

An underwater photograph of a coral reef. A diver is visible in the center, illuminated by a light. The reef is covered in various types of coral, including large, branching orange corals and smaller, more delicate ones. Numerous small fish are swimming around the reef. The water is clear and blue.

Bali's Treasure Liberty Wreck

Microcosm of Life

Text and photos by
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THIS & PREVIOUS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the *Liberty*; Pinnate batfish (right)

The *Liberty* wreck has long been a dive that most divers aspire to have in their logbooks, but in recent years the wreck has graduated onto the backpacker “must do” list of experiences that have to be completed before reaching 25.

The first ones arrive just after eight and on a busy day, within the next hour the car park will be filled with a selection of cars, mini-buses plus the odd large coach and a quick walk around will expose you to a veritable United Nations of international accents. They used to come mainly from the east,

up the coast road and over the nearby mountains into the town's main street—in fact, the only street—but now they are also being bussed in from the west and the new resorts that have been built in nearby villages where the real estate is cheaper.

This is Tulamben, the small town on the northeast coast of Bali, and “they” are the scuba diving tourists who come to experience the island's most famous wreck, and arguably one of the best known wrecks in the world, the *USAT Liberty*.

I vividly remember my first dive on the wreck back in 1999 and how impressed



I was by the rich marine life and beautiful soft corals it supported, but I also recall being taken aback by the number of divers on the wreck.

That was some 13 years ago when there was no car park, only a hand-



Longnose hawkfish (above); Diver in huge school of jacks (top); Bumphead parrotfish and diver on reef (right)

full of dive resorts in operation, and it felt really crowded sharing the overall experience with 20-30 other divers.

These days, it is not uncommon to have more than 100 divers on the wreck during the busiest hours of the day, and in the peak seasons, those numbers can easily exceed 150!

So, is the *Liberty* wreck still worth diving, or is it being killed by its popularity and become a mere shadow of its former pristine glory?

Liberty Insider's Guide

If you had asked me last year, "Have you dived the *Liberty*?" I would have waxed lyrically about the various experiences I have had on the wreck and how I have learned to dive it early in the morning before everybody arrives. Plus, I would have told you about the various hot-spots you should visit on the wreck to see a particular type of fish or coral.

But then I realized that although I

had indeed dived it dozens of times over the years, I could still manage to get lost on it and did not possess the intimate knowledge of its topography that I needed to write a definitive article on this famous wreck.

So, I approached Tony Medlow of Tulamben Wreck Divers to see if he would help me write an "insider's guide to the *Liberty* wreck", and to my delight, my email was answered within minutes. The next week, I was

on my way back up to Tulamben.

Tony and his wife, Dot, are very well-known in the Australian dive industry as the people who developed the Exmouth Dive Center and scuba diving on Ningaloo Reef, in Western Australia, and also helped set-up the whale shark Code of Conduct that has been a key part of the successful interaction with whale sharks there.

Tony and Dot have been diving the *Liberty* wreck since the early



Liberty

THIS PAGE: Diver explores the architecture of the *Liberty* wreck, heavily laden with thriving corals and marine life



very early and then dive different sections during the day with specific objectives in mind.

His view is that the *Liberty* is basically a

that run down the northeast coast of the island into the mighty Lombok Strait. Those waters flush through Tulamben Bay and are the key to the sheer resilience of the wreck and its ability to regenerate.

