent exactly an hour on the wreck below, a healthy bottom time which allowed us to almost explore the entire wreck inside out. Our little Evolution rebreathers allowed us to significantly increase the bottom times on our dives. We'd also figured out that by re-cycling the gas we breathed in the Evolution CCRs, in just one week we'd see what an open circuit diver would see in five weeks of diving. The extra hundred bucks excess luggage we copped for dragging our rigs with us was great value for money! Though we covered the San Francisco Maru in one dive, there's so much cargo inside the holds and interesting artifacts, a single dive just isn't enough. This wreck was hot as hell – yes we'd return the following week – but right now we had two hours of perfect high def footage and over 1000 RAW stills to analyse!

Truk Lagoon is in the Republic of Micronesia in the Pacific Ocean 1,300 miles south east of Japan and 1000 miles north of Papua New Guinea. This natural harbour was a vital tactical base for the Japanese Navy's combined fleet. The famous Pearl Harbour attack was co-ordinated from Truk, following amphibious assaults on the Marshall Islands. Truk was the next major roadblock for the American Pacific Fleet in its advance towards the Japanese Empire. In a series of raids on 17-18 February 1944 known as Operation Hailstorm, American forces wiped out the entire Japanese auxiliary fleet here.

More than 60 mainly upright, incredibly well-preserved wrecks, including many Japanese defence aircraft, attract divers in their thousands. Though many wrecks are in shallow water, several are at 60 metres or more and these were our focus. Stowed on or within the decks of these ships are Howitzer guns, trucks, lorries, bulldozers, tanks – even complete aircraft.

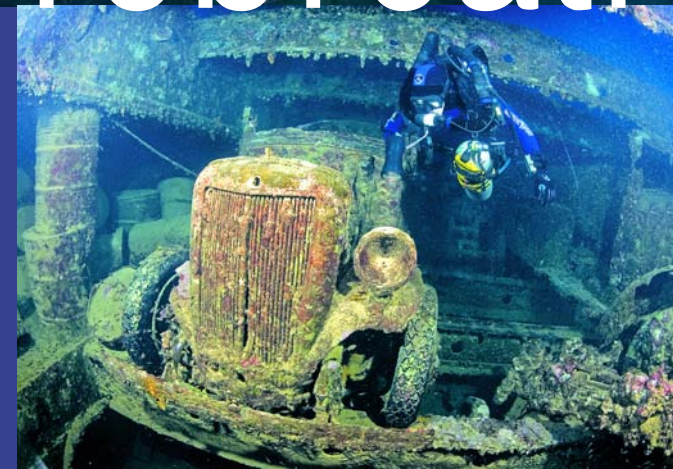
The 5,831-ton San Francisco Maru is on the North East pass



: TEXT AND IMAGES  
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† BEING CIRCLED BY SHARKS IS NO FUN AT THE BEST OF TIMES, EVEN MORE SO WHEN YOU HAVE AN HOUR AND A HALF OF DECOMPRESSION LEFT AND HAVE TO STAY IN THE WATER! TO TAKE MY MIND OFF THE SITUATION I REFLECTED ON THE DIVE I'D JUST MADE – ONE OF THE MOST SPECTACULAR WRECK DIVES OF MY LIFE.

# deep rebreathing



Above - The 3inch bow gun on the deck of the San Francisco Maru  
Left to right -  
An incredibly intact electrical switchboard deep inside the San Francisco Maru's engine room  
Shell cases fallen from their original stowed boxes deep inside the San Francisco Maru  
A diver examines an Isuzu type 94 truck stowed in the holds of the San Francisco Maru

side of the lagoon east of Dublon Island on white sand around 65 metres down. Immediately forward of the superstructure are three armed Mitsubishi tanks stowed as deck cargo beside flatbed lorries, more of which are in No2 hold. Almost every hold is stacked with live ammunition ranging from cases of shells, torpedoes, depth charges and mines, to crates of rifle bullets. Exposed beams and catwalks divide the decks and more war equipment is seen the deeper you go.

As well as tanks, several torpedo bodies can be seen lying on the port stern deck, but the real treat are the intact engine rooms. The bridge superstructure above

the Lagoon, if not the world; at 117 metres long, the dive guides refer to her as a serious dive where extreme depths can be encountered. They state the site is an excellent candidate for experienced divers during deep dive weeks where doubles can be used – or in our case, yellow closed circuit rebreathers!

