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SCUBALAB

2021 GEAR GUIDE

145 MASKS, FINS, REGULATORS, BCs, COMPUTERS AND MORE





BROOKE MORTON got hooked on diving at age 14, and went on to teach scuba on St. Croix after college. She's dived and snorkeled on every continent.

READERS CHOICE: BEST DESTINATIONS FOR WRECK DIVING

From ships destroyed in World War II to the recently sunk, these destinations offer history, massive marine life and routes for exploration

BY BROOKE MORTON



2019 Readers' Choice Award
Caribbean
and Atlantic

BVI

1 No other Caribbean destination serves up more recreational-diver-friendly wrecks than the British Virgin Islands.

Most are shallow enough for open-water divers; even RMS Rhone has sections in just 40 feet of water. Then consider the site known as Wreck Alley, home to three vessels lying in 90 feet at the deepest point, with structures starting around 40 feet.

As for history, these wrecks span centuries, from the storied *Rhone*, sunk in 1867, to the *Kodiak Queen*, purposely downed in 2017 but also packing historical significance—it survived the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack.

Perhaps one of the most interesting is the *Chikuzen* refrigeration ship, lying off the northeast tip of Virgin Gorda. It's out of the way for most dayboats, but it's part of the weekly itinerary for the *Cuan Law* live-aboard. "It's a lone wreck,

Lively colors abound on the RMS *Rhone* off Salt Island. Parts of the wreck are as shallow as 40 feet.



not near any of the islands," says Kevin Purdy with All Star Liveaboards. "The *Chikuzen* really is a little oasis."

There are no reefs nearby. As such, the wreck has become a stopover for spotted eagle rays, reef sharks and green moray eels—and the hull is a constant flurry of schooling grunts. "To see all those different things on one dive—the eagle rays,

the sharks and the schools of fish—really is a treat," Purdy says.

READERS PICKS

LIVEABOARDS

All Star *Cuan Law*, British Virgin Islands

BONAIRE

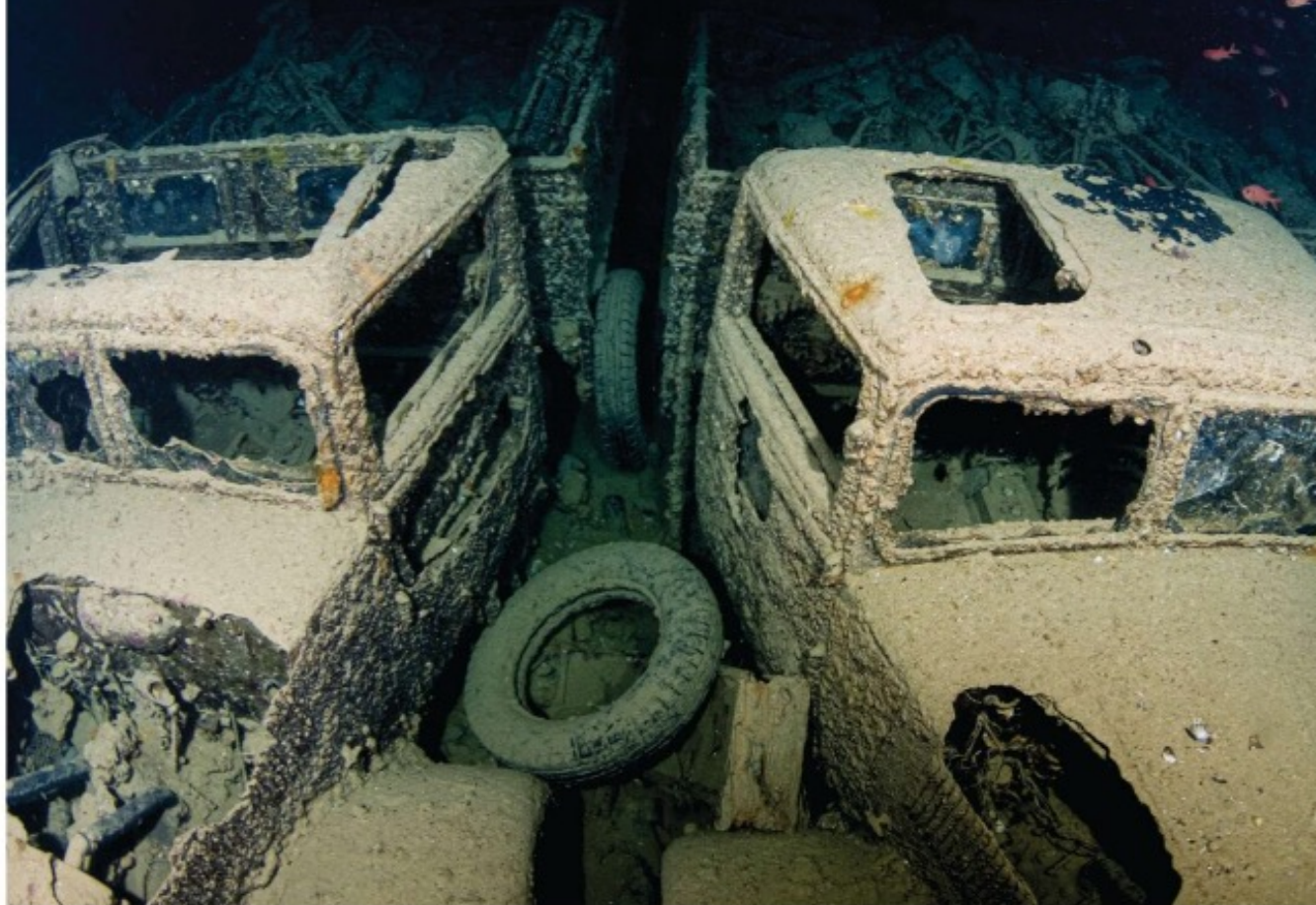
2 Bonaire does not have quantity when it comes to wrecks—in fact,

