

Wrecks to Reefs

by Mark Webster

Most divers enjoy wreck diving and we underwater photographers are no different in this respect. Wrecks by themselves can produce some stunning and very graphic images but what also attracts me to them is the manner in which they are slowly engulfed by the sea. Any piece of wreckage whether placed deliberately or through tragedy under the sea will attract marine life very quickly and over a longer period will resemble a well populated reef giving us the best of both worlds – wreck and reef.

This transformation occurs in both temperate and tropical waters, but undoubtedly for underwater photographers the best opportunities are going to be found in warmer clearer waters of the tropical seas or perhaps the Mediterranean. To capture large sections of a shipwreck we need not only the correct equipment choice in terms of lenses and flash guns or filters, but more importantly plenty of light and good water clarity.

As with all dive sites, getting to know your wreck by diving it more than once gives you the opportunity to plan your shots, particularly if they involve a diver in the shot, and discover the habitats of some of the

smaller species if you want to mix your images between wide angle and macro. A wreck in open water is like a magnet to marine life and may offer a home to numerous fish species, particularly if the wreck is swept by currents. Many fish are like underwater photographers in that they don't like to work too hard in the current, so look for areas that offer shelter and you will often find fish schooling at the edge. The cracks, crevices and pipe work of a steel wreck are ideal homes for many species of blenny and crustaceans whilst the internal or darker spaces attract species like glassy sweepers or hatchet fish.

To capture large sections of a wreck you may need to shoot with natural light only and if it is shallow enough then maybe add a filter to restore some of the colours with white balance adjustment. Using a fish eye lens allows you to get much closer, but we need to accept that some distortion is inevitable where straight lines are composed near the edge of the image.

There are numerous examples of wrecks with great marine life around the globe, but here are a few examples



Tug Boat Tien Sien. Small wrecks like the tug boat Tien Sien are ideal for filter photography. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm fish eye, Magic Filter, ISO200 f8 1/60.

of my favourites in locations that won't break the bank.

Tien Sien - Fury Shoal, Red Sea, Egypt

Fury Shoal is an intricate pattern of reefs and lagoons which covers a broad area south of Marsa Alam and has provided a watery grave for several ships. The remains of an Admiralty tugboat named the Tien Sien lies on a reef known locally as

Abu Galawa. And she met her fate on 26 October 1943 on passage from Suez to Massawa.

Being a tugboat she is quite a small wreck, but this is one of the attractions as her size enables you to explore the whole wreck and get to know the major features in one dive. The bows have ploughed into the reef and it must be assumed that she sunk fairly quickly as the hull, keel and superstructure are all remarkably intact and are now protected by the



Tug Boat Tien Sien. Some features of the wreck are almost totally obscured by the hard coral growth. Nikon D200, Subal ND20 housing, 10.5mm fish eye, Magic Filter, ISO100 f8 1/60.

surrounding reef structure. The hull rests at an angle of approximately 30 degrees listing slightly to starboard with bows awash and the stern firmly wedged into the sand at a depth of 18m. At the midships section the keel is suspended above the seabed with plenty of space to swim through

The wreck is covered with predominantly hard corals, for which Fury Shoal is so well known, which almost obscures the shape of the superstructure in places.

On the main deck and stern the cover is less dense, but the reef definitely dominates the wreck. The shallow depth and often excellent visibility here makes this an ideal site for a Magic Filter and fish eye lens, as you can obtain an image of the whole wreck. Working closer reveals all the usual Red Sea suspects on the corals and closer inspection will reveal some of the less obvious residents – anemones with eggshell shrimps, lemon gobies, leopard spotted blennies, pixie hawk fish,

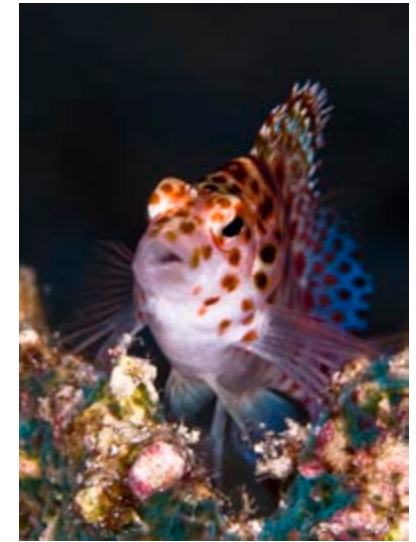


SS Turbo 'half wreck'. Shooting down the sloping decks of this wreck gives increased perspective and depth to your shots. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm fish eye, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f8 1/60. This wreck must have the largest population of pixie hawk fish I have encountered anywhere. On other sites you may struggle to find one, here they almost get in the way! Nikon D200, Subal ND20 housing, 105mm macro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f16 1/125.

scorpion fish and elegant shrimp goby with their blind shrimp partners. As the wreck is so shallow this is a perfect subject for filter photography and natural light only and is certainly worth several dives with different lenses and lighting techniques.

