

Ghost Fleet

Odyssey

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> FOR MOST DIVERS TRUK LAGOON IS NEAR THE TOP OF THEIR WISH LIST OF PLACES TO DIVE AND MANY WOULD RATE IT THE FINEST WRECK DIVING ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.

The destruction of so many ships and aircraft by the planes of US Carrier Force 50 on 17/18 February 1944 has left a memorable record on the ocean floor. The anticipation brought about by having to book up to two years ahead if you want to do a liveaboard only adds to the tension and excitement of one of the most exhilarating experiences to be had underwater. Truk Lagoon has everything from abundant marine life to deep penetration wreck diving. Though there are only a few naval wrecks, the remains of the merchantmen that supported the fleet provide a ghostly and awe-inspiring glimpse into the past.

The huge numbers of wrecks lie silently in depths from 10-60 metres, and a few far

deeper. Due to the nature of the lagoon most wrecks lie virtually side by side, so it's easy to dive multiple wrecks in one day. Protection of the reef leads to calm waters, which combined with high local water temperatures, has led to extensive colonisation of shallower wrecks with abundant bright coloured corals and marine life better than most reef systems.

The best way to exploit the concentration of wrecks is on a liveaboard and the top choice is the Truk Odyssey, which caters for up to 16 divers. This is a fantastic boat with high quality meals and snacks appearing after every dive. The guides and captain are very experienced and will tune an itinerary to suit the skills and experience of the group, showing flexibility over specific requests.

Multiple dives on the same wreck means you can explore different sections at leisure, do deep engine room penetrations or just enjoy the marine life on the external surfaces. For photographers the option to revisit points of interest, after reviewing their initial efforts, with different lenses or varied techniques, was a rare luxury. The ability to moor directly over the ship and fall off the back was an ultimate pleasure, avoiding the aggravation and discomfort of using zodiacs.

The routine was to wake at 6am, breakfast, briefing at 7.30am, with diving beginning around 8am with the option of four or five dives per day. However, once briefed on a wreck, guides were very relaxed about buddy pairs diving to their



Left to right: Artefacts on the bridge of the Shinkoku Maru include a Japanese First Aid box full of sake bottles; Thirsty work; One of several 105mm anti-tank guns on the deck of the Nippo Maru; Engine room telegraph.



Bellow: Neon Damsels (Pomacentrus coelestis) congregate on the coral encrusted mast of the Hoki Maru; Bow gun on the Shinkoku Maru heavily encrusted in coral.



Left to right: Graceful bow of the near upright Kensho Maru; Great visibility down onto the bridge & funnel of the Kensho Maru; Fuselage of a Zero fighter in Hold 2 of the Fujikawa Maru; Diver examines the 6" British bow gun on the Fujikawa Maru.

own schedule, meaning photographers could get their shots before the vis was degraded by other divers.

You can only visit a fraction of the 52 wrecks in a week, but it's possible to see a wide variety and each has a distinctive and memorable personality. The Shinkoku Maru is one of the largest and most stunning. Large parts of the ship are in shallow water and she's perfect for multiple dives (including spectacular night dives) exploring the fantastic artificial reef that's grown on her masts and superstructure. Pretty much every colour of soft coral is found and large groups of damselfishes, butterflyfishes, anemonefishes and other reef fish abound. Grey reef sharks circled close to the wreck, coming in occasionally to check on divers, and large schools of Jacks were ever present.

For those after more adrenalin the wreck could be penetrated in a number of places, but using a guide is strongly recommended as it was pitch black and heavily silted at lower levels. The bridge and superstructure can be easily explored and in the infirmary there were human remains lying on the operating table. The

guides reported that, in a truly macabre joke, a diver had previously gathered up the components of a full skeleton and laid it out on the table, but this had been subsequently dismantled.