the shore-accessible 235-foot *Hilma Hooker* is really the only one frequently dived, but that wreck is so unique and rewarding that the destination is a favorite among metalheads.

The *Hilma Hooker* is special in large part due to its location in the middle of a double reef system, protecting and attracting a different gathering of marine life.

TANYA BURNETT

Well-preserved military vehicles still lie aboard the SS *Thistlegorm* off the coast of Egypt.



Tarpon, barracuda and other "big, shiny, silvery fish" are always at the wreck. "We definitely see them in larger numbers and larger sizes than at other sites," says Bas Noij, owner of VIP Diving, a dive center offering guided dives and retail on Bonaire.

Inside the wreck, divers with overhead-environment training and gear can explore the engine room and

a captain's room. You can also pop your head through one of the windows and see a safe.

Of course, you need to know which one. "This is definitely a good dive to do with a guide," says Noij, who tasks his charges with finding the real name of the ship, written in relief letters on the bow and the stern.

Going with a guide also opens up choices for diving

the wreck in unexpected ways, such as starting from either neighboring reef—Angel City or the Lake.

Either way, he says, "You approach and just see gray amid all the blue, and then the wreck appears. It's a very cool, very surreal experience."

READERS PICKS

RESORTS

Buddy Dive Resort, Bonaire

Carib Inn, Bonaire
 Divi Resort, Bonaire
 Eden Beach Resort, Bonaire
 Plaza Resort, Bonaire

OPERATORS

Buddy Dive, Bonaire
 Carib Inn Dive Center, Bonaire
 Divi Flamingo Divers, Bonaire
 Toucan Divers at Plaza Resort, Bonaire
 VIP Diving Bonaire
 Wannadive Bonaire at Eden Beach Resort



SS *Thistlegorm* off the coast of Egypt—where the Gulf of Suez meets the Red Sea—is without comparison the most impressive and museumlike vessel to welcome divers.

For liveaboard travelers, exploring the wreck is as easy as giant-striding from the swim platform off the aft deck. From here, each dive is a tour through room after room of jeeps, motorcycles, trucks and a host of other vehicles and supplies. There's an eerie calm inside each room, where collected exhalation bubbles create mirrors on the ceiling—the only movement inside the rooms besides eels, crabs and other dark-seeking dwellers nestled among the motorcycle kickstands, anchor chains and other now-stilled gear.

"It's all sitting strapped down like they were when it was transported during wartime—it's as if you're diving it the day after it sunk," says Wayne Brown, CEO of the Aggressor Adventures fleet of liveaboards.

READERS PICKS

LIVEABOARDS

Red Sea Aggressor II, Egypt

AUSTRALIA

4 The name "Yongala" isn't that well known among North American divers, but the iconic images of marble rays stacked up in the current are. Officially the SS *Yongala*, this 350-foot passenger ship off Cape Bowling Green, Queensland, is famous first for its tragic history. A 1911 cyclone claimed the ship, along with 121 lives.

Second, it is famous as an artificial reef amid acres of sand. As such, the list of marine life it draws in is large: giant grouper, sea snakes, turtles, shovelnose guitarfish and cobia lying on the seabed. "You can dive it all day—

it is absolutely exciting," says Craig Stephen, managing director for Mike Ball Dive Expeditions.

Because the ship is its own ecosystem teeming with life, *Spoilsport*—Mike Ball's liveaboard dive vessel—stays moored in the area long enough for divers to log up to six dives, including one at dusk and another at dawn.

With that much time, divers can explore its entirety, and locate the knickknacks around the perimeter, such as the gas lamps. "With the combination of history and all this wildlife, there really is so much going on at just this one wreck," Stephen says.

READERS PICKS

LIVEABOARDS

Spirit of Freedom, Great Barrier Reef

Reef

Spoilsport, Great Barrier Reef



Top Place Winner
U.S. and Canada

NORTH CAROLINA

5 Any diver who has read the historical nonfiction book *Shadow Divers* has certainly fallen under the spell of U-boats and the hidden war games happening just off the Eastern Seaboard.

