

DEEP WRECK: HMS MANCHESTER

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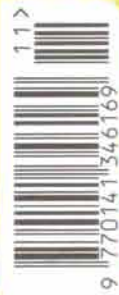
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SETTLING INTO A SARDINIAN LIFE-STYLE



Big friendly fish, wrecks, unique geology and a relaxed approach to diving – all this, and fine Italian food and wine. **JOHN LIDDIARD** gets set to enjoy his time in Sardinia



Main picture and inset: Nautilus dive centre's boat in the marina at Palau.

THE BOAT RIDE OUT TO THE LAVEZZI marine reserve, located just to the French side of the channel dividing Corsica from Sardinia, is filled with high expectations.

For me, because I have dived there before. For the divers from Hamburg, here on a week's holiday and filling most of the spaces on the boat, because a few of them have dived at Lavezzi and told the others about it.

The excitement is all about a concentration of big Mediterranean groupers, almost tame because a boat from Corsica regularly feeds them, despite this being against the marine-reserve rules.

I can't say I really mind. As long as no one sneaks in and massacres them with a speargun, and as long as they are not fed so much as to make them lazy about

catching their own dinner, friendly groupers are fun.

Midweek, there are no other boats on site. The grouper display decidedly different personalities as a boat-load of bubbling divers descends on their reef.

Among the granite boulders and gullies, some grouper run for their lives, some watch cautiously from the entrance to a safe bolt-hole, some circle cautiously, and one or two come up to admire their reflections in the lenses of cameras. Perhaps this is because they like looking at other grouper magnified, or because some of the best food hand-outs come from photographers.

Stephanie, who with husband Vincenzo owns the Nautilus diving centre, alights on the sand in a light fin-pivot. A grouper soon approaches and hovers inches from her face. Is it





looking her in the eye? Or can it see its own reflection in her face?

Like many fish, including wrasse, grouper start their lives as females. Then, within any group, the largest female changes sex to become a ruling male in charge of the harem.

I can't tell the difference, so don't know if there is either one very happy male among all the grouper at Lavezzi, or many males in charge of smaller harems that have overlapping territories about the dive site.

Even among the grouper I meet on this dive, there is considerable variation in colour schemes, from light grey with slightly darker mottling to deep brown with big and almost black spots and stripes.

Colouring doesn't appear to correlate with size. Perhaps some hatched here and others are immigrants.

On the other hand, one of the benefits of such a thriving population is

that these grouper form an excellent breeding base from which the population or the whole region can be improved.

Some of the fish grow bored and look for other sources of amusement, while others, emboldened, take their places. Divers learn to emulate Stephanie's technique, holding still near a likely grouper and letting its curiosity bring it to them.

As divers run low on gas or bottom time, grouper collect close to the buoyline for a last look in the face of divers returning to ascend. Those of us remaining receive greater attention until the last few ascend, and a couple of the fish follow halfway up to the boat.

THE WEEK OF DIVING from Palau, a small town in the north of Sardinia, had begun with what I at first thought of as big granite scenery, at Spargiotello sites I and III. My instincts were torn

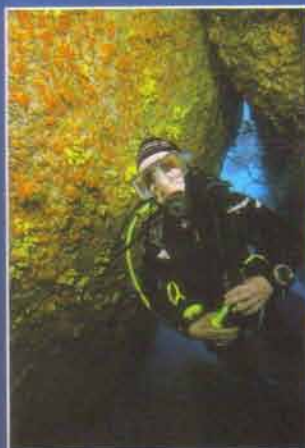
between the magnificence of the spires and canyons in 30m visibility, and the profusion of nudibranchs munching across hydroids and sponges and patches of orange anemones beneath most overhangs.

I changed my mind the next day at Washington Arch, where the scenery is on an altogether grander scale. The site is named after a rock further along Washington Reef, said to resemble Washington on Mount Rushmore.

I don't get to judge, because we dive among arches, tunnels and overhangs where huge granite boulders have settled against each other.

Imaginative names for dive-sites abound. Stephanie explains that Secco Dello Zoppo translates to something like "Lame Walk". Imaginative and not that politically correct, but this is Italy.