The *Fujikawa Maru* is rated one of the top wrecks in the world. She's almost upright, well within sports diving depth, has magnificent deep penetrations and a fascinating cargo. A deep penetration dive into the engine room and workshop is a must to see the famous "R2D2" compressor and numerous machine tools.

Going down to the third level was only done with an experienced guide as it's forbiddingly dark. The eerie silence is only broken by the sound of your own breathing. Imagination runs riot with images of those long-gone sailors using the still solid wooden telephone box and perfectly preserved gas mask. Even those who weren't claustrophobic admitted to being nervous here!

The other unique feature was in Hold No 2 where the fuselages and wings of a number of Zero fighters rest on the bottom. *Fujikawa Maru* is also one of the few wrecks to have 'onsen' style

bathrooms, typical of a Japanese household. Unlike Western baths, the idea is to wash outside the bath and then have a hot soak once clean, as bath water was shared by many sailors.

Though I waited two years to dive Truk, it still exceeded my high expectations. Each dive was different with huge ships, small personal artefacts, dark engine rooms, colourful corals and abundant marine life all competing for the highlight of the day.

Apart from the wrecks there was the opportunity to dive with large numbers of grey reef sharks drawn in by a large frozen tuna – the 'icing on the cake' of a memorable week. We were also fortunate to spend an hour swimming with a school of 10-12 dolphins who seemed genuinely intrigued by our presence. Surfacing to find dolphins jumping over our heads made this a wonderful and rare event.

Sadly time, local fishermen and careless diving is slowly taking its toll on these glorious wrecks, but with good management hopefully they'll continue to deliver a stunning diving experience for many years to come.

A HISTORY OF TRUK LAGOON Japanese involvement in Micronesia can be traced back to the early years of World War I when German raiders were harassing Allied shipping in the East China Sea. Japan was requested to join the Allied war effort and they jumped at the excuse to expand their sphere of influence in the Pacific. Japan captured various German islands around Micronesia. Suspicions soon began about Japanese intentions, as they denied access to all foreign vessels and refused to provide further help in the war. After the war Japan was awarded a mandate to govern, despite American protests, provided the islands were demilitarised. Japan immediately set about exploiting the islands for their own interest and relegating the local Trukese to third class citizens, all in breach of the mandate. Until the 1930s trade and tourism were the main focus, leading to a build up of port facilities and the first flying boat base.

By 1937 the various agreements struck after WWI limiting military expansion had expired, and Japan began to build communication facilities and military airfields in a substantial way. By 1941 Truk was home to not only the 4th Mandated Fleet, but also headquarters to the Combined Fleet that was responsible for the planning and execution of the attack on Pearl Harbour. Truk made the perfect naval base, being an atoll 40 miles in diameter with only five navigable passes, but 100 metres deep in places. It could easily accommodate the whole fleet and had sufficient islands to support coastal defence guns and land based fighter/bombers. Its strategic location and substantial repair facilities made this the most important Japanese base outside mainland Japan. Shortly before America attacked, the lagoon contained some 100 vessels, including the superbattleships *Yamato* and *Musashi* with their 18" guns, and around 370 aircraft of various types.

The Allies were well aware of Japanese preparations, but had little solid intelligence on which to assess the strength of the islands. In January 1942 an Australian air reconnaissance brought back limited information other than to confirm the significant naval and air threat, but the follow-up bombing attacks did little damage. It was not until 3 February 1944 that the Americans conducted successful overflights in preparation for their planned sea-borne invasion. The photographs showed a huge number of naval vessels including aircraft carriers and battleships. 'Operation Hailstone' was hurriedly rewritten and brought forward to include only the fastest and most powerful ships in the US fleet, hoping for a decisive surface battle. This force included nine aircraft carriers with over 500 fighters, dive-bombers and torpedo bombers. Unfortunately Japanese Admiral Koga had seen the writing on the wall and withdrawn all the major naval units from the lagoon back to Japan, never to return. Despite this, when American attacks began on 17 February 1944, they found 60 vessels at anchor, most of whom were merchantmen either under repair from US submarine attacks or unloading military hardware for the local defences. In the two days of attacks that followed over 45 ships were sunk, including six medium warships and a number of special naval auxiliary ships. In addition over 270 aircraft were destroyed, leaving the islands virtually defenceless from the air. Due to the damage caused, the base became ineffective and the Americans never invaded.

