

Hurricanes Maria and Irma in Saint Pierre, Martinique

by Jean Michel Machefert

If you read the issue 98 of UWP magazine I wrote an article on the numerous and beautiful wrecks and tropical sceneries to be seen in Saint Pierre (Martinique, French West Indies), from almost the surface down to depths by far too important for divers. This first trip occurred in July- August 2017, and it was so good that we decided with my wife to come back for 2 weeks in February 2018.

Since August 2017, almost no change, only 2 hurricanes the first one was Irma (huge hurricane with a radius of 300km, 5th category on 5 on the Saffir Simpson scale) on September 6th with a trajectory of the centre a distance at more than 400km north from Saint Pierre. In the northern part of Martinique the gusts reached around 130km/h and the swell a height up to 5 to 7m. The second hurricane was Maria (also major hurricane in 5th category) on September 18th with a trajectory of the centre at a distance of 50km north from Saint Pierre. During this hurricane the gusts reached 120km/h and the swell a height up to 6m in the bay of Saint Pierre. Now thanks to the

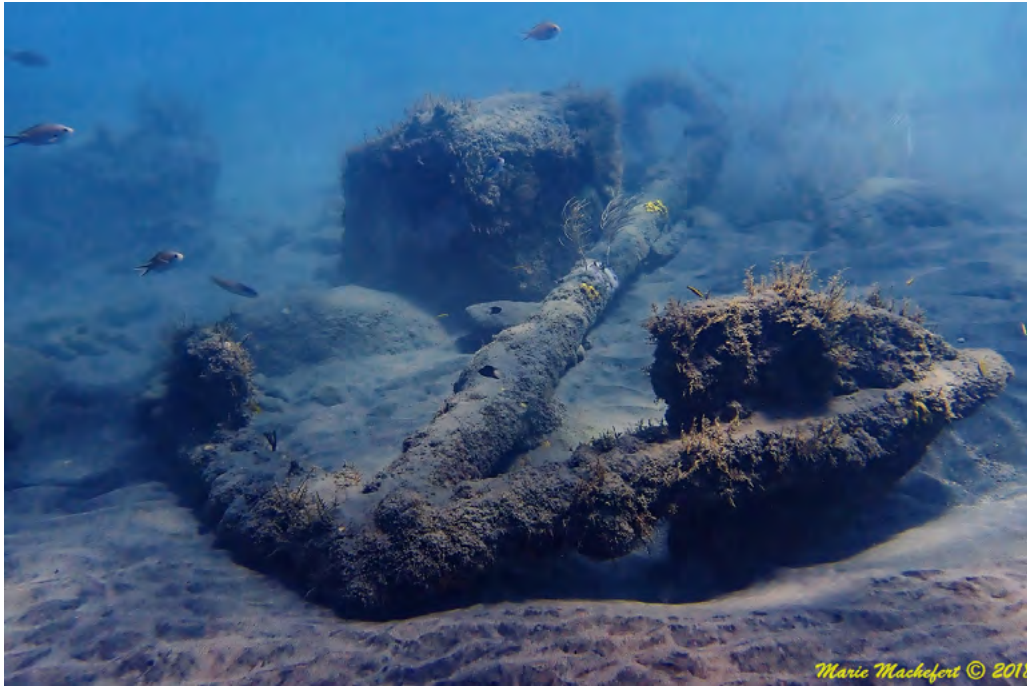
weather forecast there was almost no serious damages in Saint Pierre and only a couple of small yachts broke moorings and run aground on the black sand of the beach in the middle of the city luckily with only some scratches on the paint.

So in February 2018 we decided for the first dive to visit the wreck of the Amélie sunk in shallow water south of Saint Pierre during the eruption of the Montagne Pelée I told in the article in UWP magazine 98.

A general view of the wreck of the Amélie (depth 9m) in July 2017 before the hurricanes, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Tokina 10 - 17mm at 10mm, 1/ 60, f 11 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, ½ and full power

A general view of the wreck of the Amélie in February 2018 after the hurricanes at the same place as the picture just over, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Sigma 17 - 70mm at 17mm, 1/ 200, f 8 , ISO 400 , 2 strobes Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, ½ power





In February 2018 after the 2 hurricanes: nothing under water, only sand. Only the big anchors used for mooring are still here but less prominent than in July. Photo by Marie Machefert

This wreck lies close to the shore in shallow water on a flat sea bed at a maximal depth of 9m.

