

visiting an enigmatic lady

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Today some 200,000 souls inhabit the place, which is regularly referred to as 'the world's happiest' by sociologists. This may have something to do with the fact that today's Vanuatians refuse to embrace the blessings of modernity and prefer to live by their traditional 'kastoms' instead. This insistence has not only resulted in an astonishing level of general public healthiness, but also in an insular nature which has remained hale and hearty – including the underwater scene. Vanuatu's surrounding seas are blue and crystal-clear, a paradise for divers. And then there is the *Coolidge*...

Launched in 1931, the 21,936 gross ton ocean liner *President Coolidge* was one of America's largest and most luxurious passenger vessels, which mostly plied Pacific routes and was usually booked to capacity. In 1941 after war had broken out with Japan, the ship was converted into a troop transport. On 24 October 1942 the *Coolidge* departed Nouméa in New Caledonia, bound for the huge U.S. military base of Luganville on the island of Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. On board the vessel, colossal for her time, were 340 civilian crew under the command of Captain Henry Nelson, a grizzled oldtimer, as well as 5,100 soldiers and a large cargo of war material. The heavy load was earmarked for deployment in the Solomon Islands, where the fortunes of war were gradually turning in favour of the United States.

The approaches to Luganville had been mined in August 1942 to repel a potential Japanese attack, but this operation was done in a rather dilettante fashion. In its process, the destroyer USS *Tucker* ran upon one of its own mines and sank like a rock. A similar fate was in



*Main: Entering the bridge in AD 2009 style.
Inset top to bottom: The President Coolidge, proudly afloat after launching in 1931; The end – Coolidge capsizes and vanishes beneath the waves.*

> NOT TOO MANY AUSSIES KNOW WHAT AND WHERE VANUATU IS, EVEN THOUGH THIS 83-ISLAND ARCHIPELAGO IS IN THEIR CLOSE NEIGHBOURHOOD. PERHAPS THE NAME BESTOWED ON THE ISLANDS IN 1774 BY CAPTAIN JAMES COOK RINGS A BELL – NEW HEBRIDES. IT WAS AN ILL-FITTING DESIGNATION FOR THIS MELANESIAN GROUP TO BEGIN WITH, WHICH IS WHY IT WAS PROMPTLY ABOLISHED WITH INDEPENDENCE IN 1980 AND SUBSTITUTED FOR VANUATU.



Top to bottom: Gauges in Coolidge's boiler room still show pressures, but not the correct ones; These once useful objects are now museum pieces; Reaching their dream destination, divers admire the "President's Lady".

store for the *Coolidge*. It appears, in retrospect, that Captain Nelson had been insufficiently briefed on the location of the mine fields, if at all. (He was later exonerated of all guilt, although the navy brass gnashed their teeth at the verdict). As the huge vessel neared the approaches to Luganville in the morning of the 26th, she hit one of those mines and shortly afterwards, a second. In hopes of preventing a total loss, the skipper had the sinking vessel run upon the nearby coast, but it soon turned out that the *Coolidge* was doomed. 5,440 men abandoned the derelict in chaotic haste, leaving all belongings behind. Although the land was only a hundred metres away, two men died during the evacuation. At 10:52 that morning the *Coolidge* capsized and disappeared below the surface – her stern in 240 feet, her bow in 70. By an unfortunate coincidence, Captain Nelson had chosen the steepest and deepest portion along the entire coast.

In 1943 the first salvage operations commenced to raise vehicles and weapons that had been carried on deck, as well as cargo in the holds which included large amounts of currency. After the war 519 lbs of badly needed anti-malarial quinine sulfate, and even some mail, which was dried on land, were salvaged, as was most of the bunker oil which had been badly polluting the shore. Civilian Australian divers managed to blast off, and recover, the *Coolidge*'s two huge brass propellers in a risky but highly rewarding operation at great depth.

“the world's most exciting wreck”

Yet the sunken *Coolidge* proved her true value in recent times only as a destination for adventure-minded scuba divers, soon gaining the title of “the world's most exciting wreck” and being visited by hundreds of submarine sightseers. The designation is not at all unrealistic. Remotely comparable to the *Titanic*, the *Coolidge* is a huge former luxury liner,

but easily accessible and widely intact, even in death a diva of great beauty.

'Easily accessible' means that divers can just wade out from the shore, swim a short distance and descend to their target. There is an immense amount to be seen on the wreck, and be it the giant swarms of fish in its interior. But no diver would want to miss out on a visit of the 'President's Lady', an odd-looking sculpture embellishing the first-class smoking saloon once upon a time and possibly depicting Queen Elizabeth I before a Unicorn – researchers are still puzzling over the enigma of her identity. Aussie diver Allan Power, a squat and wiry sexagenarian, located the attractive lady at 60 metres in 1981, after some protective wooden shoring had rotted away and allowed her emerge into the open. Allan saw to it that she was dismantled and taken ashore for cleaning, to be reinstalled at a more accessible location at 45 metres. Since then she has served scores of divers as a dream destination and it is here, anyway, that

the usual guided dive tours will end before reaching saturation. But whoever has dived the *Coolidge* will consider it a must to see the Lady and will talk for the rest of his or her life of having looked into her hypnotic eyes.