Another deep wreck that interested us was the Japanese Kamikaze class destroyer Oite. Despite receiving orders to head for Saipan, its Captain had already taken his vessel through the North Pass where Operation Hailstorm was well advanced. Soon after an exchange of information, the Oite came under heavy fire from US fighters. The

life which included lots of resident oceanic whitetip sharks! The site was discovered by the guys at the Blue Lagoon Resort but they rarely venture out to the wreck because of the depth. When they do, it's amazing how they find it without visible transits and no modern technology aboard the small boats. The Oite is a poignant reminder of what happened at Truk Lagoon and human remains can clearly be seen around the wreck. On the stern section a rack of depth charges are stacked neatly ready for deployment; close by a twin-barrel machine cannon gun stands clear as well as the main battery gun which points forward. The extended stern deckhouse between these two guns has

wishing to explore the wreck should read a detailed guide of the wrecks layout before they make the drop.

The Aikoku Maru is close to the San Francisco Maru in deep water shipping lanes east of Dublon Island. Scuba divers often dive the top at around 45 metres. Blasted by an aerial attack, this massive 10,000 ton plus passenger freighter has to be seen to be believed. It's amazing how one attack destroyed such a large section of the ship – it's as if someone cut down the centre of the ship with a knife and towed the bow away! The wreck is on a white seabed at about 70 metres, upright on a fairly even keel. Swimming along covered promenade

decks at 50 metres, the size reminded me of the ocean liner Britannic in Greece. Everything seemed so big! Venturing inside doors along this deck revealed interesting accommodation areas, many with white porcelain sanitary fixings. Laying close to land, Aikoku Maru is very prone to silting and thick silt lies inside. A huge number of men died when she sank and, though most human remains were recovered by the Japanese many years ago, a set of bones can still appear from under the silt. One of our team venturing deep inside the wreck saw several haunting skeletons of Japanese soldiers that still had gas masks attached to them. On the exterior

marine growth has proliferated; now richly coloured anemones cover the portholes and the large stern gun which points out over the port side. There are anti-aircraft guns on the boat deck and resident sharks that park themselves on the exposed decks.

The small fast 'banana boats' we used took a maximum of six divers per boat, per wreck, per dive, to minimise disturbing visibility while we photographed. After a morning on a deep wreck we'd return to one of the shallow sites in the afternoon; we averaged about 5-6 hours a day in the water. Each boat headed out to different wrecks each day with technical divers

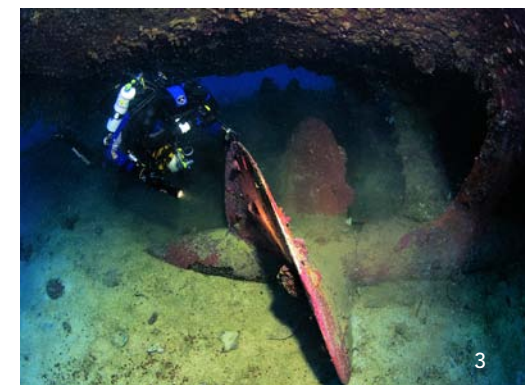
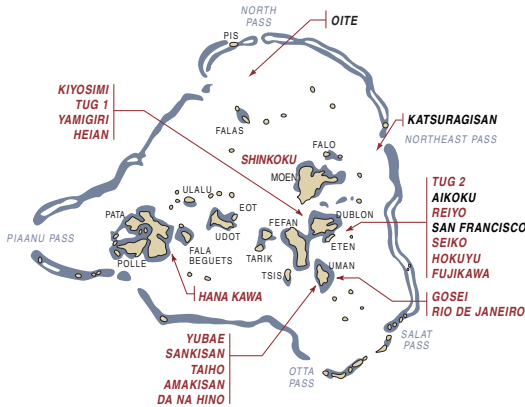


has begun to collapse but divers can swim through the galley entrance to the interior walkway and make their way down to the engine room. Coloured rich rust red, the machinery that once ran this vessel is spectacular. To the starboard lower side is a huge electrical switchboard with switch names in place. Steam gauges still in their original panel arrangement are labeled in Japanese. Here in the engine room a tiny rebreather like the Evolution really comes into its own. As you navigate the lower areas, rust and silt knocked from gantry walkways above impairs visibility, so the lack of expelled gas may even become a life-saving commodity.

