

# Best Dive Sites in North Carolina



If I were to talk about the **best dive destinations** in the world, I'd be looking for a few specific things.

First and foremost- interesting and varied marine life, followed shortly by healthy and diverse habitats along with high visibility and professional dive centers, gives us a great dive location checklist.

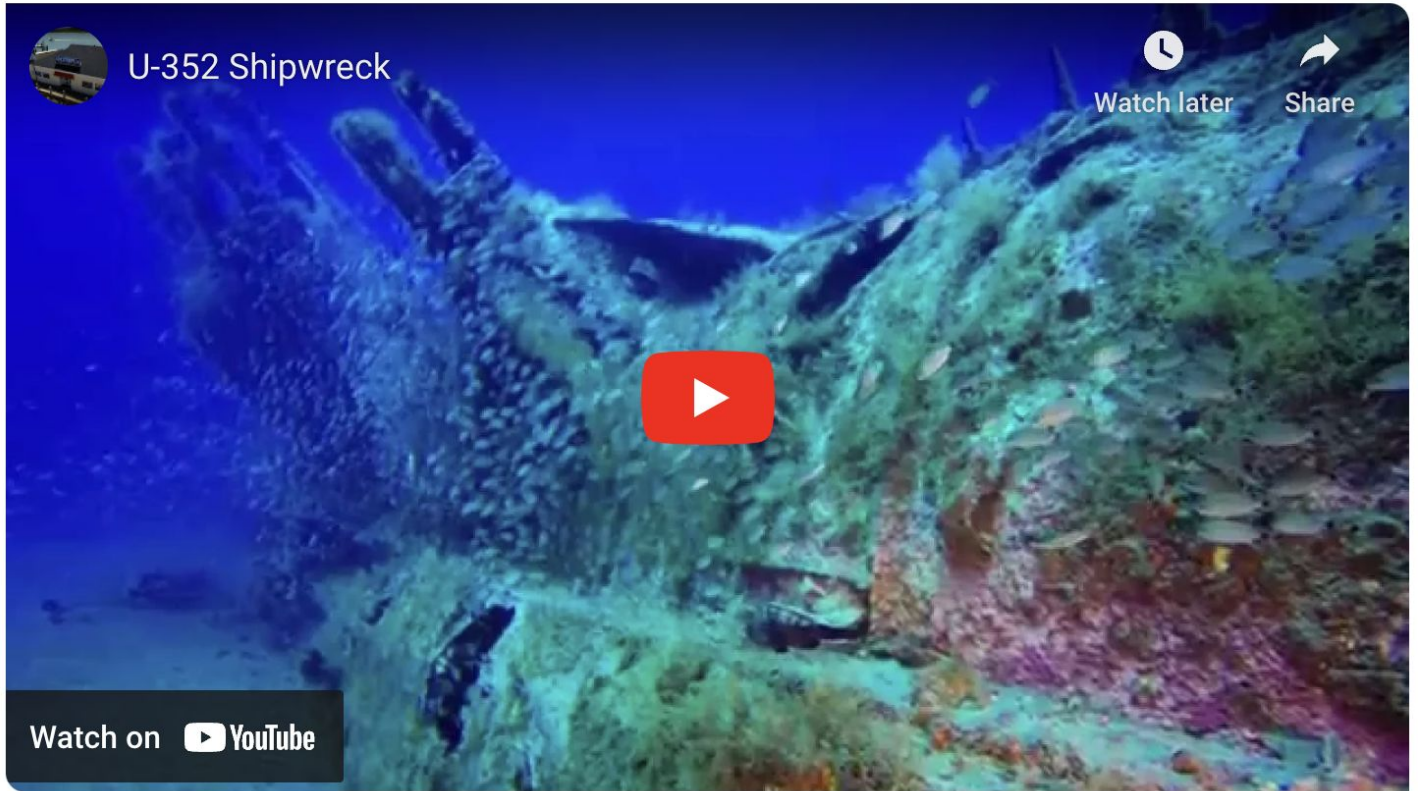
If you throw in the opportunity to spot **large pelagic hunters**, relatively warm water, and outdoor recreation opportunities beyond diving, then I'm taking the week off and buying a plane ticket.

