MALTA’S BEST TEC WRECK
Why Southwold is a must-dive

DOWN BY THE JETTY
Peering under piers around the world

CHRISTMAS SHOWCASE
54 Gifts for everyone among latest dive-gear

SPOILT FOR WRECKS IN CORON BAY
Philippines location is a magnet for metal-heads

HOLY ROWLEY!

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PORTHKERRIS UNDER THREAT

DECEMBER 2016
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THE MAGAZINE THAT'S STRAIGHT DOWN THE LINE...

DIVER
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ATTACK ON CORON BAY

THE DOWNLINE DISAPPEARED
into the murky waters of Coron Bay in the Philippines, and with
this visibility we had to trust that eventually it would lead us to our
objective.

Hand over hand we descended into the
swirling waters of the bay, and our eyes
finally began to discern the faint outlines
of the hulls of a sunken ship.

At first hazy and almost imperceptible,
with every metre of additional depth it
came into sharper focus. We were diving
on the Atikanshima, a Japanese seaplane
reveling on its side in 38m.

Our descent took us to a spot near the
storm, where we began our exploration
of one of the vessels lost in the US Navy
attack on a fleet of Japanese warships on
24 September, 1944.

Our eyes quickly adjusted to the light
in the hazy water, and we recognised
the remains of the ship’s crane lying in
the sand. It was used to lift seaplanes
from the water onto the deck, today, it is home
to schools of fish seeking shelter from
predators.

Breathing alongside it is a three-barrelled
anti-aircraft gun and projector, appearing
as if they were poised to retrieve the
bottle that sank them three years ago.
We were only a few minutes into our
dive and already enthralled.

The Atikanshima was hit near the stern
and an opening into the bowels of the
ship, evidence of the damage that
cast her to sink within minutes of
being hit, invited us inside. Leaving the
sunlit world of Coron Bay, we entered the
ghostly confines of the seaplane ship.

Our mix of 388 nitrox helped ward off
the effects of decompression as we pushed
deeper into the mangled interior of the ship,
but the ship’s disorienting position on the
bottom and the internal damage from the
attack presented challenges to navigating
these passageways.

Quickly made our way through
dangerous wrecks, narrow corridors and
cargo holds before emerging near an
opening close to the bow. Rising to the
top of the wreck, we slowly rode the slight
tidal current back to the surface, where we
began our ascent.

Later, as our faces broke the surface to
be greeted by the mild sunning
Philippines sun, we smiled broadly to
each other... our exploration of the
wrecks of Coron Bay was over!

WORLD WAR TWO, the Philippines
archipelago was the site of several fierce
battles between US and Japanese forces.
During the Battle of the Philippines in
1941 and 1942, Japan invaded Luzon
from the north and attacked Manila from
the land.

US and Filipino troops, led by General
MacArthur, retreated to the Bataan
Peninsula. The fall of Bataan, on 9 April,
1942, signalled the victory of Japan in
Manila and the northern Philippines. The

At the rear of the Atikanshima was the
skyscraper
photon.

The survivors left: American
soldiers next to the bilge
valve and anti-aircraft gun
on the Atikanshima.

Right from top: Lady
broadened atoll and the
Olympic Pass.

Bнос州, Death March is an inestimable loss
of the brutality of this period of the war.

As American forces battled to liberate
the Philippines, the Battle of the
Philippines Sea took place between 19–20
June, 1944, followed by the Battle of Leyte
Gulf that October. Between these two
battles, the US Navy launched a strike
force of fighters and bombers to attack
a Japanese supply fleet of up to 24 ships at
anchor in Coron Bay and around nearby
Busanag Island on 24 September.

This was a surprise aerial attack by the
US Third Fleet, under the command of
Admiral “Bull” Halsey aboard the
battleship USS New Jersey. Vice-Admiral
Mitscher, commanding Task Force 38
from the aircraft-carrier USS Lexington,
provided tactical control of the attack.

Ninety-six Grumman F6F Hellcat
fighter-bombers and 24 Curtiss SB2C
Helldiver dive bombers took off from
their positions 340 miles away that
morning and ultimately surprised the
Japanese fleet at Coron. In a devastating
aerial assault, the US Navy sent these
ships to the bottom of the bay.

One victim was the Kaga Maru, a
freighter that sits upright at 30m.

Descending into the cargo holds, divers
come across piles of large barrel drums
covered in silk and strewn across the
bottom. Swim through these silent
corridors and you can imagine the
chaos of the sinking that caused these
drums to be tossed about us violently.