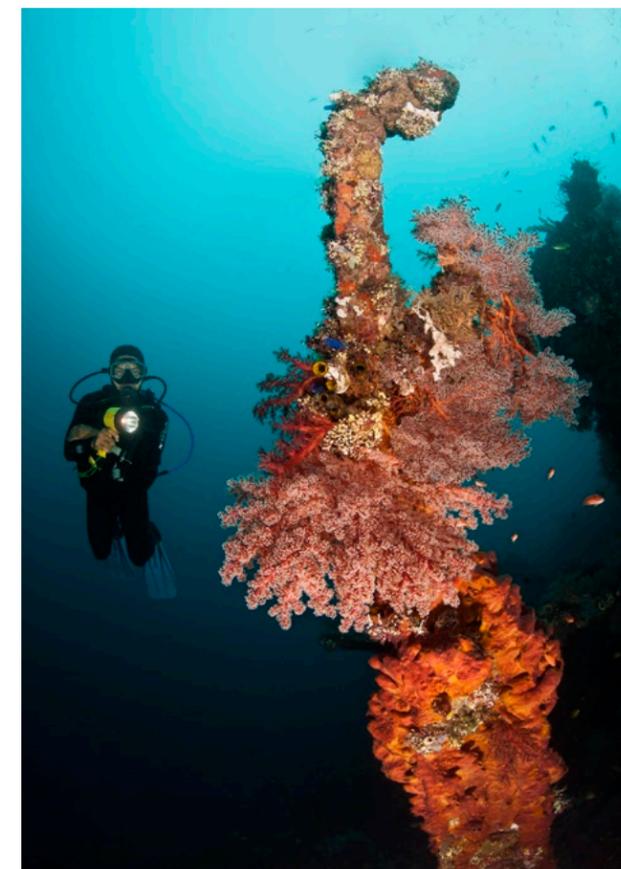
The rich marine population of the *Liberty* has also learned to adjust to the daily influx of visitors. So, if you arrive during peak hours with a fish-eye lens to capture the bigger residents, you are likely to be disappointed. But if you adjust your timing and expectations around the rush hour(s), it's possible to have some incredibly

memorable dives.

Early morning on the *Liberty*

I used to be utterly convinced that entering the water around 07.30 was the best time of day on the *Liberty*, but the truth is that you really should be leaving the wreck at that time to enjoy a hot breakfast and reflect on what you have just seen. Zero-6.00 is the witching hour if you want to start the day with a "bumphead moment", because around the stern—the usual entry point for the wreck—in about 15m of water, you will encounter a large school of bumphead parrotfish performing their morning ablutions before heading out for the day.

Early risers, the bumpheads spend the night down around the bow in about 25m of water where they can rest in the shelter of the hull. They congregate around the stern as the sun's rays start



1980s, and when they decided to sell their business in Exmouth, a move to Tulamben became the logical next step. They set up Tulamben Wreck Divers in 2001 in partnership with former dive guide turned local entrepreneur, Wayan Ambek.

Tony's very clear advice to me was that if I really wanted to experience the best the wreck has to offer I should start

microcosm of the best diving Bali has to offer, but it is more than just a dive site—the wreck is a living thing, nourished and sustained by the rich waters





THIS PAGE: More scenes of the coral-encrusted wreckage; Candy crab (right)



to penetrate and light up the wreck.

If you are lucky, you will get 15 to 20 minutes with them. With a bit of careful maneuvering—whilst keeping a wary eye on those formidable teeth—it is possible to edge up really close to the bumpheads, which makes for some memorable photography.

