

'HOW COULD ANYTHING THIS BIG SINK?' I ASK MYSELF ONCE AGAIN AS WE DROP OVER THE EDGE OF THIS ENORMOUS WEED-ENCRUSTED MASS AND HEAD DOWN TO THE BRIDGE DECK. 'AND HOW CAN ALL THIS LUXURY AND GRANDEUR LIE MOSTLY UNSEEN ON THE SILTY SEABED OF PORT GORE?'



Mike Wilkinson

∴ SUE FARLEY

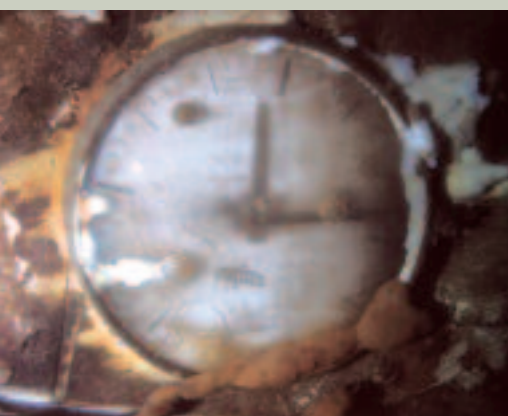
The sheer scale of the *Mikhail Lermontov* has to be seen to be believed as no end of photo gazing can adequately prepare a diver for the picture that unfolds as they descend the mooring line. Wrecks tend to materialise out of the gloom as a scattering of disjointed pieces on the sea floor or chunky blurred shapes that take form as they draw closer. But the *Mikhail Lermontov* grows out of the gloom like the mother ship in *Star Trek* disappearing fore and aft for as far the mind can stretch.

It sank on a reasonably calm summer night 17 years ago, a giant Russian cruise liner carrying 372 passengers on their trip of a lifetime around the rugged coast of New Zealand. Many of the passengers had joined the ship in Sydney and, until it hit submerged rocks in the tiny channel running beneath Cape Jackson on the edge of Cook Strait, would have been settling back to enjoy a pre-dinner drink before the delights of another ship-board dinner.

