

Algarve's Ocean Revival Project

by Augustus Salgado

Just five minutes before two o'clock in the afternoon on the 21st last September, the fourth and last ex-Portuguese Navy ships – the hydrographic research ship Almeida Carvalho – started her controlled dive to the ocean's floor, by the expert hand of the Canadian Artificial Reef Consulting (CARC).

This ship joined three other ex-Portuguese Navy ships – the Zambeze (44 meters ocean patrol boat), the Oliveira e Carmo (85 meters corvette) and the Hermenegildo Capelo (102 meters frigate) – all sunk 1,5 nautical mile from Alvor beach, in the Algarve, creating one unique underwater park. All these ships, with a common background, create the largest single artificial reef structure in the world, freely accessible to all.

With the sea bed around 30 meters, the upper structures of the ships are at a depth around 15 meters and the main decks around 20 meters, making them accessible to all levels of divers. The ships were fully cleaned of all hazardous materials, and openings were made all around the ships' structures, so that a diver once

inside a compartment will always see a way out in front of him. Also the ships' bridges have openings on top, allowing even Open Water divers to enter them.

But the project doesn't have only recreation objectives, as the new wrecks will also be closely followed by biologists that will monitor the marine life grow in the new underwater structures.

Although some believe that this project started only one year before when, for the first time, the patrol boat Zambeze and the corvette O. Carmo were sunk on the same day – 30th October 2012 - it really started in 2006, by the hand of its promoter, Luis Sá Couto.

Even though the Portuguese Navy didn't take long to see the potential of the project, Luis had to

Inside the main engine room of the ex-Portuguese Navy corvette Oliveira e Carmo. Nikon D300, SEALUX Housing, Tokina 10-17 mm, at 10 mm, f.6.3, 1/30, iso 200, one Inon Z-240 on housing, one Inon Z-240 remote triggered by Tigerfish slave sensor.





The ex-Portuguese Navy corvette Oliveira e Carmo, seconds before she disappears from the surface. Nikon D300, Sigma 70-300mm, f.9, 1/640, iso 200.

struggle against all kind of difficulties and lack of vision by both civilian and governmental entities.

His persistence was finally rewarded 6 years later, when Almeida Carvalho, was finally sunk. With all the ships sitting in the bottom in the upright position, after a security verification by the Portuguese Navy divers, the ships were opened to recreational divers, on the same day they were sunk.

So far the project has cost 2.5 million Euros, but Sá Couto believes that the investment will be regained in

short time. With direct flights to Faro (40 minutes drive to Portimão) from Northern Europe - especially from England and Germany -, he expects to reach 90,000 dives yearly, by 2020. Just in the first 8 months and with only two ships sunk, more than 4,000 dives were made, which represents an increase of over 40% in comparison with previous years.

To complement the underwater park, the project also includes:

An Exhibition Centre on land, where the history of the sunken fleet is documented with drawings, photos



The main gun director of the ex-Portuguese Navy frigate Hermenegildo Capelo. Nikon D300, SEALUX Housing, Tokina 10-17 mm, at 10 mm, f.10, 1/100, iso 200, one Inon Z-240 on housing, one Inon Z-240 remote triggered by Tigerfish slave sensor.

and films of the ships, the chronology of his career and documents about its historical context;

A hyperbaric chamber, located in Portimão, at the service of the local community and available to any and unlikely emergency dive;

Other routes underwater, including the identification, cataloging and dissemination of other dive sites, demarcated and protected, allowing divers to safely explore the many sights of the region.

With good diving conditions 300 days yearly, and with water temperatures ranging from 14° to 22° C, the dive centres in the Algarve usually conduct two dives on each trip, usually in the morning. In the summer months, however, they normally do two trips daily, being the morning dives the most pleasant, because of the strong breeze that arrives early in the afternoon.

Portimão is the closest town near the underwater park, and it has plenty



Minutes before the sinking of the ex-Portuguese Navy frigate Hermenegildo Capelo. Nikon D300, Sigma 70-300mm, f.18, 1/200, iso 200.