The name comes from the shape of the stepped circuit of reef about a ridge that almost breaks the surface. Here we



Above from left: Washington Arch, where giant boulders lean together to create caves and swim-throughs; orange anemone; a painted comber.

Main picture: Groupers are big and tame in the marine reserve at Lavezzi.

descend to the seabed, then work our way back up in diminishing circuits that could hardly be called circular.

The boat is anchored next to another rock that looks like a man standing to attention while reclining at about 20° off the vertical. One diver comments that the natural statue seems to have left his trousers unzipped. But it can't be the Washington-shaped rock – US presidents would never be caught with their trousers unfastened.

The top of the reef displays some of the rock formations typical of the area,

and almost unique under water. This is some of the oldest geology in the Mediterranean. Above water, granite outcrops have been eroded by wind and sand to smoothed and undercut shapes, the geological equivalent of well-eroded driftwood.

EAST OF PALAU, A ROCK formation at the top of a headland looks like a giant granite bear, so is named Capo d'Orso. The Bear has appeared on charts and navigation documents dating back thousands of years.

Over periods thousands of times longer, changes in sea level have left some such grit-blasted rock formations under water. We see peculiarly shaped reefs on the shallower parts of our dives, though none as unusual as the Bear.

Out of season, Palau is a quiet town with just a few tourists and locals. Restaurants in the evening vary from friendly to surly, though we soon learn which to avoid. The family businesses are consistently welcoming, with good food and wine. Consumption of wine is something I have to watch, as I have





A lone engine from an Italian tri-motor bomber rests on the seabed.

FLYING AND DIVING WITH EASYJET

Despite the amount of travel and diving I do, this was the first time I had flown with EasyJet and I was pleasantly surprised. It was nothing like the PikeyJet cartoon that has an airbus towing a caravan.

What I liked was the stress-free way in which a divebag could be booked in on the website. It costs extra, but a reasonable amount. Hand luggage is not weighed as long as it fits into the requisite size, and you can lift it into the locker.

It makes a nice change from those airlines where check-in is a stressful gamble between diver's allowance and extortionate excess charge.

The EasyJet website returns a page to print confirming the booking and dive bag with everything in black and white. It makes a mockery of the "safety" line other airlines use to justify weight restrictions on hand luggage.

Food and drinks on board may cost extra, but the price for a sandwich turned out to be cheaper than on the ground at Gatwick. So congratulations to EasyJet for making it easy to fly with dive kit.

already got through a few bottles from the supermarket, chilled nicely by the fridge in my room at the Hotel Piccada.

For lunch I have got into the habit of sitting on the balcony with fresh bread, cheese and cold meat from the deli counter at the supermarket. Wine washes it down nicely.

Fortunately, I don't need to be fit to dive in the afternoons. Diving is timed for a two-tank boat trip in the morning, leaving afternoons free.

After lunch and a brief siesta, walks along the coast are pleasant from 4 o'clock onwards, when the sun is not so intense. It takes less than an hour each way to walk to Capo d'Orso, though high winds mean that the best viewing angle for the Bear is closed off for safety. Then it's time for a refreshing Italian ice cream

Clockwise from below: Scorpionfish; kitting up on the Nautilus dive centre boat; cow nudibranch.

before another siesta, and finding a nice restaurant for the evening.

There is more than one site in the marine reserve at Lavezzi, and for a second dive we move to Pilone, a lighthouse on a barely submerged reef. The canyons are so wide that it is more like diving along a wall, then back along another wall facing it.

It reminds me of Longships off Land's End, but on a bigger horizontal scale to account for the better visibility.

The groupers here are back to their normal timid selves, both disappointing and reassuring; it is nice to confirm that the effects of feeding are so localised.

We move on to a day of wreckage. The plan is to



first visit the *Angelica*, a 4400-ton motor ship that ran aground off Capo Falcone in 1983, then to dive a solitary radial aircraft engine.

So much for plans. As we motor along the coast towards the *Angelica*, the wind picks up, and it is obvious that the dive site will be too exposed.