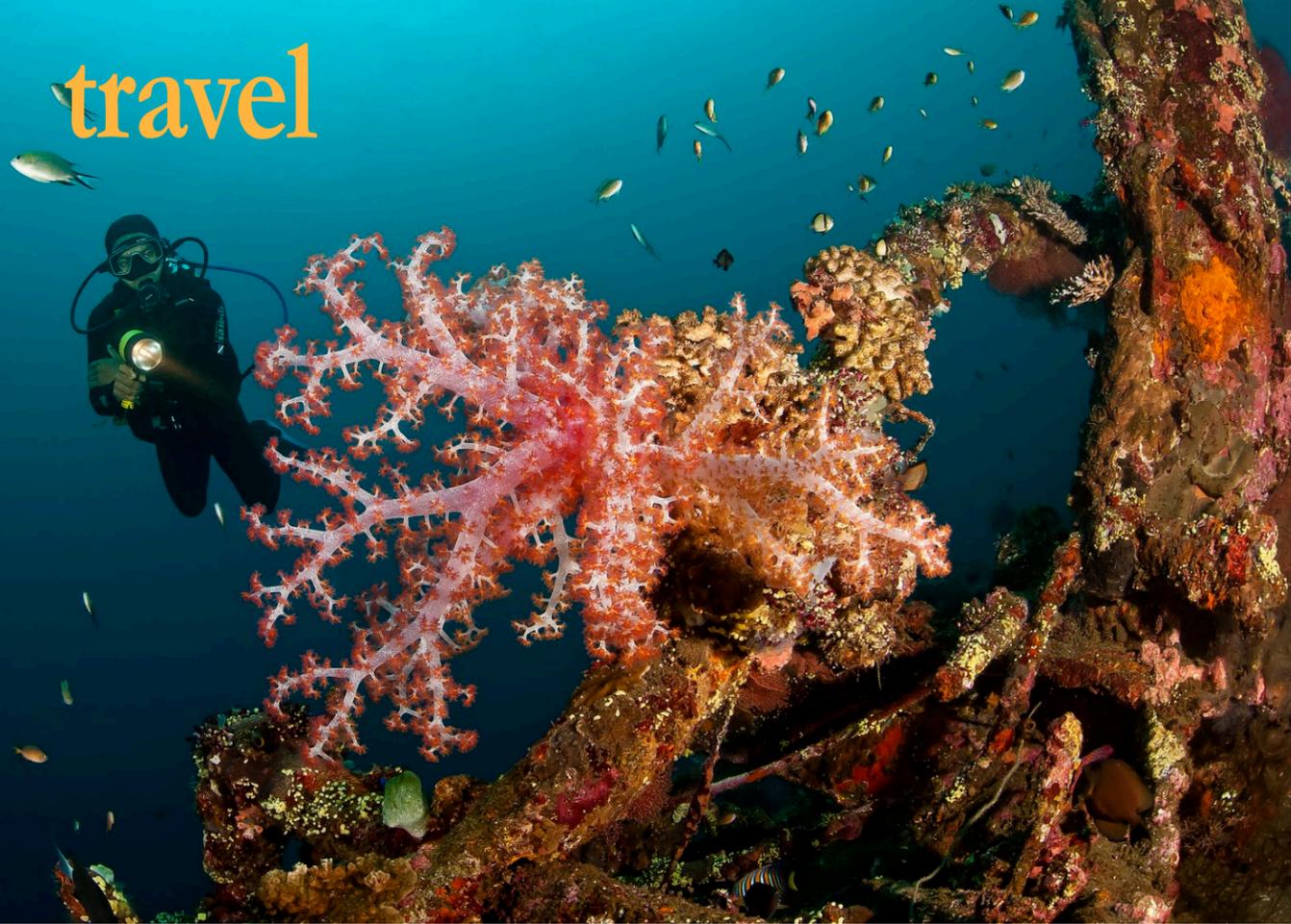
Early morning is also the best time for a random encounter with “George”, the giant barracuda that has made the *Liberty* his home. George appears to have lost much of his natural apprehension to scuba divers, and being a curious fish, will often come and eyeball you—offering a special Kodak moment if you are prepared, or one of immediate and imminent danger if you have never heard or seen him before.

At nearly six feet long, and equipped with some fierce-looking dental capability, George is a serious fish who graces you with his presence and moves on when his curiosity is satisfied.

If George is nowhere to be seen, you can go for quantity, rather than individual quality, and spend some time with the huge school of jacks that hangs out around the stern. Used to divers and snorkelers, the jacks will allow you to enter their midst if you do so slowly and carefully. A good model will allow you to create some stunning images in the early morning light.