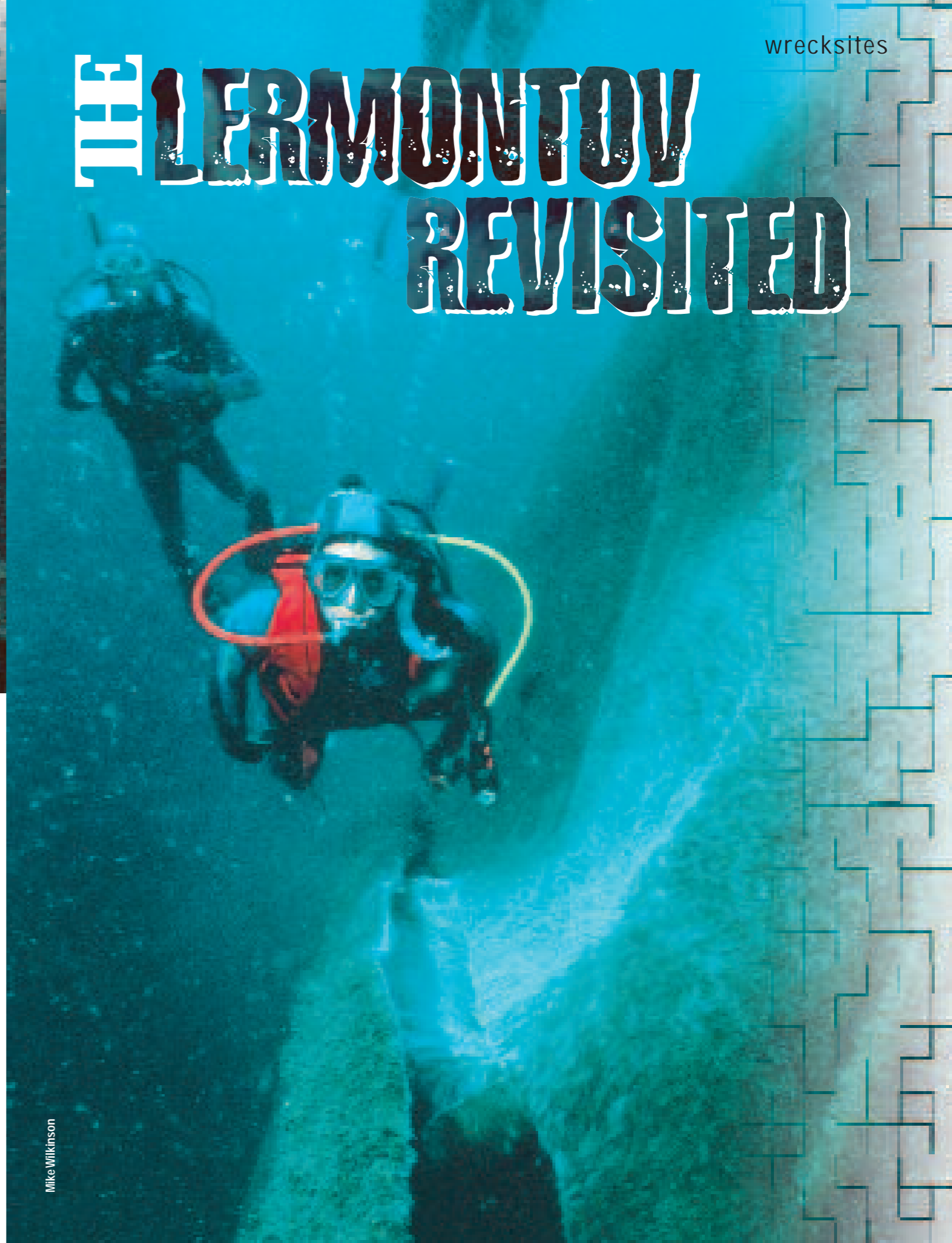
But a fatal rip in the port side quickly sent the ship scuttling for the safety of the beach in Port Gore, just around the corner, and five hours later she sank. Now lying on her side in 35 metres just two nautical miles from shore, she has become a fabulous but challenging dive site that stretches the imagination and does strange things to the mind.

The *Mikhail Lermontov* is one of the largest accessible cruise ship dives in the world – the *Titanic* is far too deep to count – and as such has become a popular dive for locals and international visitors alike. But as the novelty of cruising around the exterior and peering into the dark caverns of the ships interior wears thin for some, the inside of the wreck is being increasingly visited by skilled cave and wreck divers keen to make use of this unique site.

Slowly the outside of the hull is taking on the appearance of an artificial reef as soft corals, sponges and shellfish colonise the teak decking, giant deck fittings and vast steel plates of the hull. Edges have softened and become camouflaged as soft weed fills tiny



# THE LERMONTOV REVISITED



Mike Wilkinson

## THE SINKING OF THE MIKHAIL LERMONTOV

She set off from Leningrad on her maiden voyage in May 1973, calling at New York, the first Russian liner to do so for 25 years. The ship was 155 metres long and 23.6 metres wide. Draft was 8.3 metres and gross weight was 23000 tons. She had a comprehensive interior refit in 1982, four years before sinking.

When she sank she was travelling from Picton, at the top of the South Island, to Milford Sound, on the far SW corner of the island. There were 743 people on board; 372 of those were passengers, of which 327 were Australian; 9 of the crew were also Australian.

The ship was taken through a tiny passage at the head of Queen Charlotte Sound, at the notorious Cape Jackson. The Cape spills out into Cook Strait and experiences strong currents and often very rough weather. The ship hit rocks in the passage at 5.37 pm and began to take on water and list immediately. The band played on, dinner was delayed an hour, the wine tasting only stopped when the glasses could no longer stay on the tables and the crew were seen wearing life jackets. There were no immediate announcements made to passengers.