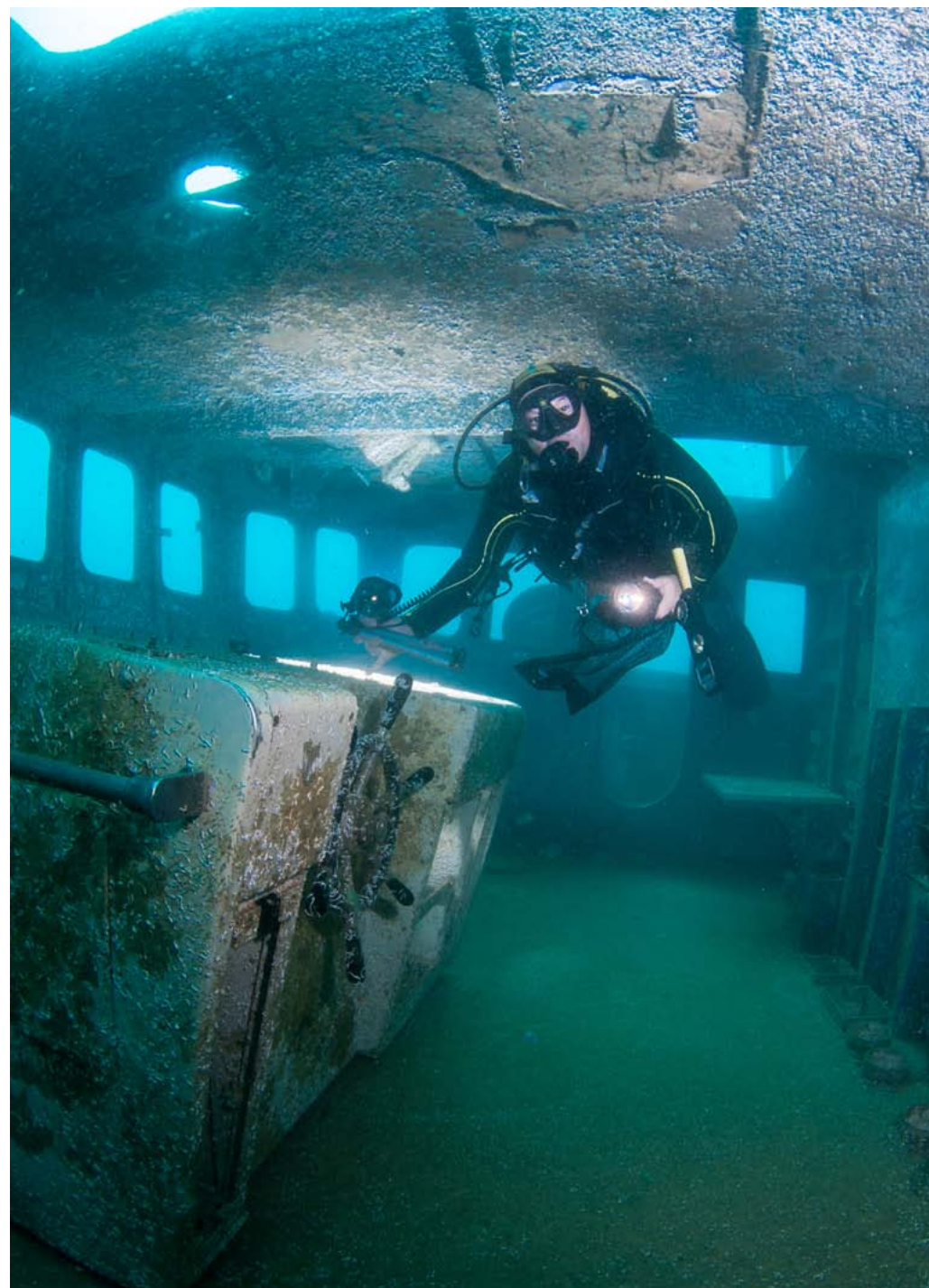
offers of accommodation ashore and restaurants, and although the Ocean Revival project came from Luis Sá Couto, the owner of the SUBNAUTA diving centre (Portimão), all the nearby dive centres can and are diving in the park.