As soon as we are under the surface at the first sight it looks different than in July. At the “front” part of the wreck close to the shore there was in July a big barrel sponge located at the right side of the wreck and an accumulation of sponges and life in front of it. Now in February, no more sponge even broken and a big round hole instead of the

accumulation! This can be seen on the pictures taken from the same place but with 2 hurricanes in between. The main structure of the wreck is still here with a kind of cross in metal but the ground inside the wreck is now covered by sand with some metal structure more prominent than in July, and still plenty of small colourful fishes.

Some but few barrel sponges with some damages can time to time be seen and this is quite strange to



Near the beach some remains of deck railing and some wooden beams from the wrecks sunk in 1891 during a hurricane as they can be seen in July. Now after the storm nothing visible. Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Tokina 10 - 17mm at 10mm, 1/ 100, f 10 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

notice that they do not anymore lie close to the bottom but they seems to be hung on metallic remain of the wreck. Some of these barrels sponges are partially broken but not always.

Let's go on the left side. In July, there was here only turtle grass with some turtles and no visible remain of a wreck. Now after few meters there is a new big sandy patch with quite a lot of garden eels (*Heteroconger*) who were not here in July and as a cherry on the cake, a very big part of wreck

almost 20m long fully cleaned. As it can be seen on the picture this part should be one of the sides of the hull of the *Amélie* with welded plates of steels reinforced by metallic frames.

Such discovery after stormy weather in sandy areas is quite common and for example after the storm ravaging the coast of southern Maine in March this year the hull of a sloop was discovered. The same hurricane Irma as we had in Martinique also washed up the coast

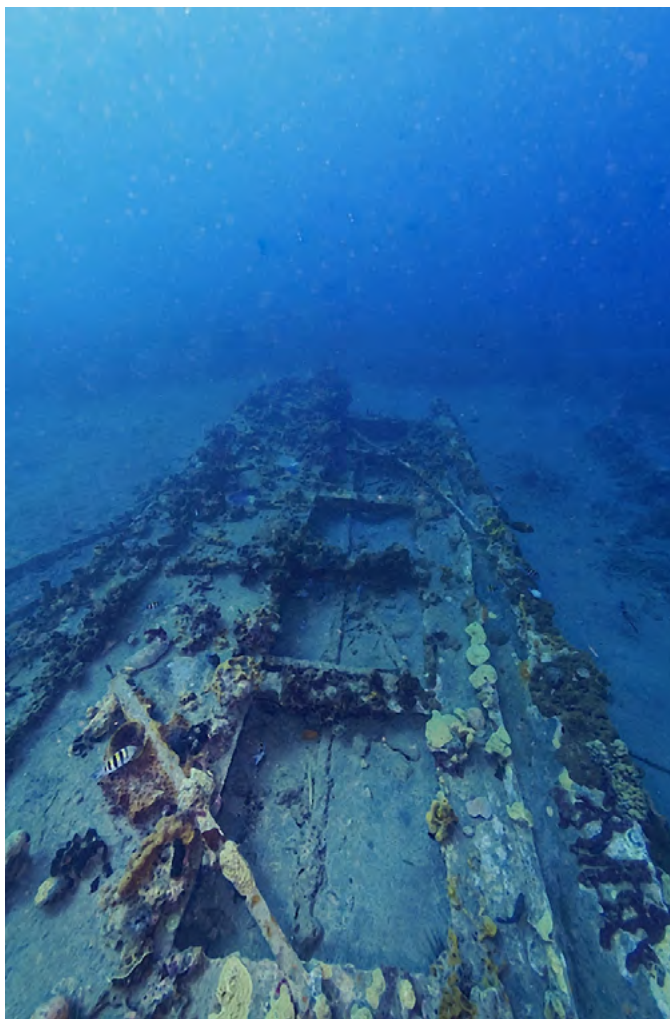
of Florida exhibiting a 15 feet long canoe several hundreds of years old probably from the native culture. Many other examples are also known on the east coast of the US during the storm season.