A Mayday call was reportedly made and answered. LPG tanker *Tarihiko*, came in response and arrived just as passengers were being loaded into the liferafts at around 8.45 pm.

The captain had tried to beach the ship, but without engines – these had stopped earlier – he was unable to do this. The ship continued to drift further into the bay.

23 other smaller local craft arrived as the Mayday situation was declared, and the inter-island ferry *Arahura* was also diverted, arriving at 9.30 pm. By then it was dark and raining heavily. The ship sank at around 10.30 pm but the search for people and lifeboats in the water continued into the night. Witnesses reported the noise of the ship as it went down to be deafening. Bubbles of air 2 metres high blasted from the surface and anything unattached floated to the top. Then all was quiet. Divers were called in immediately to secure any oil leaks and to get the ship's safe and duty-free gold goods.

Later controversy over who was in control of the ship at the time of impact has been a contentious issue in NZ since then.

### Contacts

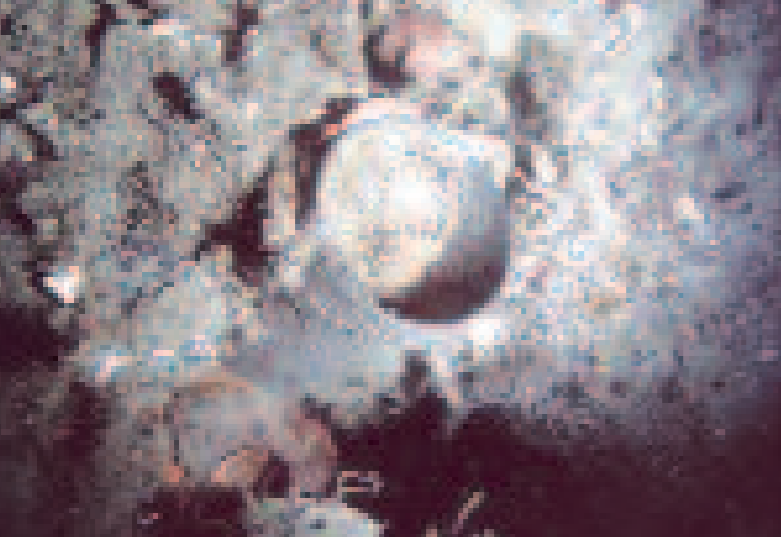
Frank Carre – operates the *Sandpiper* dive charter boat out of Picton to the *Mikhail Lermontov*. Single and multi-day trips. Best time of year for visibility is October – November although vis is rarely better than 15m, often worse.

[www.sandpiper.co.nz](http://www.sandpiper.co.nz) [frankcarre@xtra.co.nz](mailto:frankcarre@xtra.co.nz)

Phone 64 3 573 8882, fax 64 3 573 8885

Excellent website to view –

[www.nzmaritime.co.nz/lermontov.htm](http://www.nzmaritime.co.nz/lermontov.htm)



Below: A sign outside the restaurant indicating deck levels, the red marker indicating where the reader stands. ; The head of Port Gore, where the *Lermontov* limped in to run ashore, but sank on the way; tech divers on the *Sandpiper* ready to go down

Left to right: A glass lying in the Nevsky Bar; Cape Jackson - a forbidding rocky place that provides no safe shore for wandering ships. This topography continues underwater where the *Lermontov* struck the rocks; Frank Carre shows divers a map of the ship layout before they head down to see it

gaps and covers porthole windows. Regularly visited by, amongst others, groups of Australian technical divers doing repeat penetration dives the visions and dive challenges change the further divers go into the wreck. Peering into the black holes that were once picture windows and exterior doors, the stairways are lying on their sides and tables and chairs are bolted to the walls. I have to think twice about everything I see because it is all 90 degrees off reality – decking that runs upright like weatherboards, stairways zigzagging along the horizontal and doorways that drop down into blackness.