There are usually very few other divers around. So, early in the morning, if you are lucky enough to be diving on a rising tide bringing

in clear water from the deep, once you have had your fill of the jacks, it is a great time to photograph both the stern and the bow of the *Liberty*. Both are large steel structures, which at first sight are difficult to recognize as part of a large ship, but if you take your time to understand the orientation of the wreck, it is possible to define them



THIS PAGE: Huge soft corals; Resident school of bumpheads (above)

against the negative space of the clear blue water. A good model, carefully positioned, will add a nice touch of scale. At that time of the morning, because of the wreck's position parallel to the northeast shore of Bali, the sun will be behind you and will help to illuminate the structures despite the low level of the overall light.

The sheer prolificacy of the currents that run through Tulamben Bay means that the prominent large structures of the bow and stern are richly coated in marine growth, and the two guns that were mounted on those structures are hardly recognizable as deadly armaments anymore.

Prophetically, the gun on the bow now has a large flower like growth of gorgonian fan on its breech, which will make you

want to put that "If you're going to San Francisco" tape you have been saving into the cassette player of the VW Combi hippy wagon...

Mid-morning, early afternoon

From 08.30 in the morning, the car park will be filling up, and the volcanic stone beach will have a lot of divers getting ready to enter the water. This is the time to forget about the larger residents of the *Liberty* and its structures and concentrate on the smaller stuff that lives in the nooks and cracks of the wreck.

It is also when your dive guide

transforms from super-model to critter finder and becomes worth their weight in gold. Depending on how deep you meander on the wreck, the maximum bottom time you can probably expect is about one hour, and with the right guide, this can be a very productive period. On the other hand, if you





Diver hovers over the *Liberty* wreck (left and right); The volcano, Mount Agung, on Bali (lower left)

unlike places like the Lembeh Strait where critter locations are networked, in Tulamben, the location of a photogenic critter is kept as tight a secret as the U.S. nuclear codes.

That's why you need a good guide like Made Sadia from Tulamben Wreck Divers, who was the perfect combination of super-model and critter-spotter.

The *Liberty* wreck is not critter-



central like Lembeh Strait or the Twilight Zone, but it has a lot to see—if you can find it in amongst all the wreckage. The mid-section of the wreck is the most prolific area, but there is stuff all over the place, and a good guide like Made will know where to find it.

You can easily do two very productive and enjoyable dives mid-morning and early afternoon by looking down in amongst the wreckage and simply ignoring the promenade of scuba-diving tourists doing their obligatory circuit of the wreck above you.

Late afternoon

By about 15.30 the tourists are packing up and getting back in their cars and busses, and just like the house vendor after one of those necessary but very painful open houses, the residents of the wreck start to reclaim their home after everybody has left.

Usually, the visibility is not too good at this point because all the visitors have stirred things up a bit, plus the light fades rapidly, as the sun dips behind the 3,000m-high Mount Agung volcano that dominates Tulamben. But it is still a good time of the day to put a wide-angle lens back on your camera and photograph the beautiful and incredibly prolific soft corals around the deeper sections of the wreck's mid-section. It never ceases to amaze me just how rich these corals are, and very interestingly, how much they evolve over time.

I have been diving and taking

THE WRECKING OF THE *USAT LIBERTY*

The *Liberty*, contrary to urban myth and what its name suggests, is not a Liberty class ship. It was actually built in 1918, at the end of WWI as a freighter in Kearny, New Jersey, by the Federal Shipbuilding Company, with a length of 120m and a beam of 17m. Its draft was 24m and had a gross tonnage of 6211 tons.

At the start of WWII, it was requisitioned, fitted out with guns on the bow and the stern, and then operated by the U.S. Army as a transport ship.

At 04.15 on the morning of 11 January 1942, it was torpedoed by the Japanese submarine *I-166* in the Lombok Straits, as it was passing through in a convoy of ships taking supplies from Australia to the Allied campaign in the Philippines.

Badly damaged, two of the destroyers protecting the convoy took the *Liberty* in tow to the ship repair facilities at Singaraja on the north coast of Bali, but the damaged ship was taking on so much water that it had to be beached in Tulamben Bay to prevent it from sinking.

