

Wreck Diving in Porto Santo

by Augusto Salgado

It has been more than 20 years since I last dived in Porto Santo Island, the second biggest island of the Madeira's archipelago, that measures just 6 by 11 kilometres. One might struggle to find it on a map, but just look 40 kilometres northeast from Madeira and there it is. Contrary to Madeira, this island has a nine kilometres' long sandy beach, and it's known for its very clear and blue waters. And, with just a handful of hotels and restaurants, Porto Santo has been classified as one of the last 'undiscovered' resorts in Europe. The climate in Porto Santo, mild all year round, with a sea temperature ranging between 17°C and 22°C, makes this island always attractive, even in the winter.

Since 13th July this year, the island is also the home of a new artificial reef, the ex Portuguese Navy corvette General Pereira D'Eça. It was an excellent excuse to go diving in Porto Santo again.

With a group of nine other divers from the diving club I usually dive in Madeira, a trip was organized to dive on Porto Santo's new underwater park. On that day, we were going to do two dives with the support of a

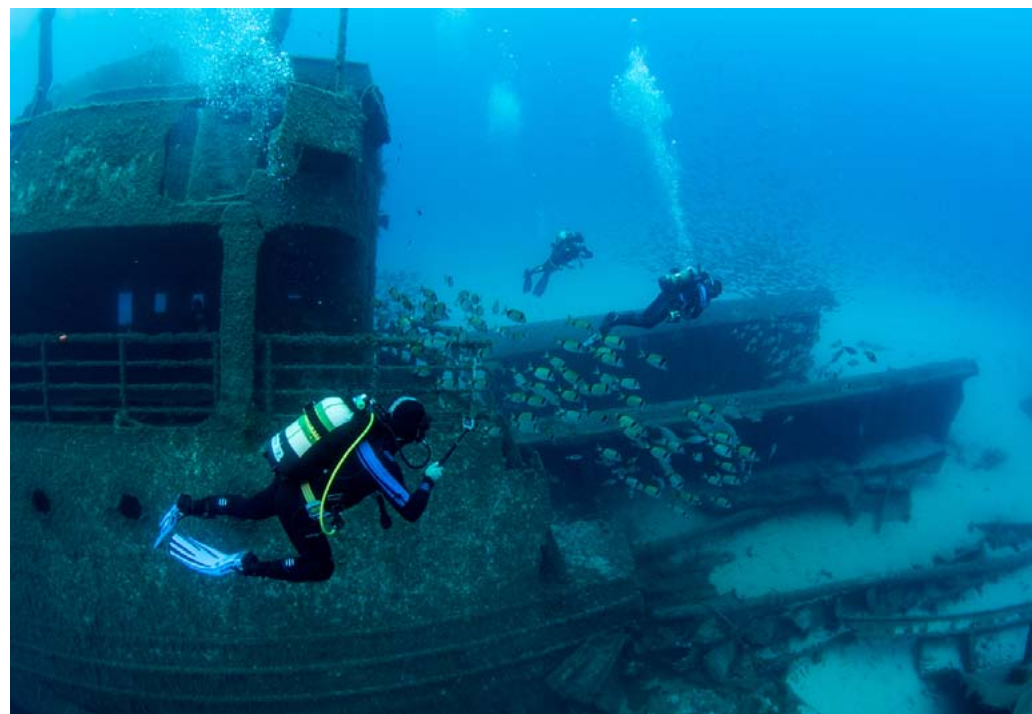
local dive club, just after the arrival of the daily ferry. Everyone was eager to see the new spot, as very interesting images were already being shown on the Internet.

The process to sink this ship started in 2014, and had a total cost of 345 thousand euros (85% came from the EU). The ship was prepared in Lisbon and then towed to her final destination, when ready to be sunk. According to local government, Porto Santo was chosen in order to diversify the tourism on offer in what is known as the "golden island".