SS Turbo 'Half Wreck' - Ras Banas Red Sea, Egypt

This wreck of a fuel tanker is in fact only half of the ship which includes the stern and 'centre island' accommodation and engine room area. There was some confusion over her identity when first discovered and this wreck was assumed first to be the Atlas which had been torpedoed in 1940 off Yemen and broke her back as



a result. The stern section was salvaged and under tow to Alexandria with the intention of rebuilding the Atlas when she was struck by stormy weather close to Ras Banas and broke her tow and sank (it is now known) close to Port Berenice.

The prevailing winds here also make this a difficult wreck to dive as you need very calm conditions for your live aboard to moor over her – in fact to date at least one



SS Turbo 'half wreck'. There are a number of cooperative schools of bat fish on this wreck, particularly close to the stern. Waiting for them to emerge from the hold area give you the opportunity to frame them against the silhouette of the wreck. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm fish eye, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f8 1/60.

has been washed onto the fringing reef here by trying to dive in marginal conditions.

The wreck is intact but is not quite smothered in coral due to the proximity of the lagoon behind the fringing reef which can cause the visibility to drop after windy weather. There is however significant hard coral growth particularly on the starboard side hull, hand rails and mast. The mast did jut out into open water from the deck, but has now

collapsed and runs at a right angle down to the sandy seabed. If you are short of pictures of pixie hawk fish then head for this spot as there are literally dozens of them amongst the corals. The stern is very intact and is home to one or two very large groupers and a school of batfish. Close by on the sand sat a brass compass binnacle on my last visit – it may well still be there. Working your way along the walkways and around the accommodation there are



SS Turbo 'half wreck'. At the 'end' of the wreck where the bow section was torn away there is a community of bold lion fish who spend most of their day in the shadows of the hull. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm fish eye, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f8 1/60.

all the normal reef species and many scorpion fish and lion fish. On the forward part of the wreck are winches that have provided a secure hold for large anemones and their clown fish residents – look closer for transparent cleaner shrimp and the larger eggshell shrimp species, but expect a nip or two from the clown fish. You can access the engine room quite easily, but only do this if you are experienced in wreck penetration, have an experienced guide with you and have

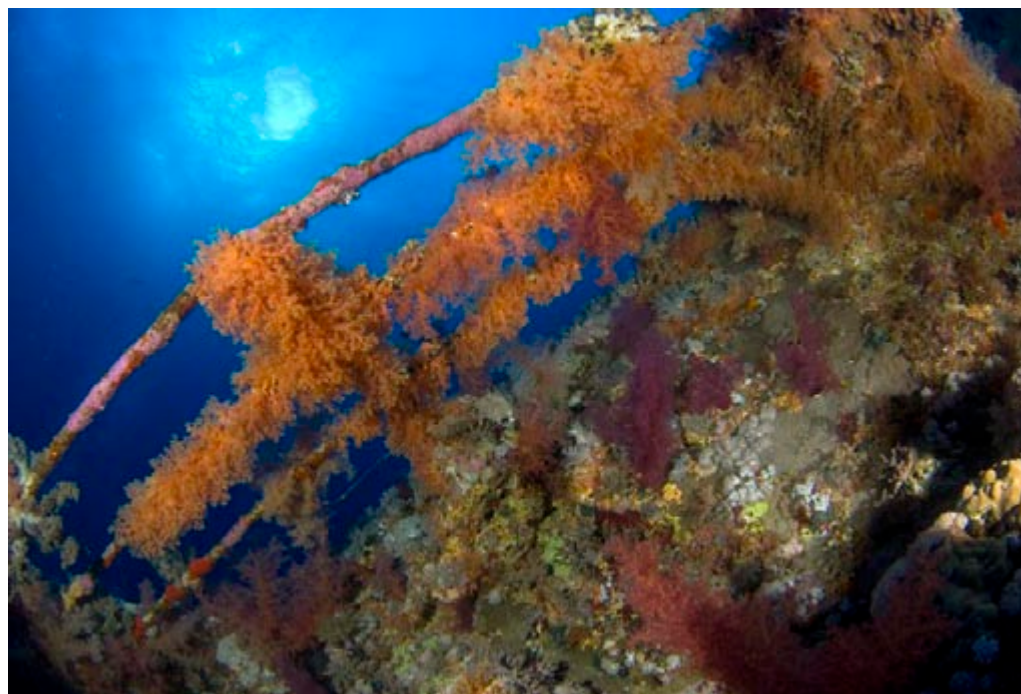
planned the dive that way.

When you reach the forward end of the wreck you can see clearly where the tanker broke her back. There is some access here into the dark recesses of the hull and this spot is normally home to dozens of lion fish during the day and several schools of glassy sweepers. On the sand below look out for large torpedo rays and crocodile fish before moving back onto the main deck area towards the accommodation, stairways and

gangways provides good framing opportunities for diver shots. Finish your dive on the shallow starboard side of the wreck where there is lots of hard coral growth and the chance to see schools of white parrot fish and surgeon fish grazing as though this was just another reef table. As this is only 'half' of a relatively large ship it is possible to swim hard and get around her in a dive if you don't head for the sea bed for too long. But by doing this you will miss out on a lot of the detail and marine life – if conditions are calm here the wreck is certainly worth two or three dives.

