

Bikini Atoll

With Tim Priest

60 years ago the wreckage of three wars was smashed onto the bottom of Bikini Atoll: tired ships from the first World War, proud veterans and ruined casualties of the second World War and the utilitarian concrete of the Cold War. Even now fewer than 2000 divers have visited them. The lagoon is a treasure house of 20th century military history.

Bikini is a long way from the USA, and further from Europe. Travel is best organised by an agent who has learned the ropes, as there are three or four flights to catch, with obscure connections and stopovers. A day in Hawaii broke our travel, and let us do some historical research on the ships of Pearl Harbor. Civilisation, in the form of 24 hour water and power, was left behind when we arrived at Majuro in the Marshall Islands. We then discovered that it was not going to be easy to get to Bikini, as the small Dornier aircraft that does the flight most of the time cannot divers and their gear together if they include rebreather divers and video equipment. Everything is staged through the US base at Kwajalein, which further complicates matters. Kwajalein is also home to the remains of the Prinz Eugen, but that's another dive... After negotiation, Marshall Islands Aviation conjured up a second flight to bring our kit. The Bikini Atoll Nuclear Fleet Dive Team managed to rustle up a



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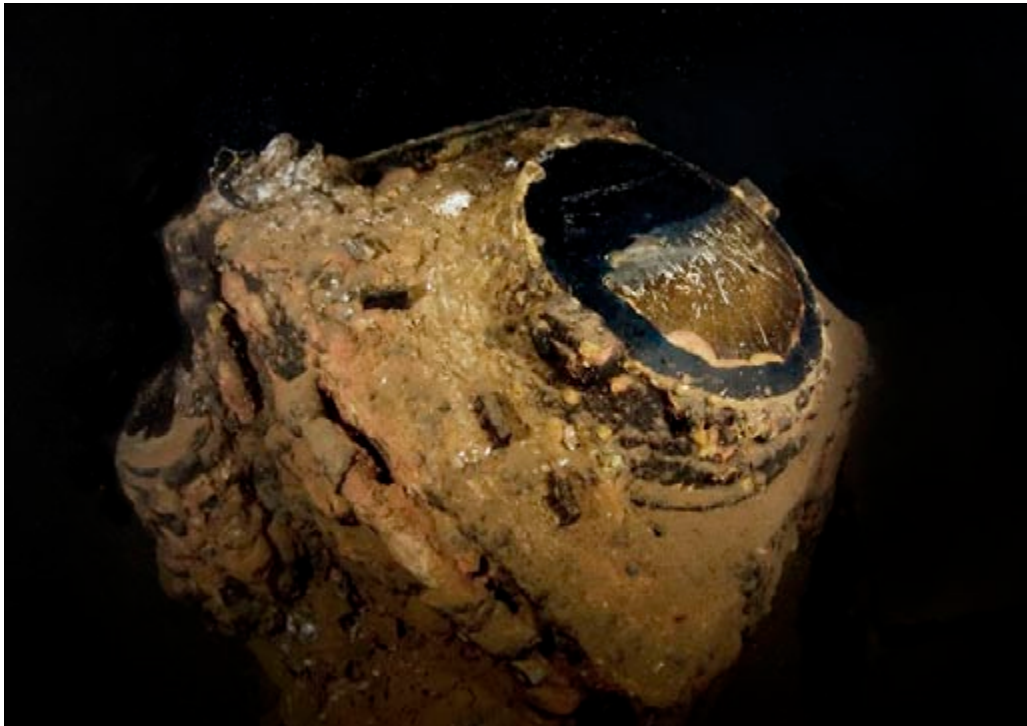
complete set of dive gear and a wetsuit until one bag finally arrived almost a week later. I had 26kg in two bags: the aircraft can cope with about 24kg a person, with 12 divers flying out to Bikini. There is a bigger aircraft, but it spends a lot of time waiting for repairs at Majuro.

After a checkout dive to a mere 35m on a 35,000 tonne ship most of the diving is to between 40m and 55m. The dive guides say that any competent diver with a reasonable amount of experience could do the diving, and that is true, but adding a camera is certainly adding risk to a deep air dive. I organised a technical diving course last year, and felt that smooth the way for concentrating on my photography. I noticed that the rebreather divers did not do any serious photography: maybe that reflects the enormous commitment needed to master both skills. The Bikini Atoll Nuclear Fleet Dive Team supply air in twin 13 litre steel cylinders with isolation manifolds, so that two regulators and



BCs or wings that can support twin cylinders are needed. The island can supply tools and expertise, but spares must come with you on the small aircraft. Luckily it is very warm on the atoll, because there is not much space left for clothes. The water is about 28_C, but can feel cold during decompression and some people bring 5mm suits and hoods.