This new wreck was sunk near the island's other wreck, the MV Madeirense that went down in 2000. They are just two nautical miles apart

The MV Madeirense stern almost covered with schools of fish. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic Strobes. ISO 400 1/80th f9

Divers start to explore the MV Madeirense's with schools of fish around them. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic Strobes. ISO 400 1/80th f9



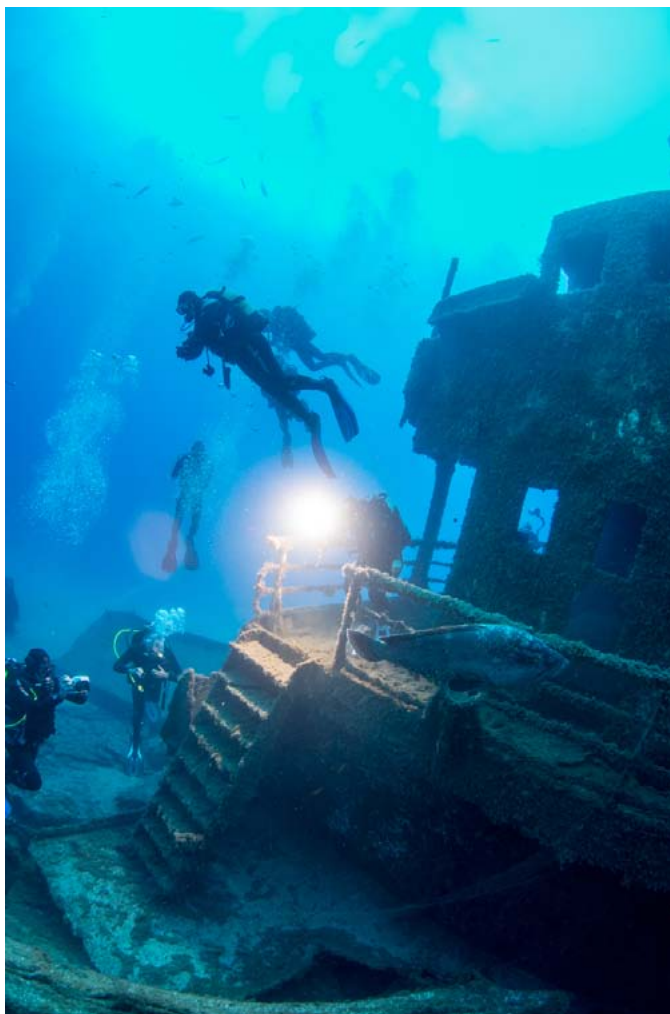
in a less than 10 minutes trip from the harbour. With this new wreck, an underwater marine park was created, and there is hope that the diving activity, that represents already 5 to 10 % of the income of the island, will increase.

As planned, we departed early one morning from Funchal, on the daily ferry that returns everyday late in the afternoon. As we needed to take all our diving equipment with us, except our tanks, we decided to take one car, instead of carrying it aboard the ferry. On arrival, we went straight to the pier where the diving boat was docked, as we were on a tight schedule.

With all the diving and photographic gear ready, we headed first to the Madeirense, which is known for the great amount of marine life that gathers in and around her. We could see that immediately after we started descending, as schools of small fish almost covered the wreck. The wreck is already broken in two, with the stern still high in the water.

As we reached the wreck, the group split into pairs. She lies on a sandy bottom, around 35 meters deep. The visibility was around 20 meters and the water temperature was 21° C, so we were able to see most of the wreck and the marine life that lives in it. Going with Nitrox, we were able to stay on the wreck for the next forty minutes, exploring most of it. We were sad to return to the surface, but the computers ordered so, and we had the new shipwreck to dive next. I just had time to see the outside the wreck, so I took note that this one needed, at least, two more dives.

After an hour's break at the surface and with tanks changed, we were ready to dive again... it took less than 5 minutes to reach the new dive spot. As soon as we put our heads in the water we could



A busy moment on the MV Madeirense bridge. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic Strobes. ISO 400 1/80th f9