The bow gun points quietly over the port side, covered with multi coloured sponges and filmy hydroids, one of those iconic images for which Truk is so famous. The San Francisco Maru is without doubt one of the best wrecks in

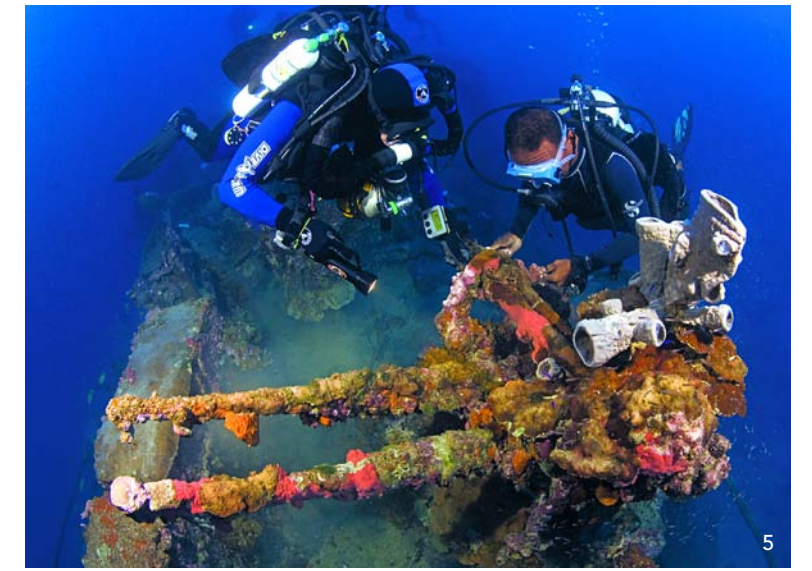
first wave of attacks took out the command post, commander and bridge. The second wave of five avenger planes struck amidships with a torpedo, which blew the bridge to bits and split her in two, sinking her immediately. Of the 589 men on board only 20 survived.

The Oite has awesome visibility. With no major island close by, little if any sediment has built up on this wreck so it's excellent to photograph. The stern section is completely upright at around 68 metres, while the bow section at the same depth lies to port a distance away, facing the opposite direction and completely inverted. This was a fabulous dive in clear water with intense marine



doors either side allowing divers to peer into the accommodation area. Close to this my diving partner Gabrielle Paparo from Italy discovered the location of the ship's bell in a storeroom. Truk Lagoon is an underwater museum so nothing is touched and artifacts like ships bells are left in place (in other locations around the world this would have been a major trophy). From here, across the port side seabed the bow section can be seen in the distance; here the open break allows divers to examine the hull interior with its many working mechanisms and machinery.

The Oite is an amazing dive and a classic Japanese Kamikaze destroyer – anyone



- 1 Divers complete their decompression in the 29° waters of the famous lagoon
- 2 High def cameraman Carl Spencer from the UK
- 3 The propellers & rudder of the Japanese destroyer Oite
- 4 Rifle rounds now remain exposed from the boxes they were once stored in
- 5 Divers inspect the AA guns on the Oite destroyer
- 6 Open skylights above the engine rooms allow deeper access into the ships
- 7 After 64 years below water the Japanese destroyer Oite's bell remains
- 8 A diver examines human remains on a deep wreck

## deep wreck diving°



A diver looks on at a Japanese type HA-Go tank on the deck of the San Francisco Maru

aboard eager to explore the next wreck on their list. We'd zoom off to a site and arrive in less than 10 minutes – land-based diving with fast boats!

The 2,472-ton Katsuragisan Maru was another dive off the beaten track and deep enough to often be overlooked by guidebooks. Striking a mine as she entered the North East Channel, she and her valuable cargo sank to 70 metres. The wreck is upright on an even keel and much of her cargo of trucks and government stores are still in their original place. No1 hold is filled with trucks tightly stowed together; little appears in No2 hold, but No3 is filled with rolls of steel mesh matting. A further six trucks are in hold No4 and divers can enter compartments under the aft section of the boat deck where smaller cargo and supplies were stored.

The bridge and amidships section of the Katsuragisan Maru were a little disappointing. Fire broke out here and swept through the wooden superstructure soon after the ship struck a mine. But like the Oite, the visibility out here was stunning. As it's away from the main lagoon traffic, the Katsuragisan Maru has an abundance of whitetip sharks that circle the wreck.

Mixed gas diving with rebreathers in Truk Lagoon is still in its infancy. This trip was organised by Pete Mesley who is based in New Zealand. He takes care of all permits and provides Sofno Lime, gas and cylinders for CCR divers who book on his specialist deep weeks to Truk. Pete also brings gas analysers,

sonar equipment for finding new wrecks, and everything else that divers get stung for as excess luggage. He also has special arrangements for diving the deep wrecks in the Lagoon with Gradvin Aisek of the Blue Lagoon dive shop and resort.

Ten days of diving my Evolution almost 5-6 hours a day in Truk Lagoon was great and this was the best diving I'd done since the day I walked into a dive school 20 years ago. Whatever people say about the diving in Truk Lagoon multiply it by ten, it really is that good.

> **LINK:** [www.truklagoon.co.uk](http://www.truklagoon.co.uk) ■