Using the SUBNAUTA as an example, divers are asked to get to the dive centre around 0800, in order to get their diving equipment ready and checked. In this centre, you just need to bring your diving certifications, as the dive package includes all the diving equipment that is well

organized by types and sizes.

Having your equipment ready and checked, your gear is then taken to one of the three SUBNAUTA's dive boats – a 10 meter RIB, with two 90 HP outboards; a 12 meters RIB with two inboard Diesel engines 270 HP

The ex-Portuguese Navy corvette Oliveira e Carmo's bridge. Nikon D300, SEALUX Housing, Tokina 10-17 mm, at 10 mm, f.7.1, 1/50, iso 200, one Inon Z-240 on housing, one Inon Z-240 remote triggered by Tigerfish slave sensor.





A sponge at the ex-Portuguese Navy corvette Oliveira e Carmo's just after 10 months. Nikon D300, SEALUX Housing, Tokina 10-17 mm, at 11 mm, f.9, 1/60, iso 200, two Inon Z-240.

(Left) Going down the chimney of the ex-Portuguese Navy corvette Oliveira e Carmo. Nikon D300, SEALUX Housing, Tokina 10-17 mm, at 10 mm, f.8, 1/60, iso 200, one Inon Z-240 on housing, one Inon Z-240 remote triggered by Tigerfish slave sensor.

and a 18 meter multi-hull ship, for live aboard – that you were assigned to, so that your gear is already on board you arrive.

Meanwhile, the divers are getting into your dive suits and having the diving briefing, all in the centre's excellent installations.

You are then taken to the

Portimão's marina, by golf cars, to your assign diving boat but, before o step in, you will have a small briefing about your specific boat.

As the underwater park is just 3 miles from where the boats are, the ride takes just 10 minutes until the boat is moored to the chosen wreck's bow buoy. In the summer, it's not

uncommon to see all the buoys occupied, and some with more than one dive boat on each.

With high expectations of what lays bellow, people start to gear up, quickly jumping into the water with their assigned buddies and their dive guide. As the divers start their descend, the shape of the ship starts to get bigger and bigger as the 20 meters from the surface are covered.

Reaching the main deck, groups split up and start to explore the ships, according to pre-dive briefings, entering a new realm to most of them. The first thing a diver notices is the amount of life that the “older” wrecks already have after only some months underwater.

Although torches are carried by all, once inside the wrecks, and after the divers’ eyes adapt themselves to the low light, the extra light is only needed to check for details. The several openings along the structures, allow enough light to enter the wreck for a safe navigation between the corridors and rooms inside the hulls and, in case of emergency, they are wide enough to let a diver pass to the outside.

Even diving with Nitrox, with depths inside the wrecks raging between 15 and 30 meters, the bottom time is around 40 minutes that allows divers only to complete one of the several different tours that can be made on each wreck. This diversity of routes reduces the chance of meeting the other group from your boat, or even from other boats. Also, you’ll want to dive several times in the same wreck, as other divers start telling what you missed, by not going the other route.

On returning to the surface, and as experiences are exchanged between the groups, a light snack is served while the crew change our tanks and move the RIB to the second dive spot of the trip.



The ex-Portuguese Navy corvette Oliveira e Carmo's ship galley. Nikon D300, SEALUX Housing, Tokina 10-17 mm, at 10 mm, f.3.5, 1/15, iso 200, one Inon Z-240 on housing, one Inon Z-240 remote triggered by Tigerfish slave sensor.

On completion of the second dive, the boat just takes another short 10 minute ride back to the marina and all the process is then repeated in reverse. Divers are ferried on the same gulf cars back to the dive centre, while their dive gear is taken cared again by the staff.

Although there are several different dive sites to dive in Algarve – including several older wrecks

and places full of marine life – since October last year, most of the dive trips the centres around the underwater park go to is for this unique underwater park and its four ex-Portuguese Navy ships.

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