WRECKS AND HIGHLIGHTS

Wreck	Ton	Length (m)	Depth (m)	Type	Highlights
Kiyosumi Maru	8,614	133	21-37	Armed merchant	Torpedo holes
Yamagiri Maru	6,438	134	9-37	Naval aux	X Beams, skull, 14" shells
Fumizuki Destroyer	1,590	98	29-38	Mutsuki type destroyer	4.7" guns, elegant Bow
Shinkoku Maru	10,020	153	10-37	Tanker	Soft corals, reef fish, night dive
Hoki Maru	7,112	137	27-50	Naval aux	Trucks and earthmovers
Fujikawa Maru	6,938	133	12-35	Aircraft ferry	Engine room and workshop, fighter planes
Nippo Maru	3,764	108	27-50	Water supply	Tank, anti-tank guns, bridge
Unkai Maru	3,220	101	15-36	Naval aux	Funnel, mess Kits
Heian Maru	11,614	155	12-37	Submarine tender	Torpedoes, bow name, periscopes
Kensho Maru	4,862	117	18-40	Naval aux	Engine room and workshop
Betty Bomber			15-18	G4M1 model 12	Detached engines

Clockwise from right: Engine room oil pressure panel; Spare submarine periscopes lying in the companion way of the Heian Maru; Wooden telephone booth still intact due to the lack of light.



On the *Yamigiri Maru* there was a disturbing find – deep within the engine room the skull of a crewman was fused to the hull by the heat of the fire. It was one of numerous mortal remains found over all the Truk wrecks and raises questions about divers disturbing these last resting places. The men who died here were on the ‘wrong’ side but surely should be irrelevant to the way they’re treated afterwards. Though a number of retrievals have been made, recent requests to bring up further finds have apparently been rejected by the Chuuk government. The fear is that Japanese tourists are an important source of revenue and that if mortal remains were to be repatriated then this traffic might cease. To the Japanese these wrecks are a shrine to their war dead and the continued disturbance by divers causes great upset. In contrast, all Allied ships on which lives were lost and not recovered, are classified as war graves and can rarely be dived, and then only with great care and consideration. It is unknown how many sailors lost their lives, but it is clear from the damage seen underwater that many wouldn’t have survived the fury of the American attacks.



TRAVEL FACTS

Where is it? Truk

Lagoon was renamed as Chuuk State on the creation of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) in 1979.

Chuuk is about 800km SE of Guam and 800km NE of Papua New Guinea.

How to Get there? Continental Micronesia flies 3 or 4 times weekly from Guam and Honolulu, but it’s best to get on a direct flight rather than an ‘island hopper’. Flights to Guam go from Seoul, Bangkok or Tokyo and it’s advised to avoid the Manila option. Allow at least three days for travelling no matter which way you go.

Visa Requirements Passport valid for 120 days and return ticket, but no visa.

When to Go Generally it rains more in the summer months of July, August and September. The drier months are January, February and March. Consistently stronger winds occur January through April while the calmest time is June and July. The visibility is usually better in the winter (Jan-Apr); visibility will range from 15 - 25m. The visibility is worst in late summer/early fall (Aug-Oct) when visibility ranges from 10 - 20m. There isn’t much to choose but March/April is optimal.

Health There are only three decompression chambers in FSM and little experience in dealing with dive injuries. Yellow fever and cholera vaccination certificates are required if arriving from an infected area.

Tour Operators

- Truk Odyssey - www.trukodyssey.com
- Continental Airlines - www.continental.com

