

Mairi Bahn

Last of the Wind Jammers

By Joseph C. Dovala

So the story goes....On December 6th, 1912, The Mairi Bahn left Trinidad bound for Marseille, France with a cargo of asphalt. Barely one day out a fierce storm caught the ship and headway was lost. Blown heavily off course the sailing ship was rapidly approaching the island of Bonaire. As if Captain Razeto didn't have enough problems, an oil lamp started a fire. A fire at sea is bad enough but when you're carrying flammable cargo it becomes horrendous.

Hundreds of barrels of the tar were stowed on deck and below so it didn't take long for the flames to find their ally. In no time the decks were ablaze and the forward sails had been turned to ash. The ignited asphalt spewed thick noxious smoke. With little control and the conflagration spreading, the Captain decided to run his ship aground to save his crew. So on December 7th, he aimed his ship for the last time toward land.

The force of the impact detached her mainmast thrusting it on shore. Battered by the big storm waves she quickly heaved over on her starboard

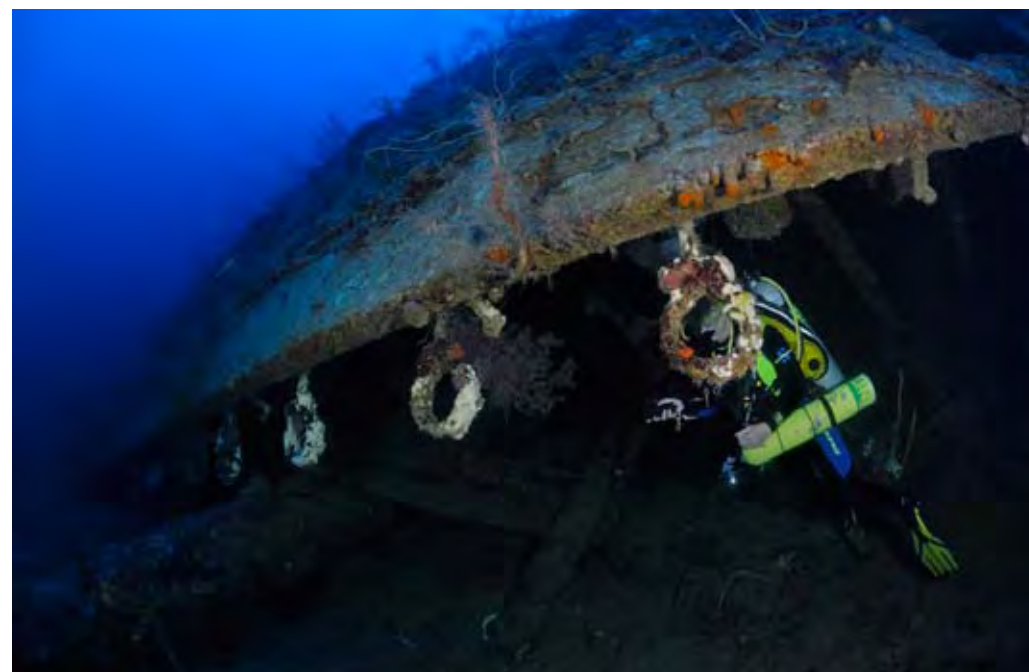
side, filled with sea water, and slid down the slope of the reef on the northwest end of Bonaire. Incredibly, all hands survived.

The Mairi Bahn, which is Gaelic for Bonny Mary, began life in 1874 at the Glasgow Scotland shipyard of Barclay, Curle and Co. The three-masted bark carried passengers and freight all over the world and though not a clipper ship, was very fast for a wind driven vessel.

At nearly 1,400 tons, 239 feet long, with three masts over 110 feet high she must have been quite a sight under full-square rigged sail. Her maiden voyage was a record setting 70 days, dropping off 479 new immigrants on New Zealand in July, 1874. For nearly twenty years she ferried thousands of passengers and cargo across the Atlantic and Pacific.

While it sounds romantic, the spartan conditions and rigors of day-to-day handling a large sailing ship were anything but. In the 1890's

Nikon D700, Aquatica housing, 15mm lens, 1/160th @ F9. ISO 800





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she had new Italian trade merchant owners and was relegated to being a tramp cargo hauler only. By the early 20th century, sailing cargo vessels were largely being replaced by the “stink potters” that didn’t need to tack and could maintain a steady relatively quick speed. The age of the Wind Jammer was coming to an end and the Mairi Bahn ended her career carrying any freight she could find from one port to another.

Known as the Schooner or Wind Jammer wreck, the Mairi Bahn’s

whereabouts have been known since the mid 1960’s, though she gets few visitors. She settled on a steep sand slope lying on her starboard side with her port cap rail in 160 feet of water. The remains of the forward mast and crows nest point toward the abyss at near 220 feet. A portion of the main mast that was thrown on shore still sits in 35 feet of water pointing down toward its lost ship. Prior to 9/11 accessing the ship wreck wasn’t a big deal. That’s changed now. Since her remains rest within the confines of the



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BOPEC oil storage facility, written permission with a passport check and an official guide are now required.

Like most diving at Bonaire the Wind Jammer can be approached from shore (boat diving on the wreck is forbidden). In fact, it’s actually one of the easiest beach entries on the island.