Vinnie turns the boat round and we go to the more sheltered La Motore for a fun little dive with the radial engine, propeller and partly intact cowling that give the site its name canted on the seabed, with some nice boulder caves and swim-throughs on the headland to follow.

The engine is photogenic in the way in which a bowl of fruit fascinates some artists. It is thought to have come from an Italian trimotor aircraft, but there are no signs of the rest of plane.



Vinnie has good news – the wind has backed off and it is now calm above the *Angelica*. It's a site I have dived before but, though broken, it's a good wreck, with opportunities to get inside where cabins and hull still stand, so I have no hesitation about returning.

Passing the propeller, I polish the shining tip of one blade for luck, as so many divers have done before me.

Almost an hour later, I am oblivious to time beneath an upturned section of the main deck, held off the seabed by big cargo winches in each corner.

My buddy gesticulates at her dive computer – it's time to end the dive.

For a change in the afternoon, I take the ferry to Isla de Maddalena, a smaller Italian island between Sardinia and Corsica. There are two ferry companies from which to choose, running well into the evening. Cement lorries are carried back and forth; a new conference centre is being built for a future G8 summit.

I had hoped to cross on a ferry run by EneRMar (try saying it), but the schedule for the other, less memorably named, vessel was more convenient.

We have skirted the island on the way to dive sites all week, but this does not



prepare me for the size of the main town of La Maddalena, considerably larger than sleepy little Palau. I wander through traditional narrow streets and alleyways that climb the hillside, then go back down to the harbour for dinner, before a late ferry home.

DIVING GETS BACK INTO BIG scenery at Il Picho, on the back of Caprera Island. Having taken in the big scene, I am now hunting various little fluffballs of nudibranchs, interspersed with scorpionfish, blennies, gobies, hermit crabs and flat nudibranchs with the colouring of Friesian cows.

Even so, I admire the granite spires that rise sheer from 30m to 5m short of the surface on the seaward side of the reef, then connect with a 20m saddle to the rocks descending from the shore.

Back on the boat, I add a new term to my diving vocabulary, to "Vinnie a zip".

The zip on the back of my wetsuit is stuck, so I ask Vinnie for help and, with his good tug, the slider disintegrates.

Above from left: Flabellina nudibranch; bronze propeller on the *Angelica* wreck; spiny lobster.

Below: Inside the stern of the *Angelica*.



The good news is that a scrapped wetsuit at the dive centre has exactly the same YKK zip, and Stephanie has needles and thread I can use.

At first I plan on stitching the zip into my suit, but after a nice crisp rosé to lubricate my brain cells, I hatch a simpler plan. I cut the bottom off both zips and move the slider from the old suit onto my zip, fixing the bottom with a few stitches and a cable tie.

As good as new, if a centimetre shorter, I am grateful to have a working zip in the end-of-season 20° water.

A growing westerly wind means that diving continues on the sheltered east side of Caprera Island. This is a pleasure rather than an inconvenience. At the end of walls, pinnacles and canyons, we swim through a cave that ends in a submerged pool at La Grotta de San Francesco.

On the hotel balcony, I feel obliged to finish up the wine left in the fridge, along with some fresh bread rolls, serrano ham and olives. Kit doesn't dry faster when it's watched, but at least it feels faster this way. ☐



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ John Liddiard flew from Gatwick to Olbia with EasyJet, www.easyjet.com. Transfers from Olbia to Palau take about an hour with Sardegna Tours, www.sardegnatours.it

DIVING ▶ Nautilus Diving Centre, www.divesardegna.com

ACCOMMODATION ▶ Hotel Piccada, www.hotelpiccada.com

WHEN TO GO ▶ Nautilus operates from March through to October.

MONEY ▶ Euro.

PRICE ▶ Return flights and seven nights' accommodation with breakfast at the Hotel Piccada from March to June 2010 costs from £529 with Crusader Travel, 020 8744 0474, www.crusadertravel.com. A 10-dive package with Nautilus costs 270 euros.

TOURIST INFORMATION ▶ 020 7408 1254, www.sardinia.net