Outside, huge schools of silversides
glide over the wreckage and divers often
encounter schools of fish swimming in
and around it. Resting in disgust on the
dock are numerous starfish, a living
warming against touching anything.

The Kaga Maru lies on its
starboard side in 34m and offers
divers swim-throughs into all six of its
cargo holds and into the engine room
and bridge area. In the second hold, a
small boulder is readily apparent, along
with a pile of cement bags that tumbled
chaotically as the ship sank.

The Kaga Maru is also home to
brilliant soft corals that adorn the top of the wreck at 22m. It would be easy to lose focus on
the wreck itself as you swim alongside
clouds of small reef fish, and elsewhere.
Clockwise from far left:
The Olympia Maru — Christopher Weaver explores the shadowy
remains; striped catfish
seek shelter alongside the
wreckage; barreis.

Below, from left: The
Kazuyu Maru — remains of
an old bulbizer inside the
wreck; crocodilefish; part
of the cargo; exploring the
interior of the wreck.

predatory lionfish lying in wait among the
wreckage and corals.

Just before nine that morning dive-
bombers attacked the Okikawa Maru. The
first two groups simply strafed the
Japanese tanker before heading for the
Akatsushima Maru, anchored nearby. But
15 minutes later they scored numerous
direct hits on the ship, which began to
sink. Official records are unclear, but it
has been reported that three gunners and
five or six sailors were killed in the attack.

Okikawa Maru did not sink completely — the forecastle remained
afloat and burning until 9 October, when
another US air group sent it to the bottom
in a final attack.

Today, the vessel lies upright in 26m
with its main deck reachable between 10
and 16m. The bow section is crumpled
and pointing upwards from the main
wreckage. Perhaps the most interesting
wreck in Coron, Okikawa Maru offers
both a plethora of colourful marine life
and fascinating opportunities for wreck
penetration and exploration.

You can traverse the propeller shaft
from outside the ship all the way through
to the engine-room, and also explore the
ship’s prison. Examining the rusting bars
of the jail-cell sparks thoughts of what life
was like aboard these vessels.

OTHER SHIPWRECKS IN THE area
also invite wreck-divers to explore
their broken bones and shattered keels.
The Teru Kaze Maru is a gunboat or
submarine-hunter that lies in very
shallow water on the east side of Tangat
Island. Starting in only 3m and dropping
to 22, it’s as good for snorkellers as divers.

For divers with deep diving experience,
the Irafo, a Japanese refrigeration ship
that lies in 43m at the mouth of the bay,
often boasts the best visibility of the
Coron wrecks and is one of the most
picturesque shipwrecks in the area.

There are several other wrecks the
identity of which is still unknown. These
ships add to the mystery of the place…
what is their story and how did they
eventually sink?

The waters of Coron Bay are
relatively protected but the passages between the islands are subject to swift currents during tidal exchanges, so dives should be planned accordingly.

Also, it often comes as a surprise to divers visiting the Coron area for the first time to find that the waters are somewhat murky and silty.

Visibility can exceed 30m on good days but drop to only a few feet on bad days.

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ➞ Fly to Manila and on to Coron or transfer to Puerto Galera.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ➞ Marco Vincent Dive Resort in Puerto Galera offers multi-day liveaboard safaris to Coron on Big Beth; www.marcovincent.com

WHEN TO GO ➞ Wet season May–October; dry season November–April. April and May are the warmest, most humid months, December and January the coolest. Typhoons can threaten from July–October.

CURRENCY ➞ Philippines peso, US dollars accepted.

PRICES ➞ Marco Vincent six-night dive safaris to Coron and Apo Reef cost US $2085pp. Seven nights' full-board at the resort with diving costs $1785pp.

VISITOR INFORMATION ➞ www.itsmorefuninthephilippines.com

Average visibility on the wrecks is generally 6-9m. To experience them in safety and comfort, divers should have at least Advanced OW D certification and,

before doing penetrations, make sure they have Wreck Diver certification and proper experience.

As we concluded our trip, we sat on the deck of the Big Beth, the liveaboard operated by the Marco Vincent Dive Resort in Puerto Galera, and marvelled at the canopy of brilliant stars that draped the sky. We were headed to Apo Reef, and with no artificial light sources they appeared numerous and brilliant.

They also seemed to extend right into the water, where flashes of bioluminescent light mimicked the starlight and created a continuum between waves and sky.

This mesmerising cathedral of lights reminded us of how we are all connected in this world – to each other, to our past and to our future. The history that lies beneath the waves in Coron Bay is just part of the tapestry of human experience.