Allan, who by his own confession is a *Coolidge* addict and has performed innumerable dives upon her, manages one of two big dive operator outfits in Luganville and even has a private access road to the wrecksite. It is thanks to him that the habit of removing 'souvenirs' from the wreck has been largely discontinued, although he admits that the temptation is great at times. Almost everything still lies about as it was abandoned in 1942; the shipwrecked soldiers could not even save their weapons. But there isn't only Allan, called “the Captain of the *Coolidge*” or even “The President” in Luganville, who is guarding the wreck, so to speak. There is also “Boris”, a huge garoupa, who keeps an eye on the divers, of whom he is not in the least afraid...

Clockwise from top: “Hey, I found something! What the hell is it?”; Steering wheel belonged to a cargo of jeeps bound for the Solomon Islands campaign; The ship's dispensary is still well stocked at this time and age; During the chaotic evacuation all kinds of equipment, even helmets, stayed behind.

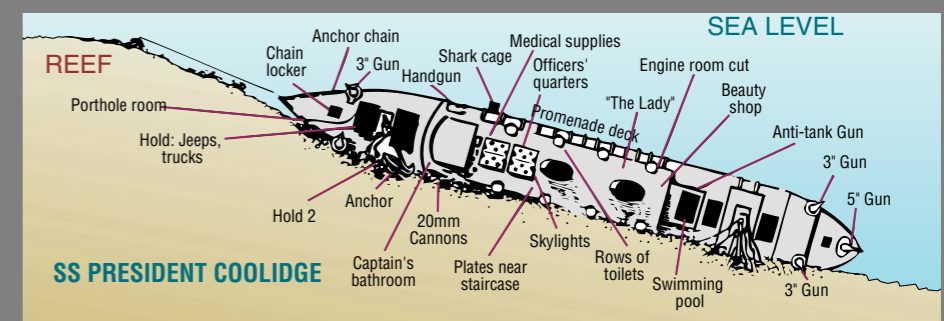


DIVING THE COOLIDGE

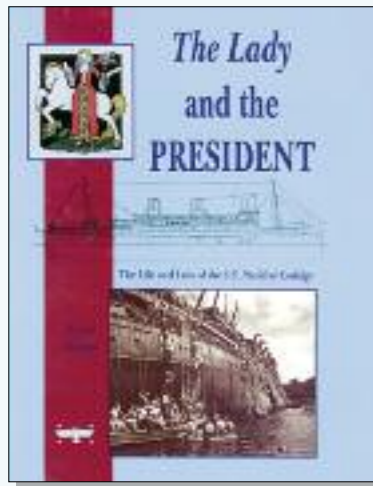
Located only a few kilometers from Luganville, the second largest town in Vanuatu on the island of Espiritu Santo, the wreck lies only a few paces from the relatively calm shore. Divers can reach it by boat or by foot, through one of several dive operations based in Santo. With visibility normally around 15-25 meters, such a wreck dive offers exceptional underwater clarity. The outer parts of the ship can be safely seen by novice divers. For penetration diving, most areas of interest, including the famous Lady, allow divers to see outside the vessel at all times. However it is strongly recommended that divers take it easy at first.

www.vanuatu.travel/scuba-diving.html

Right: The wreck is laughably easy to reach – divers just waded out to the site.



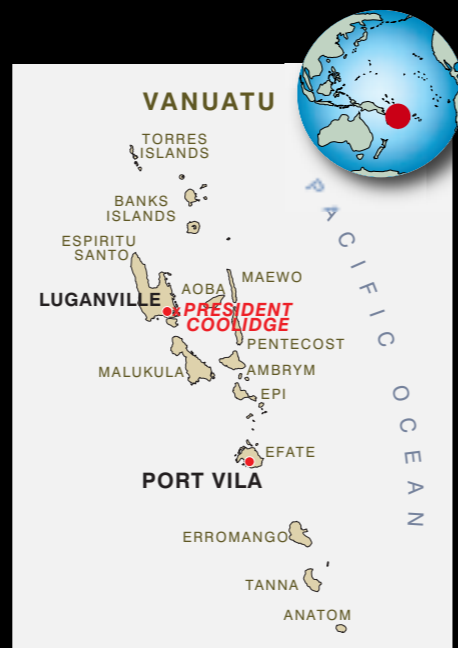
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Anyone feeling the urge to dive 'the world's most exciting wreck' should not be discouraged by the apparent distance to the place. Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital, is in fact just two jet hours out of Brisbane, and daily flights connect Vila with Luganville. Once there, all difficulties end. Accommodation is no problem, and the dive operators, first and foremost Allan, will arrange everything else. But watch out: The risk of becoming an addict of the *Coolidge* and the Enigmatic Lady, like him, is great...



Right: Vanuatu's coastal waters are blue and crystal-clear.

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