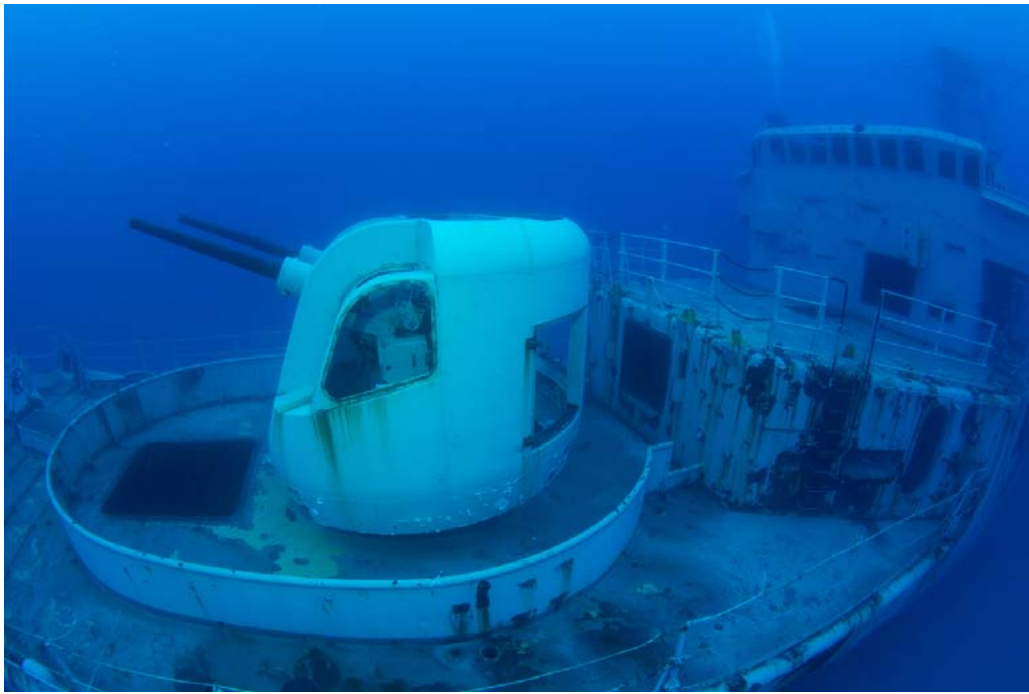
immediately see the corvette. This one is a little shallower, with the keel around 27 meters deep, and the higher part reaching the 16 meters, allowing more divers to enjoy this new wreck.

Being on the bottom for just 15 days, there wasn't much sea life yet, just a small school of little



Divers start to explore the MV Madeirense's with schools of fish around them. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic Strobes. ISO 400 1/80th f9

fish inside the bridge. But with clear blue water, it was a sight to enjoy. The group dispersed again, but I was able to get some pictures with just the wreck, as many went inside the well-prepared interior. Inside, as well as the others sunk in the Algarve, the ship was prepared so that a diver doesn't need



The bridge and 76 mm gun of the corvette General Pereira D'Eça. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic strobes. ISO 400 1/125th f11

The bow of the corvette General Pereira D'Eça. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic strobes. ISO 400 1/100th f10

to retreat the way he entered, he can always see at least one exit in every compartment as well as the one he's entered.

As I already know the inside of these types of ships, I took my time to try to make good use of the excellent visibility and to get general pictures of the wreck. I feel that much better can be done so I have to return... sun rays were lacking, as it was a cloudy day, unfortunately...

All the others were also enjoying the dive and this new artificial reef. As the ship was sunk with both its guns – two 76 mm on the bow, and two 40 mm amidships, you could see their joy, especially my youngest son's.

Once again, the computers told us it's time to go up, and we started to ascend... as I looked down during my safety stop, I was still able to see the Pereira D'Eça on the sandy bottom, and I tried to get some pictures of the





The bridge of the corvette General Pereira D'Eça. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic Strobos. ISO 400 1/100th f10

My youngest son “firing” the 76 mm guns of the corvette General Pereira D'Eça. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic strobes. ISO 400 1/100th f10

group and the ship under them. In Portugal, there aren't many places we have all these together.