The "**Crystal Coast**" off **North Carolina's Outer Banks** is an area that demonstrates all of the above, along with an earnest culture of stewardship and care for their local environment.



Known to some as the **“Graveyard of the Atlantic,”** the Crystal Coast is home to some 2,000 shipwrecks and rich marine life ranging from charismatic megafauna to cleverly hidden critters skulking in the wreckage. This accessible area is quickly gaining prominence as the **premier wreck diving destination** in the US. Word is out, we’ve done our research and sat down with Robert, the owner of local *Olympus Diving* to hone in on the best the Crystal Coast has to offer.

# U-352



**Difficulty:** Intermediate

**Visibility:** 50-100+ ft

**Max Depth:** 115 ft

**Currents:** Minimal to Moderate

*U-352* is the **crown jewel** of North Carolina diving, it's also one of the more notorious wrecks in the world. The story of Torpedo Alley, how the sub ended up submerged in shallow water, the tenacious search to rediscover it, and the unlikely reunion that followed is compelling and well worth the [read](#).

While clouds of vivid Red Barbier and other schooling fish swarm the wreckage, most of the **appeal is the U-boat itself**, and this is definitely a dive for the history. My inclination with dives without a major biological component is to dismiss them as "novelty" attractions, but *U-352* is an **exception**. There are so many compelling reasons to take the undersea voyage to this essential piece of history. Well within recreational limits, *U-352* is an incredibly accessible and easy-to-navigate dive for intermediate and above divers.

# Indra



**Difficulty:** Beginner/Intermediate

**Visibility:** 20-30 ft

**Max Depth:** 60 ft

**Currents:** Minimal

Sunk in 1992 as a part of the ongoing NC Artificial Reef Project, the *Indra* is one of the higher-trafficked sites for **novice divers** and those getting their bearings off the Carolina Coast. While its proximity to shore limits visibility and the likelihood of spotting large pelagic life, it's a way **shorter boat ride** than the considerable distances needed to explore some of the more popular sites.

The *Indra* is considerably more shallow than other sites in the area and, as a consequence, tends to have much worse visibility. In 2018, Hurricane Florence devastated the Carolinas and **ripped the *Indra's* hull apart**. Aesthetically, this did good things for the *Indra* as a dive site. Burgeoning divers can get a bisected view of the ship's interior. It's a great, very accessible dive for those just dipping their toes into the world of wrecks.

# Aeolus



**Difficulty:** Intermediate

**Visibility:** 40-70 ft

**Max Depth:** 110 ft

**Currents:** Moderate

Commissioned to the seafloor in 1988 as an impressive addition to the Carolina Artificial Reef Program, the *Aeolus* is a **showcase** of all the factors that make the Crystal Coast a leading wreck dive destination. The wreck is split into three major pieces in about 100 feet of water. Dives like this are **well worth a couple of trips** due to the shifting cast of offshore marine life, opportunities for penetration, and its appreciable size.

**Sand tiger sharks** are counted among the regular residents of the *Aeolus*, often spotted in the cable storage area beneath the stern deck. Divers can also count on **schooling barracuda, amberjack, and tropical fish** that hitched a ride up on the Gulf Stream. If you end up taking a boat out to dive the *Aeolus*, keep in mind that **visibility can be a big limiting factor** here. Navigation between the different sections of the wreck can be tricky if visibility isn't great.

# Proteus



Exploring the Proteus Shipwreck with Dive Hatteras



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**Difficulty:** Advanced/Expert

**Visibility:** 60+ feet

**Max Depth:** 120 ft

**Currents:** Significant

Resting just **on the edge of the Crystal Coast**, the *Proteus* sank near the end of WW I after colliding with an oil tanker. Both ships were taking precautions against the threat of U-boat attacks and, due to the lack of lights, struck one another in the dark of night. The oil tanker survived and went on for another few decades of use before finally succumbing to a U-boat attack in the next World War, while the *Proteus* has remained largely undisturbed off the Carolina Coast.