My dive bag was pretty full before I even thought about my camera. I took two Nikon D70



bodies and a Nexus housing with two Inon Z-220 strobes on two segment arms. I took Nikon 16mm and 10.5mm lenses but, despite what has been written about Bikini in the past, regretted not having a 60mm and a flat port. I used the 10.5mm lens on most dives, but the 16mm performed well, too. I used the Nexus FP 120-7 glass dome, which never ceases to impress me with its optical quality and remarkably small size. I had enough batteries to keep one set on charge all the time, and two hard drives to back up four 1Gb SanDisk Ultra III CF cards. The generator on Bikini Island is very reliable, but noisy at night.

Many divers plan a week on Bikini, some after a week on Chuuk. The guides spend a week showing off the wrecks, with limited penetration into safe spaces. Six wrecks, the Saratoga, Arkansas, Apogon, Anderson, Lamson and Nagato are usually dived. The Carlisle, Pilotfish and Sakawa are said not be as impressive. Only the Apogon, an American Balao-class submarine, and the destroyers Anderson and Lamson can be seen in a single dive. The scope for planned photography in a week's diving is limited: because of the depths reached there are only two dives a day, and because of the sharks



there are no night dives. Diving the famed Shark Pass, thirty miles away from Bikini Island, takes divers away from the wrecks for a day. Staying for a second week allowed us to revisit our favourite dives, to negotiate different routes, to split into small groups for more adventurous penetrations into the Saratoga, and to abandon group diving in favour of photography on the Saratoga. This huge aircraft carrier, commissioned in 1927, was once the queen of the US Navy, and she is more fascinating with each dive, revealing every side of navy life, from the officers' dining ware to bombs, torpedoes and aircraft.

The military side of the Lamson is more immediately obvious, but the "Sara" has treasures that reward a little effort.

It is almost impossible to use filters, because of the depths reached. The time pressure that accompanies a thirty-minute bottom time, added to the unavoidable narcosis, could easily push the photographer into snapshot mode. I tried to avoid this by planning each dive with the guides, concentrating on two or three major targets, presetting camera and strobes as far as possible, but working with manual exposures and forcing myself to think through the settings



underwater. I shoot RAW, exclusively, plan for 0.5-1.0 stops underexposure and stay on 200 ASA equivalent. I correct exposure in Photoshop CS-2, and have begun to use the NoiseNinja plug-in to remove much of the noise that sometimes results. The slow shutter speeds needed to reveal the ambient light at depth, particularly beneath the battleships Arkansas and Nagato, make strobe lighting necessary to freeze detail onto the image. This became a problem during our second week when an unseasonal plankton bloom obscured the deeper wrecks, visibility declining to 3m at 50m depth. I concentrated on getting

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close with my 10.5mm full-frame fisheye lens and using two strobes on 18-inch arms, angled slightly outwards from the camera, and held at the same level as the lens' optical axis.

The undisturbed wrecks support an ecosystem from algae and whip coral to silvertip sharks and mantas. I had not expected the opportunities for photography that this presents, and was not prepared. A Nikon 60mm macro lens would have dramatically extended my Bikini portfolio, although I expect that it would have been a difficult decision to leave wide-angle lenses behind on any dive. Many of the Saratoga's treasures are



also too small for wide-angle lenses.

The best information on Bikini Atoll diving is definitely on the web. Jonathan Weisgall's book "Operation Crossroads" is interesting historically, but says nothing about the diving; James Delgado's "Ghost Fleet" is long out of print, and based on too few dives to be truly informative. Dive guides to Micronesia only spend a page or two in Bikini. Sadly, there is nothing comparable to Dan Bailey's "WW II Wrecks of Truk Lagoon".

The diving is magnificent. I described the experience to British friends as "Scapa Flow on steroids and speed, in warm water and you can (usually) SEE!".

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DE L'IMAGE SOUS-MARINE



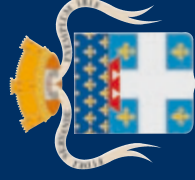
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