Our official guide was Walt Stark of Rec Tek Scuba on Bonaire. On a slightly breezy day my companions, Janine McMurdie, Michael Stevens and I crammed our four-door mini pickup with twin cylinders, sling

bottles, and all the other dive paraphernalia. We motored over to Walt’s shop and followed him northward on the narrow winding road to the BOPEC facilities. As we approached the main guard shack I expected a rather terse greeting but instead got a big islander smile, “Welcome folks, going to get wet today?”

A few signatures, a passport look-see, and a wave sent us on our way. A short drive through a gate put us at an old fishermen’s boat ramp.

I was a little worried about a shore dive with all the tech gear but this was about as easy as it can get. We even had a high concrete table to get the equipment ready. After Walt told us not to worry about his recent heart condition - and our recovery from his “joke” - it was a fairly painless walk into deep enough water to start swimming. We had small wave sets coming in from the south but nothing too dramatic. The swim out is about 250 yards, and from there it’s a nice easy angled descent to the Mairi Bahn.

It’s always a thrill to see a ship wreck emerge from the gloom, and this one sitting on the steep white sand slope is dazzling. Since we have a fair amount of depth to deal with we had to choose either the pointy or flat end to explore. We decided on the pointy end.

The bow aims to the south and though the bowsprit has fallen into the sand it’s still quite a view. Even though she’s been down for almost a hundred years, and has suffered additional collapse recently, to dive a 19th century tall ship is exciting. Much of the interior has fallen away and you can swim a good distance through the old compartments. The cargo of spilled tar looks like a grayish/black taffy and is actually spreading down the sand slope at about 7 inches per year. The asphalt

doesn’t feel like it’s moving as it is hard almost like a plastic. However, you can see black “waterfalls” flowing over bits of wreckage. Good thing it’s mostly sand down slope.

There are a couple of large cracks in the old iron hull so there are multiple places to exit or enter. Caution must still be used though, not only for entanglement potential but also the fragile nature of the ship itself. She maybe falling apart but large corroding iron parts are still pretty heavy! Some of the stanchions and dead eyes remain attached to the vessel. The forward main mast has stayed connected to the keel and its gigantic diameter is a testament to how strong these tall ships had to be to stand the rigors of heavy wind. Each mast needed to withstand over a quarter of a million pounds of wind energy during a brisk blow.

With most of the partitions and bulkheads having collapsed, the inner framework and other support structures are visible. Down amongst the clutter can still be found curios like old buckets and fittings from various ship board systems. Some denizens of the deep have made the dark confines home like groupers, eels, and lobster. I’m pretty sure the comfort factor for these critters is a whole lot better than it was for the humans who lived for weeks and months stuffed below these decks.



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Anyone who has tried to get a meaningful photograph below the surface knows that time is not the only hurdle to deal with. Lack of light and contrast under the waves is almost always an issue for the underwater photographer and even more of a problem for the deep diver. Of course reduced turbidity, organics, etc., in the water column and less cloud cover above will mean more light available to use at depth. Usually tropical destinations meet these criteria and provide the most consistent clarity but not always. Diving under sheets of ice, some fresh water springs, and

those magical days in temperate seas can also let the sunshine in. Sadly, I can count the number of days on my fingers that I had “tropical like” conditions at home, so typically the natural light accessible is quite different between the two locals. In murkier waters opening the lens up as well as using longer exposures from 1/30sec or more can help when using diminished ambient illumination. Unless motion is desired a sturdy prop such as a tripod or something to brace against (without damaging marine life) is required and your subject cannot be moving. Coupling slower

shutter speeds with higher ISO's of either film or digital capture makes a good tool to combat light loss, but there is a price to pay with increased graininess, camera shake, or noise in the final image. Shooting toward the surface will certainly help too, however the dive plan must take into account that the subject needs to be above maximum depth.

A sufficiently powerful strobe, or strobes, is essential if you're going to unlock the colors and boost contrast. While there are some powerful flashguns available, you must balance capabilities with size and complexity of system. By shooting in the "raw" format in digital I have more control of exposure and contrast than I ever could with transparency film. Also, with instant feedback I can make effective changes on site. Due to the very limited time at depth I usually just check gross exposure on the LCD. With hundreds of raw images available on a multi-gig card I'm free to bracket all I want without worrying about running out of space. Digital also allows fairly high ISO's to be changed on the fly for as few or as many shots as you like. This is very handy when you want to change the "feel" of a shipwreck for example, without committing the whole roll to a particular ASA rating. That is not to say you can't produce fine images with film, for there are many superb

photographs fashioned in just this manner.

Our short twenty minute visit came to an end and we took in her graceful whip coral covered hull on our ascent. There still remained lots of areas to poke around and explore. You also need to look out every once and awhile into the cobalt blue water; you never know what marine critter will swim up and see what all the fuss is about. Our required deco stops turned into a nice leisurely swim back up and over the coral reef. By the time the computer clears you're just about at the boat ramp.

To be sure the Mairi Bahn is definitely showing her age. As the months and years unwind the continued collapse is inevitable. Despite this there are few places in the world to see a ship wreck from this era, especially with such relatively easy diving conditions found at Bonaire. I don't know if I'll ever see her again but I certainly won't forget her.

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