Like most wrecks in this tumultuous stretch of sea, the years have been hard on the structure of the boat. Still, it remains among the more navigable, where semi-savvy divers can **easily trace the entirety of the debris on a single tank**. The stern remains in comparably good condition and, with its high relief and abundant sea life, has earned the *Proteus* a reputation as one of the most memorable dives in the area. If you're able to get out there when currents allow for diving, it's a great place to **spot large stingrays and groups of sand tiger sharks**.

# Normannia



**Difficulty:** Intermediate

**Visibility:** 50-60ft

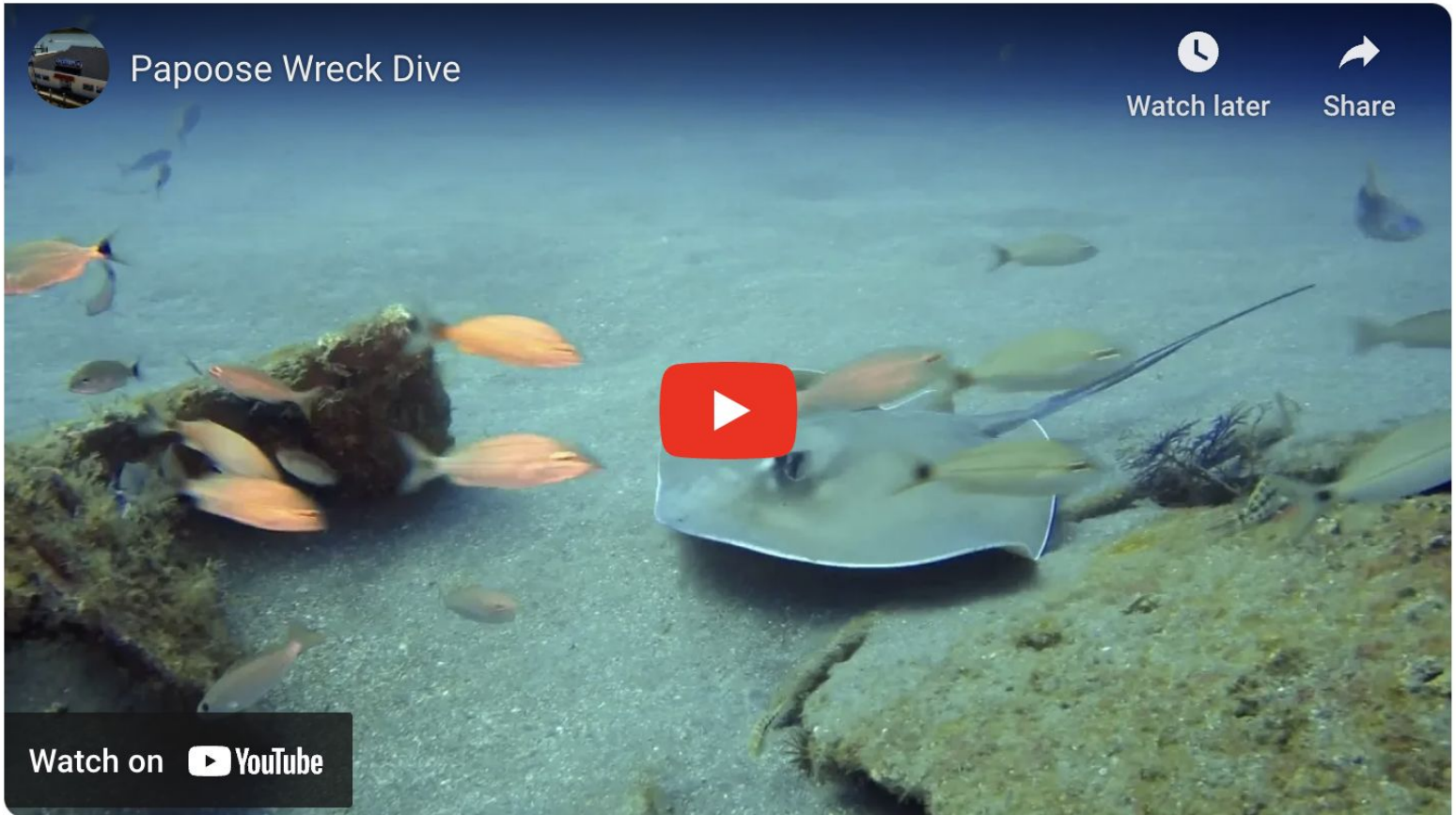
**Max Depth:** 115 ft

**Currents:** Moderate

The *Normannia* is a **long haul** from the areas where most Crystal Coast dive centers operate- but if you're willing to buckle down for an extended trip, it offers some of the most spectacular diving in the area. Because of its proximity to the Gulf Stream, there's a **high density of tropical fish** and other species lurking in and around the structure. Divers can expect hogfish, pompano, angelfish, and other charismatic Caribbean species down to crustaceans.

The *Normannia* has largely faded into the ocean floor, with some notable exceptions around the bow and stern of the ship. Nevertheless, the structure in its entirety is easily identifiable and navigable. The *Normannia* is known as one of the **prettiest wrecks** in the area and is well worth the long approach if you have the time.

# Papoose



**Difficulty:** Intermediate

**Visibility:** 50-100 ft

**Max Depth:** 120 ft

**Currents:** Minimal to Significant

The *Papoose* is **unique** among the wrecks we've covered in its structural integrity and the angle at which it is situated on the ocean floor. This might be surprising, considering the holes blasted in the hulls by torpedoes. The superstructure remains **more or less intact**, with notable degradation happening where the hull has been crushed under its own weight, probably having something to do with the wreck settling essentially upside down.

Divers who are interested in penetrating the wreck have several routes available to them, though regulars to the area have noted more and more of the wreck falling to the ocean floor, so **be wary**.