The ship is a strange mix of macro and micro – from the enormous davits that once held the lifeboats (very useful as it happened) to the tiniest light fittings just waiting for a bulb. The swimming pool is surrounded by a glass room of dainty mullioned French windows, looking like a conservatory on an English manor house, while great winch drums wound with purple rope still stand on the rear cranes – sideways.

But to go inside this enormous wreck opens divers into a new world. Dave Maddox, an intrepid Kiwi who dives repeatedly on the *Lermontov*, now uses a rebreather to get maximum time inside the hull, getting bottom times of up to 117 minutes.

'Before entering the water we discuss what team is going where to avoid different teams entering the same internal area and possibly creating a hazard for other members. Looking at plans prior to entering helps build a mental picture of what you expect to see along the way. The wreck lays on her starboard side and can be

confusing when going up and down stairways sideways.

'There are usually 2 members per team to an area. One person reels in and the other follows the line. This way we avoid too many lines and possible entanglement. We do use lines to navigate our ways in and back to the entry point. The *Lermontov* can be very silty inside due to the nature of the harbour she lays in. During penetration the line is your only guide out due to silting, and even with careful finning technique the visibility can be near zero at times. We do leave lines in on a several day trip to simplify entry to an area again but always retrieve them to avoid hazards to other divers.'

There are proper plans around of the interior of the ship but they are out of date following an internal refit just four years before the ship went down. So part of what divers are doing now is redrawing those plans to match how the ship was fitted when it sunk.

Frank Carré runs a liveaboard charter boat to the *Lermontov* on a regular basis and many of the technical teams travel out with him for extended times. These trips allow the same divers to return time and again and pick up from where they left off last time. There are no resorts or towns near the wreck site so the convenience of a liveaboard boat makes life a lot easier. 'I'm taking more specialised trips now as the demand for technical dives increases,' Frank explains. 'The demand from serious cave and wreck divers who are coming for repeat trips is growing, especially the Australians. Some of these guys are the divers from hell – they're great.'

The use of nitrox-mix is also growing as it removes the decompression problems of repeat dives. Good bottom times of 60-70 minutes can be expected on twin sets without too much decompression penalty using a nitrox mix of 32%-36%. And with the use of rebreathers as well, the penetration dives are reaching further into the dark labyrinth of corridors and rooms deep inside the hull.

But as Dave Maddox says, 'You don't need to be a technical diver to enjoy the wreck. The swimming pool with its bar, the bridge, the props and the bow that leads down to the gashes that ended up sinking the *Lermontov* are all dives that can be experienced by divers with varying levels of experience. There is so much to see and explore outside the vessel.'

For first-timers the initial dives will be spent becoming familiar with the size and shape of the hull. The mooring line is attached almost mid-ship so a dive from there around the bow and back will easily drain a tank and the second one down to the stern will do the same. But by then a diver will have a reasonable idea of just how big this boat is and how much there is to see and learn about it.

As the weed and shellfish life on the hull increases there are more fish being attracted to the wreck. Schools of yellow-eyed mullet, terakihi and marblefish cruise along the decks now, and scorpionfish lurk in the corners. The davits are encrusted with a fine, lacy pink weed that waves in the current and big white anemones shine in the torchlight.

But electrolysis is starting to take its toll causing deck fittings and structure to become less stable. Over time this will change how the wreck looks at a detail level. But other structures like the goliath of a funnel with its many smaller stacks inside, and the huge air-conditioning ducts that plunge down into the centre of the boat will remain for a long time yet.



The job remains with people like Dave Maddox (who now has 52 dives on the *Lermontov*) and Frank Carre to persist in exploring and documenting the wreck as it is now so that changes can be noted in the future.

It's not often that divers get the opportunity to monitor a large passenger shipwreck from the day it sank, to see the changes in time and map the interior as it decays beyond time.