Numidia - Big Brother Island Red Sea, Egypt

The Brothers Islands are one of the big name sites in the Egyptian Red Sea which are best known for the big fish action, strong currents and sometimes high seas. The larger island, Big Brother, has a lighthouse to warn shipping on this busy route to keep clear, however, this warning was not enough for two ships which are now wrecked here. The larger of the two is the Numidia on the northern end of the island where she ran onto the reef in 1901 where she remained for seven weeks whilst much of her cargo was salvaged. She eventually slipped down the reef and sank fully at an extreme angle on the north plateau.



Numidia. There can be quite strong currents on this wreck, but once you reach it the superstructure will provide shelter until you are ready to move on. Nikon D200, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini TTL flash guns, ISO100 f11 1/60.

The remains of the bow and several rolling stock wheels from her cargo are found in 6-10m with the bulk of the wreck commencing at 15-20m and running down to the stern at 80m, only accessible to re-breather divers.

By diving to 25-30m you will cover a large portion of the wreck which is now overrun by colourful soft coral growth which makes this one of the prettiest wrecks in the Red Sea. The wreck itself is quite open as she was heavily salvaged before

sinking, so is accessible if you wish to penetrate a little way. The remains of the superstructure and gangways are now home to scores of different fish and the wreck is often visited by big schools of barracuda, jacks, Spanish mackerel and occasionally tuna. There is always the chance of seeing shark action here as well, particularly when the current is running. The prevailing current that sweeps the northern end of the reef can be quite strong, but you can get shelter from this when



Numidia. There are a number of large inquisitive groupers that live in this wreck who will keep returning for another look at you. Nikon D200, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini TTL flash guns, ISO100 f8 1/30.

exploring the wreck, but be prepared to go with it as you ascend to the bow area in the shallows. If the current is gentle then take the opportunity to explore the rolling stock wheels which make interesting images on their own, but getting closer to the spokes will reveal numerous blennies, pixie hawk

fish and occasionally nudibranchs. This may tempt you to return with a macro lens for subsequent dive.

Going with the current a short distance on the western side of the reef you will pass over the remains of the second wreck, the Aida which sank in September 1957. There is some wreckage in the shallows but the bulk of the wreck lies below at a depth of 30-60m and for this reason is not so attractive to photographers, although she is also blessed with a carpet of soft corals which thrive in the strong currents.

If the weather is kind then your live aboard will probably stay at the Brothers for a couple of days at least as the diving here is spectacular. Early morning dives are quite gloomy on the Numidia so it is best to wait for the late morning or early afternoon for the best light. Most of the wreck is beyond filter depths so you will need flash with your wide angle lens unless perhaps you want to experiment with monochrome.

Japanese wreck - Amed, Bali, Indonesia

Although there are a number of good dive sites in the Amed area the 'Japanese wreck' is often overlooked or visited in passing to the adjacent reef. This is the remains of a small cargo vessel, perhaps 30m long, which



Japanese Wreck. The whole of this small wreck is carpeted with soft and hard corals, her almost obscuring the stern. Nikon D200, Subal ND20 housing, 10.5mm fish eye, Subtronic Mini TTL flash guns, ISO100 f8 1/60.

lies in 6-10m of water a stones throw from the fishermen's beach at Ahmed. Possibly too small to hold the attention of many divers, it is an absolute gem for underwater photographers.

The wreck is quite intact at the stern with rudder and propeller still in place, whilst the bow section goes into burial in the sand. The remains are smothered in coral growth with some large sea fans on the stern area. This



Japanese Wreck. Inside the wreck are the inevitable schools of glassy sweepers. Check out the ribs on the inside of the hull and you will also find leaf scorpion waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Nikon D200, Subal ND20 housing, 10.5 mm fish eye, Subtronic Mini TTL flash guns, ISO100 f8 1/60.

is an indication of the strong currents that periodically sweep the wreck, but if you find it strong then just come back to the beach for an hour as they normally abate quickly. The rudder and propeller are covered in tubastrea corals which must look spectacular at night, but during the day provide a habitat for gobies, blennies, pixie hawk fish and numerous invertebrates. On the rest of the wreck there are all sorts of attractive residents – a small school of batfish with a cleaning

station close to the stern, glassy sweepers inside the wreck, resident leaf scorpion fish, numerous scorpion fish, and countless reef fish to keep your camera busy.

Being so shallow this is another ideal wreck for filter photography and is worth two or three dives with differing set ups for the variety of subjects. If you run out of subjects then just a short swim away to the north, around the headland, is a spectacular reef on a steep slope with



SS Turbo 'half wreck'. The shallow elevations of the hull have the heaviest coral growth and are home to a variety of reef species. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm fish eye, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f8 1/60.

some excellent corals and sponges and just about every reef species you could hope for.

Of course everyone has their own vision of the perfect wreck dive and there are possibly countless examples out there. Wrecks are predominantly a wide angle dive, particularly if they are intact, as even non divers can really relate to an image of a diver exploring a wreck. But where nature has done her work wrecks are also excellent macro dives so when

exploring and planning your wide angle images don't forget to take a closer look as well and you may be surprised and encouraged to return with a close up lens.

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