For everyone else, the real draw to the *Papoose* is the **famous sand tiger shark groups** of several dozen regularly spotted at this site. Divers who are feeling particularly sharky will head to this wreck first on the Crystal Coast. Otherwise, the *Papoose* is a piece of history in astoundingly good shape and a dive just as memorable as the famous *U-352*.



# Caribsea



**Difficulty:** Intermediate

**Visibility:** Up to 40 ft condition dependent

**Max Depth:** 90 ft

**Currents:** Minimal

Yet another casualty of WW II's Battle of the Atlantic, the *Caribsea* is one of the **premier fish spotting** destinations off of the Crystal Coast. The wreck is notably smaller than many of the sprawling freighters and tankers of its day and is one of the few in less than 100 feet of water. With these considerations in mind, the wreck is **significantly easier to find your way around**, even on days when visibility isn't favorable. There are often considerable swells in the area, so water clarity is not often perfect, though currents are much less of an issue than at other sites.

The ship itself is easily identifiable, though most of the deck has long since collapsed. **Massive schools** of swirling baitfish dart through the wreckage, preyed upon by a mix of **offshore predators and hungry tropicals** hopping off the Gulf Stream. It's also a great spot to catch an intimate glimpse of the intimidating jagged maw of sand tigers who prowl the areas above and around the wreck.

# USS Schurz



**Difficulty:** Intermediate

**Visibility:** 50-100 ft

**Max Depth:** 110 ft

**Currents:** Moderate

The Crystal Coast is host to many **historically significant** and unique wrecks, and the *Schurz* ranks up there with *U-352*. The *Schurz* was interred from the Germans by the US Navy in Hawaii in the midst of WW I and then seized at the start of WW II. She was recommissioned as a patrol vessel before succumbing to the same fate as the *Proteus*—struck in the night while running in the dark in an effort to avoid U-boat attacks. Fortunately for the diving community, the *Schurz* is also an **incredible spot to shoot macro underwater photos** and is commonly host to critters any diver would be excited to see.