In July 2017 some parts of wrecks were also easy to see by snorkelling along the beach as some remains of deck railing and some wooden beams. In Saint Pierre such wrecks with wooden relics were not sunk during the eruption of the Montagne Pelée in 1902 (the boats destroyed during the eruption were burnt and there is no more not damaged wooden structures on them) but they are typical of the 19 big ships anchored in the bay of Saint Pierre and destroyed during the hurricane of the 8th of August 1891. Saint Pierre is really a dangerous location for ships, but what a wonderful spot for wreck lovers.

In February 2018 after the 2 hurricanes: nothing under water, only sand. Only the big anchors used for mooring are still here but less prominent than in July.

Let us visit now some reefs in shallow water (less than 5 m deep) north of Saint Pierre. Such reefs are washed every year by storms and almost no big sponges nor can elevated life be seen. On some pebbles some white and soft sea fans moving with the swell are easy to see but the majority of the life consists either in very small and soft species as hydrozoans or in hard and almost flat species as boulder coral where plenty of mimetic life as scorpion fish are observed. So no change after the storms, here the life continues as before until the next one.

Now this is time to dive a little bit deeper on the reefs with the summit at 15m. Even if they are located close to the shore at such depth the huge barrel sponges typical of the area can be seen



New part of the wreck of the Amelie in February after the hurricanes at the same place as the picture of the turtle, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10.5mm, 1/ 200, f 7 , ISO 400 , 2 strobes Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

without major damage. Deeper than 15m all the aspects of the life remain unchanged, and even the big deep water sea fans or the black wire coral moving with the tide currents.



Barrel sponges at a depth of 20m in February after the hurricanes, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10.5mm, 1/ 400, f 8 , ISO 400 , 2 strobes Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and full power

So what to conclude?

Even if Martinique was not hit directly by the major hurricanes of 2017 in the West Indies, this is quite unusual to have in the same month two times

such heavy storms in Martinique.

After the storms with swell up to 6m the diving spots in shallow water (maximum depth 10m) were completely transformed with big movement of sandy layers covering completely the bottom of the sea at some places leading to the hiding of some remains of wrecks. At the same time at some other locations (may be depending on the direction of the swell with some influence of the shore and local currents) the sand was completely washed leading to the discovery of “new” remains from wrecks. The discovery of “new” or at least forgotten remains is quite a frequent phenomenon

In such shallow water the storms destroy almost all the prominent and not flexible life as barrel sponges as soon as they are not protected from the flow created by the swell. The “flexible life” as sea fans can survive in this area and after the storm it is rapidly occupied by fishes who leaves the shallow water few days before the storms. I was in Guadeloupe some years ago and I had the opportunity to dive 2 days before the hurricane Dean (category 2 on August 16th 2007) and even if there was no wind the water was milky and it was amazing to see that there was almost no fishes at places plenty of life few days before.

Moreover near the shore in the splash area extended during the storm only the hardest living creatures as brain corals can survive, and almost nothing else.

In deeper water (more than 10m) there was almost no destruction of the life whatever it is hard as brain coral or fragile as barrel sponges. Nevertheless it seems that even in deep water the structures of the wrecks are destabilized by the increased movement of water caused by the surface swell and after some repetition of the phenomenon it



Blocks without life in shallow water (2m) in the splash area during the storms in February after the hurricanes, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Sigma 17 – 70 mm at 17mm, 1/ 200, f 10 , ISO 400 , 2 strobes Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, ½ power

can lead to the collapse of some parts of the wrecks, even if they are in depth and if they seem not to be affected. For a diver it is even more important than usual to take care by entering into wrecks after storms.

Of course there is no absolute rules on the consequences of a storm or a hurricane on the underwater life and on wrecks, but this article intends only to give a pictured description of an example of medium sized hurricane (in Martinique but not in the north as in Saint Barth or Saint Martin hit by the centre of the depression with winds over 360km/h and swell over 10m).



Turtle on turtle grass in July, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Tokina 10 - 17mm at 10mm, 1/ 125, f 11 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, ½ and full power

Jean Michel Machefert

Jean Michel began to dive in caves, lakes and the oceans in 1987. He started underwater photography in 1992 using a Nikonos IV. After shooting many years with a Nikon D70 he now uses a Nikon D2x in an Aquatica housing.

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