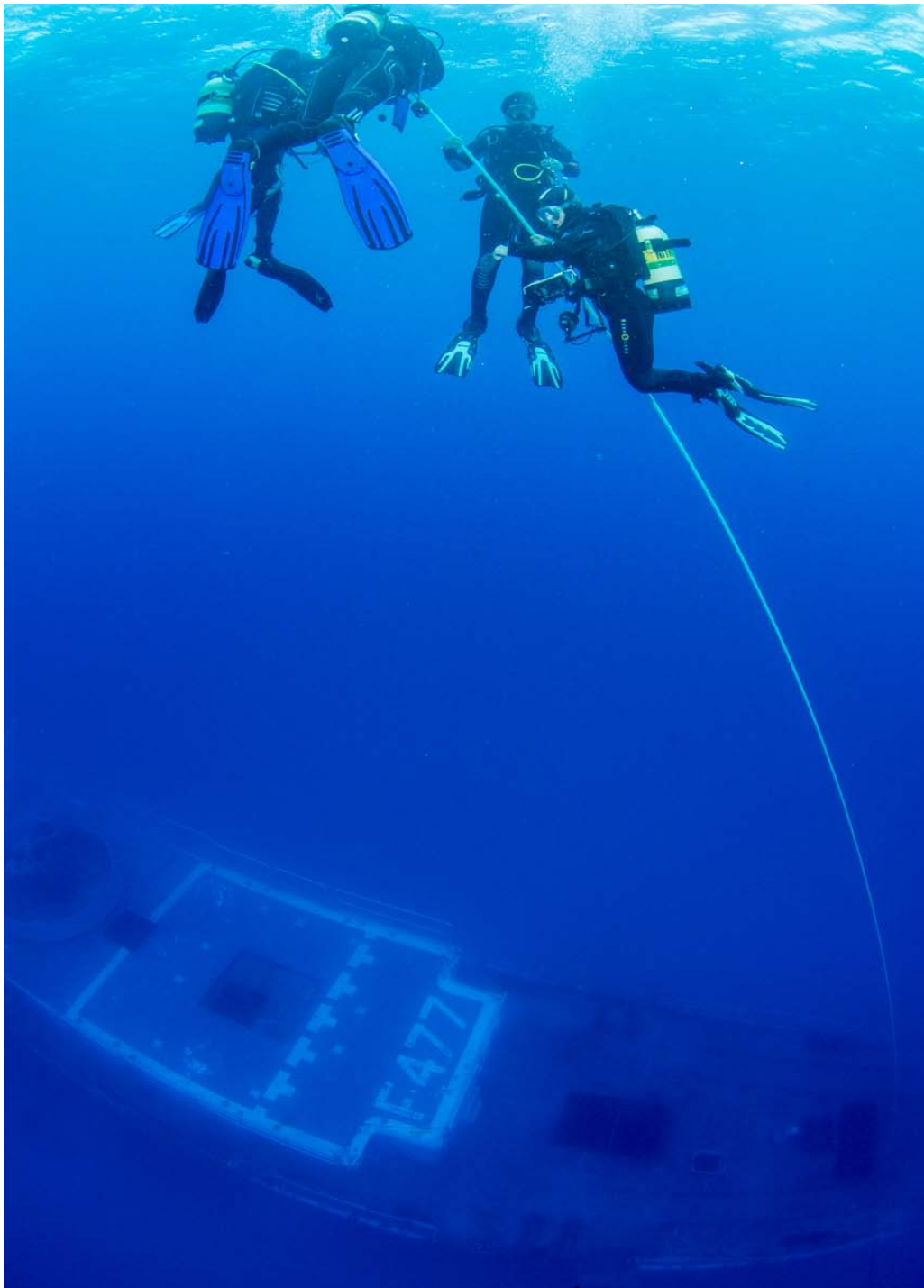
The lack of “local” residents is changing fast, as we see on the Internet. As days go by, there are more schools of fish gathering on the wreck, bringing the predators, including the big groupers that are so famous in Madeira's dives.

Back in port, we just had time to wash and put everything in the back

of our car and search for a place to eat the famous “prego no bolo do caco” (steak on a Madeira's special bread). Next stop is an ice cream on the island town centre (Lambecas) and it was time for our two and an half hours return voyage to Funchal.

As marine life starts populating the new wreck, a longer stay in Porto Santo, with more dives to explore this new underwater park is already on my wish list in the near future.





Divers on 3 m safety stop, with the corvette General Pereira D'Eça still visible. Nikon D7100, Tokina 10-17 mm, Hugyfot Housing, 2x Subtronic strobes. ISO 400 1/125th f11

Also, it will be a good opportunity to enjoy one of the new hotels that have opened since my and my wife's earlier visit.

For really enjoying the wrecks, I recommend a semi-dry suit or a 7 mm wetsuit, and the use of Nitrox. You'll feel more comfortable and stay longer bearing in mind the depths which both wrecks are. And you'll need more than one dive for each wreck, so a minimum of 3 days of diving is recommended.

But the island has other diving spots, including one with several iron guns and bullets, from an unknown wreck, or just material that was sent overboard in order for the ship to escape. One thing is for sure, the visibility is always fabulous... so, more days might be needed, after all...

When not diving with one of the two diving clubs that operate in the island, you can just relax (I just don't recommend the month of August, as it seems that half Madeira's residents move to Porto Santo for their summer vacations). The island also boasts a first-rate international golf course;

the rugged interior is a fine setting for energetic walks, and there's horse riding, game fishing and many other diversions to be found. There's an intriguing touch of history too, as Porto Santo's capital and only town, Vila Baleira was once home to Christopher Columbus.

A newly enlarged international airport serves the island, but most of the flights will pass through Madeira. Or you can use the ferry from Madeira, as we did, and you can dive even on the day you depart the island to Funchal.

There is a promise that, in a near future, the Madeira's diving community will have another artificial reef, again an ex Portuguese Navy corvette but, this time, in the Madeira's island south coast...

Augusto Salgado



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