**Visibility is uncommonly good** in this area, though your sight is likely to be unexpectedly obscured by huge schools of baitfish. Pugfish, spotted morays, and sea turtles hang out in the tenuous relief cast by the bow. But the real draw is all the small critters that take a bit more of an eye for detail to spot. This tangled wreck is absolutely choked with life, and according to our local contacts, **isn't a dive to be missed**.

# Diving the Crystal Coast

Growing up, I was familiar with the **rich maritime history** of the East Coast, but it never occurred to me how accessible that history might be or the new life that it harbored among the shifting sands and oxidizing steel.

While plenty of vessels were scuttled as a part of an ambitious artificial reef program, the kinds of vessels and their reasons for sinking are as diverse as the marine life in the area.

Based on earliest records, there's **half a millennium of maritime history off the Carolina coast**— Blackbeard's *Queen Anne's Revenge*, Civil War ironclads, merchant captains led to disaster by "wreckers" chasing salvage, and many, many victims of the U-boat Torpedo Alley blockade of WW II's Battle of the Atlantic. To this day, the coast still claims the occasional vessel.

You'll notice that all of the sites listed here are wrecks situated around coastal towns like Hatteras and Morehead City. While there are different kinds of dives in different places along the NC shore, the hard truth is that the **waters off of the Crystal Coast are world-class**, and nothing else in the state can hold a candle to them. There are numerous rocky outcroppings that could be explored as well in this very diveable water, but they don't have nearly the density of marine life that these **underwater oases of shipwrecks** hold.



# Why Dive North Carolina?

Diving in North Carolina, specifically diving the Crystal Coast, offers **world-class wreck diving opportunities** offshore of some of the United State's most **beautiful beaches**. With most sites situated at the intersection of the Gulf Stream and Labrador Currents, **water is warm** year-round, and ocean life from the offshore Atlantic and the Caribbean mingle where these significant currents collide.