Morehead City is the departure point to dive the *U-352*, an easily accessible intact German submarine. Sitting in 110 feet of water, it's best suited to advanced divers and those comfortable with depth. Those who make the journey will be awed at the thought of what life was like inside the 218-foot vessel.

Travelers come for the allure of the U-boat, but stay to work their way



RED SEA

3 World War II leveled harbors and created mass destruction above and below the waterline. Of all that remains, the



CARIBBEAN AND ATLANTIC

1. British Virgin Islands

2. Bermuda

3. Cayman Islands

4. Aruba

5. Bay Islands

6. Bahamas

7. U.S. Virgin Islands

8. Mexico

9. Bonaire

10. Curaçao

PACIFIC AND INDIAN

1. Red Sea

2. Hawaii

3. Indonesia

4. Truk Lagoon

5. Guam

6. Palau

7. Australia

8. Japan

9. Thailand

U.S. AND CANADA

1. North Carolina

2. Great Lakes

3. Florida Keys

4. Florida

5. New York/New Jersey

6. California

What Is Readers Choice?

Nearly 5,000 readers evaluated destinations, resorts, operators and liveaboards for our 2021 awards. Here we highlight some of the top vote-getters, and point out the winning resorts, operators and liveaboards in that area, listed in order of votes received.

For more:
scubadiving.com/readerschoice

through the long list of North Carolina wrecks, including the 328-foot USS *Indra* in 60 feet of water, and the 188-foot USCGC *Spar*, a buoy tender lying at 85 to 110 feet.

FLORIDA KEYS

6 It's a rare thing when the person briefing you on the wreck you're about to dive has a personal connection to it.

Rainbow Reef Dive Center has two staff members whose life stories intertwine with the USS *Spiegel Grove*, hands down the most famous wreck off the island of Key Largo—and also the largest, at 510 feet.

The name Lew Bellows will ring a bell for anyone who admires the flags waving in the current off the ship. Bellows, a staff member at Rainbow

Reef, has made it his personal mission to replace the flags when needed.

Another staff member, Jim Wyatt, now a captain with Rainbow Reef, once served on the *Spiegel*. "He gave me and my son a tour of the *Spiegel*—we asked him to give us a tour of exactly what he would do on a given day, from where he ate to where he slept," says Billy Wise, general manager of the shop. "Even thinking back to that dive, I get excited all over again."

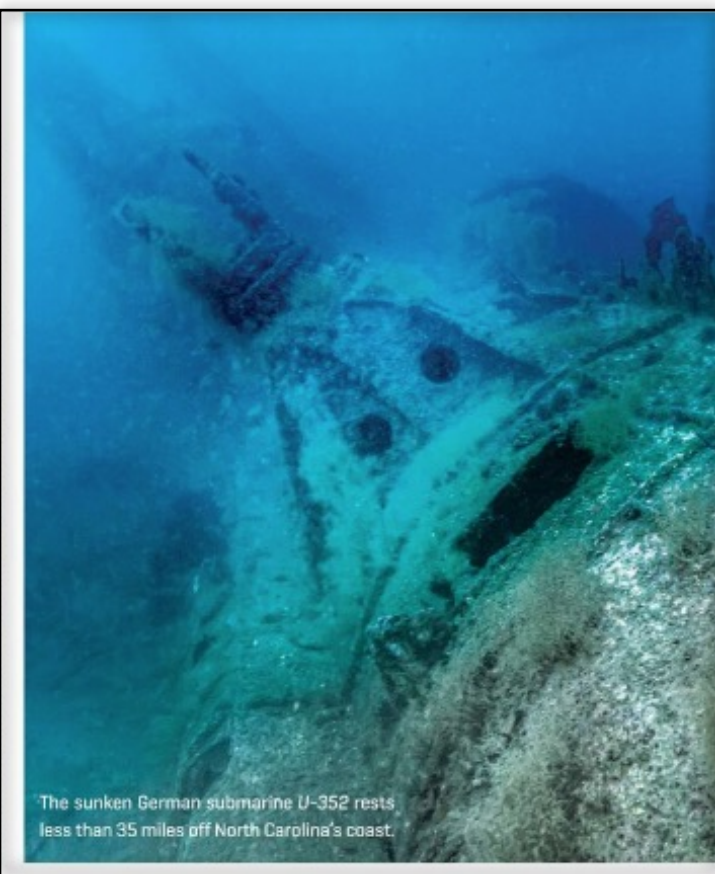
READERS PICKS

RESORTS

Courtyard by Marriott Key Largo
Dive Amoray, Key Largo
Holiday Inn, Key Largo
Marina Del Mar, Key Largo

OPERATORS

Dive Key West
Horizon Divers, Key Largo
Ocean Divers, Key Largo
Rainbow Reef, Key Largo



The sunken German submarine U-352 rests less than 35 miles off North Carolina's coast.

JENNIFER IDOL



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