There were no casualties in the actual torpedoing and all the crew was safely evacuated after the *Liberty* was run aground, but the imminent arrival of the Japanese forces in Bali prevented any of its cargo being salvaged.

The *Liberty* remained beached for another 21 years, providing a source of assorted hardware to the local villagers and a fishing platform into the deeper waters of Tulamben Bay until 17 March 1963.

On that fateful day, the nearby volcano, Mount Agung, which had been rumbling for several days, exploded with such violent seismic force that the rusting carcass of the *Liberty* was physically lifted and rolled down the slope, breaking its back in the process and leaving the wreck on its side some 40m offshore, parallel to the shore. ■

go alone you will probably finish the dive wondering what all the fuss is about.

The bottom line in Tulamben is that scuba diving is the only industry in town, and its relative prosperity revolves around visitors coming to experience the *Liberty*. So jobs in the town all relate, in one way or the other, to the wreck and the dive guides are the local alpha-males.

They all know each other, but

group has grown in numbers, as there always seems to be much more than 20 porters on duty whenever I have been in Tulamben.

The system works really well, whether you are day diving or staying at one of the resorts, as the porters just seem to appear when they are needed, nonchalantly hoisting at least two sets of gear on the heads before heading off down the beach. The group operates as a collective and pools their earnings and tips and the portage fees. So, make sure you give them a reasonable tip, because they are definitely worth it! ■

TULAMBEN'S DIVING HELPER CLUB

One of the things that always intrigues visitors to Tulamben is the sight of local women carrying multiple sets of diving gear on their heads. No mean feat in itself, doing it with what appears to be at least twice their body weight while walking along a volcanic pebble rock beach is something else!

Run by the villagers themselves, the Diving Helper Club was an initial group of 30 women who arranged to have 20 of their numbers always available on any given day to carry the heavy equipment of the diving tourists to where they want it. Started in 1978 by Pak Kari Yasa, the



Woman of Diving Helper Club carrying air tanks



Liberty

Just look at the life! The *Liberty* wreck is a thriving ecosystem of marine organisms (left); Circling school of bumphead parrotfish with diver; Diver at forward gun (below)

photographs of the *Liberty* for over 13 years, and strikingly photogenic hard and soft corals in this area seem to come and go from year to year. Without a doubt, the heavy traffic of inexperienced and often deliberately over-weighted “resort divers” take its toll. But incredibly, the wreck seems able to regenerate itself. The only rational explanation of this regeneration phenomenon has to be the sheer fecundity of the currents that wash over the wreck, as they head for the Lombok Strait and the Indian Ocean to the south.

After dark

A night dive on the *Liberty* is a special

thing, but one that needs to be considered carefully because it's easy to get lost and a little bit disorientated even during the day, so after dark, you can almost guarantee you will. The Tulamben dive guides know the wreck better than the backs of their hands—so would you if you were diving it every day of the week. They also know the best place to find stuff once darkness has fallen on the *Liberty*. So, do yourself a favor and use a guide to dive the wreck at night and experience it at its eerie best!

Random encounters

As the old saying goes, “you should have been here last week”—you will be

sure to hear that regularly in Tulamben, because the wreck acts as a beacon to the true pelagics of the Indo-Pacific. Mola mola's are spotted regularly around the *Liberty* in the deep waters around the mid-section, particularly around August and September when they become quite common. Whale shark's also put in periodic appearances. On my last dive of this trip, while I was down at the bow in the early morning light trying to get that front cover shot, a four-meter-long whale shark



was entertaining a group of Japanese divers at the stern. We emerged around the same time,

and while my Japanese was limited to “thank you” and “one more beer please”, I could tell they were very excited about something and eager to share their images.