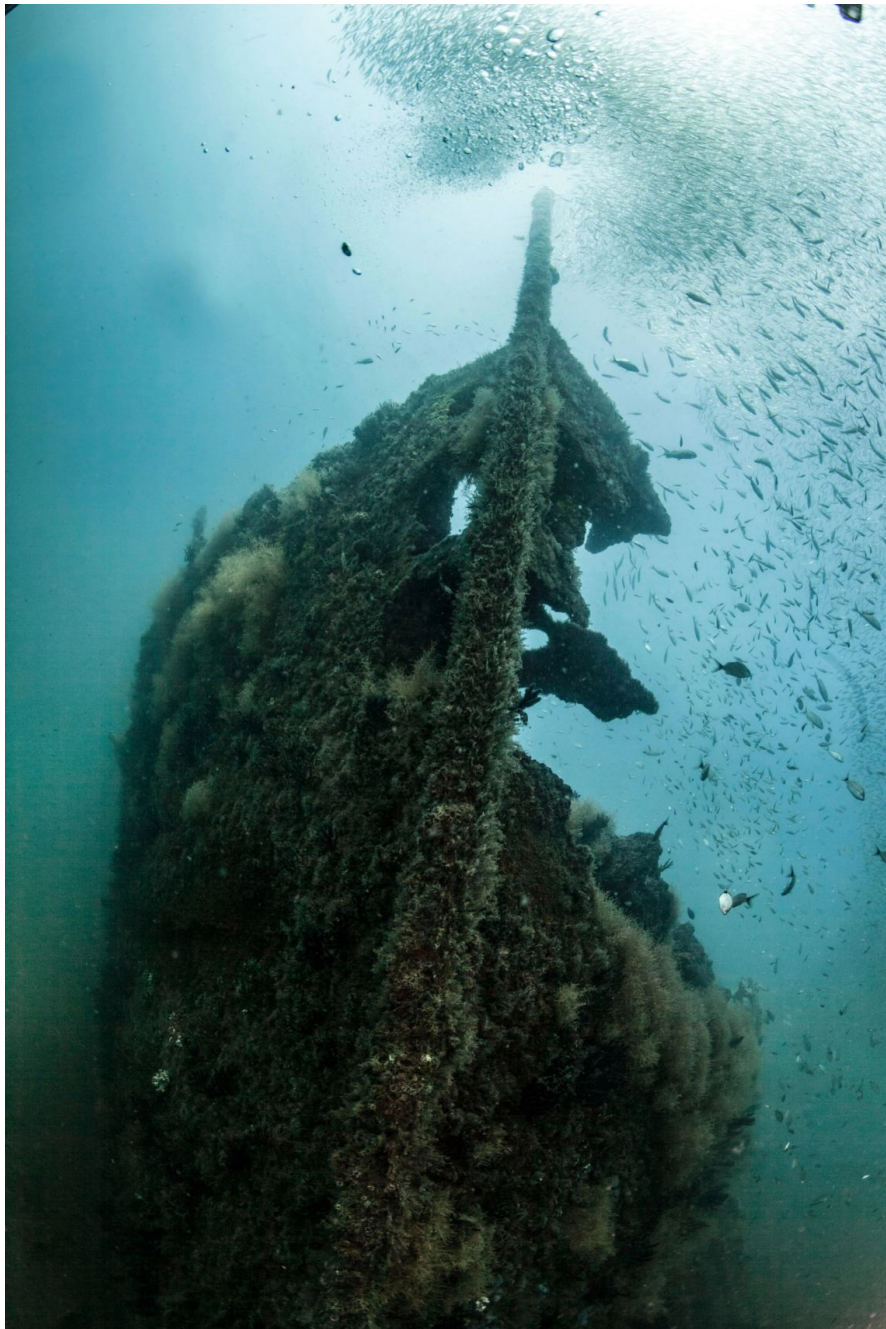
There's also the deep historical significance of the area, with hundreds of years worth of wrecked ships ranging from literal pirate ships to casualties of WW II's Battle of the Atlantic. There's nowhere else in the world that brings together all these factors.



# Red Tape, Logistics, and Barriers of Entry

Most of the diving is a **significant distance from shore** and requires both a capable boat to reach the wrecks and the **dive experience** required for challenging currents and wreck environments. While there are opportunities for new divers to get in the water, the best diving is significantly deeper than a basic Open Water certification will allow for.

In a similar sense, hardcore wreck divers who want to plumb the depths of large, complicated structures might find the experience lacking. Seas in this area get rough, and the wrecks are gradually falling apart on the ocean floor. The majority of the best dives on the Crystal Coast are what most would qualify as **intermediate**. It is world-class diving, but not for those seeking an extreme challenge.



# What You'll See

While it might sound like there's not much to look at aside from the crushed carcasses of old boats, Crystal Coast waters are teeming with life- from macro to mega. But the **sharks are by far the most popular inhabitants** of these waters. Specifically, we're referring to the sand tiger shark. Sitting right in the sweet spot of visually impressive but temperamentally docile, sand tigers are famous **year-round residents** of numerous wrecks.

As previously mentioned, the **proximity of the Gulf Stream** brings a plethora of tropical species much further north than you'd expect to find them, along with the no-less charismatic offshore critters more common off the East Coast.



# Dive Operators in the Area

Our dive expertise encompasses the greater part of the world, but even we at DIVEIN know when it's prudent to check in with a local expert. The Crystal Coast from Cape Lookout to the New River has **many fantastic dive operators**. Though you can certainly count on each operator to bring something unique to the table, we sat down with **Robert at Olympus Diving** for his input on this article.

Olympus provides an **exceptional experience** with fantastic crews having long-learned local insights into how to get divers in the water quickly when the logistics can get complicated. With well-thought-out procedures like the two-way communication between boats and their mates underwater, a color-coded line system for their wreck reels, and a scrupulous eye for safety- I can certainly tell you who I will be diving with.