That's the thing about the *Liberty* wreck, you just never know what is around the corner, and it seems to possess an almost infinite capability to surprise and enthrall its visitors. ■

Correspondent Don Silcock is based in Sydney, Australia. He travels widely in Asia and his website (Indopacificimages.com) has extensive information and imagery of the USAT Liberty wreck and other great dive sites across the Indo-Pacific region.

fact file



Bali, Indonesia



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, SCUBADOC.COM, E-MED.CO.UK

History In the early 17th century, the Dutch began to colonize Indonesia. During WWII, the islands were occupied by Japan. After Japan's surrender, Indonesia declared its independence, but four more years passed with intermittent negotiations, recurring hostilities, and UN mediation before the Netherlands let go of its colony. Home to the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia is the world's largest archipelagic state. Its government faces several challenges including alleviating poverty, preventing terrorism, consolidating democracy after 40 years of authoritarianism, reforming the financial sector, irradicating corruption, halting human rights violations by the military and police, and controlling avian influenza. Indonesia reached a historic peace agreement with armed separatists in Aceh in 2005, which led to democratic elections in December 2006. In Papua, a low intensity separatist movement continues to confront Indonesia. Government: republic. Capital of Indonesia: Jakarta. Main city of Bali: Denpasar.

Geography Indonesia is located in Southeastern Asia. It is an archipelago of islands between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean with a total coastline of 54,716 km. The island of Bali is

one of Indonesia's 17,508 islands, an archipelago located south of the equator where the Indian Ocean meets the Pacific. The tropical Indo Pacific region in which Bali is located is considered to be on of the world's richest ecologically biodiverse systems. Bali is in essence a volcanic island with the volcano, Mount Agung, revered as a great spirit by the local people, as its highest peak rising 3,142 meters above sea level. Another peak, Mount Seraya, which lies east of Agung, rises 1174 meters above sea level. Volcanic island with high crater peaks, deep valleys, cultivated lowlands, lush terraced rice fields and thick tropical forests in the highlands.

Time Zone GMT plus 8

Climate Tropical, hot and humid. Temperatures range from a high of 31°C (88°F) to 25°C (78°F) low. Highlands are cooler and drier. Lowlands along the coast are pleasantly drier than



the main tourist areas in the south. Monsoons. The dry season takes place April through November, and the wet season, December through March. Natural hazards include occasional floods, severe droughts, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes and forest fires.

Environmental Issues Deforestation, sewage, industrial water pollution, urban air pollution, forest fire smoke and haze

Health In Bali, there is no major risk. Unlike islands further east in the archipelago, there is no Malaria/Dengue fever in the



RIGHT: Location of Bali on global map
BELOW: Location of Tulamben on map of Indonesia
FAR RIGHT: Diver hovers over wreck of the *USAT Liberty*



When traveling in the rest of the country, be aware of the high degree of risk of food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever, as well as vectorborne diseases such as chikungunya, dengue fever, and malaria. Please note that highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza has been identified in Indonesia, but it poses a negligible risk with extremely rare cases possible among visitors who have close contact with birds (2008)

Population 3,000,000 (2011 est.); Religion: 87% Hindu, 3% Christian, 8% Muslim

Visa Travelers from most Western countries do not need a visa and are automatically given a 30-day stay permit upon arrival. Passports must be valid for at least six months upon arrival in Indonesia. Indonesian immigration is very strict. No work is permitted while visiting on a tourist visa.

Indonesian Law Very hard on drug offenders; the death penalty is regularly applied on narcotics couriers.

Driver's License A valid international driving license is required. Rental car insurance is highly recommended. Drive care-

fully. Traffic rules are not followed as well as in the West. Accidents are frequent.

Currency Indonesian Rupiah (IDR). Exchange rate: 1 EUR=10,002 IDR; 1 USD=9132IDR; 1 GBP=14537IDR; 1 AUD=9,500IDR; 1 SGD=7,316IDR. Credit cards are accepted by most higher end resorts and businesses. Payment in US\$ cash and traveller's checks is widely accepted.

Dive Season All year round; Underwater visibility varies 15 to 35 meters during dry season, 10 to 20 meters during wet season.

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Web Sites
Bali Tourism Authority
www.balitourismauthority.net
Bali Guide
www.baliguide.com ■