

THE ZEN DIVES

> OK. I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING, AND YOU'RE RIGHT. IT'S NOT A GREAT TITLE. ON THE OTHER HAND I COULD'VE GONE FOR 'THE ART OF ZEN', OR PERHAPS 'HEAVY METAL - CYPRUS STYLE', SO TO BE FAIR IT COULD'VE BEEN A LOT WORSE...

I liked Chris Demetriou from the moment we met at his stand during the London Dive Show. (It's actually the London International Dive Show - the organisers of these things do so love an acronym, don't they?) I was gazing at a cardboard cut-out of the *Zenobia*, a whacking great ferry wallowing on the surface with a promising list. And as this is a dive show, you can guess what happened to the *Zenobia* next.

Operations manager of Dive-In Larnaca, Chris has been exploring the wreck of 'The Zen' for the past 15 years, during which he's acquired a comprehensive and intimate knowledge of this world class site. Yet familiarity hasn't dampened his enthusiasm for the Mediterranean's signature wreck one bit - he spoke as if he'd only just been on his first 10-dive *Zenobia* package, which he'd pretty much sold me on by the time he handed me his business card and we'd shaken hands.

It was a stifling hot night when my charter flight arrived at Larnaca some months later. Officials swept other nationalities aside to shepherd the Brits to the express immigration channel, even those of us without tattoos. Welcome to Cyprus, the little island that looks like a Christmas tree trying to do a runner.

A short wait at bag carousel, then 10 minutes in a cab and check-in at the two

star San Remo hotel, all pre-booked by Sherrie at Dive-In. Clean, secure, TV, aircon, pool, just two minutes walk from the dive shop, and at reasonable rates. Add to that a fine kebabery on the corner, an open-all-hours mini mart across the road, and you're all sorted.

I was so tired I tried to turn the aircon on using the telly remote. Three times. I shouted at it in English, as you do, and jabbed it with the indignation usually reserved for a bureaucratic Johnny Foreigner. I'd turned into a boorish Brit abroad, after just five minutes. Time for bed.

At 7.45 next morning Steph drove me round the block with my dive gear to the store to meet the Dive-In cast. Paperwork had been emailed in advance, so formalities were a breeze. Kit is assembled outside the shop then loaded onto *Zeus*, the RIB, which is then towed down the road to the slipway, leaving the divers to take their respective briefings in the shade, enjoying

: H E SAWYER

supplied water, before suiting up to wander 500 metres down the road to the fishing harbour.

Before the RIB leaves the quayside there's a boat briefing, repeated every time there's a new passenger aboard. It's local regulations and common sense. Time to cast off before we melt under the morning sun, a chug to the harbour entrance, then hold on as we speed over flat water towards the marker buoys, just minutes away. Again, there's a comprehensive buddy check, with Mike and Sarah from Vancouver, and our dive guide Kelvyn partnering yours truly, Billy-No-Mates. In we roll, bath water warm, clear and blue, sinking down to the ghostly battlements of the sunken hulk that stretches as far as the eye can see.

Forty minutes later back on the surface, helping hands take my lead and tank, leaving me to fin myself aboard with all the grace of a beaching seal, huffing and

Mains left to right -

Divers passing over the bridge

Inverted articulated lorry

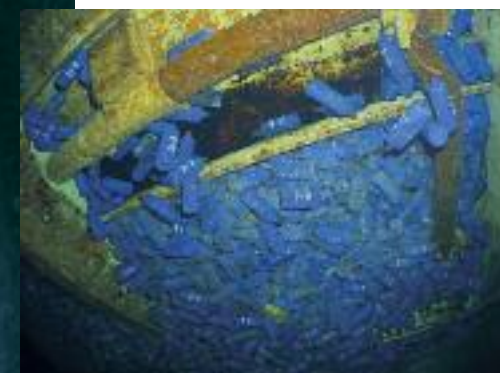
Kelvyn in the restaurant

Insets -

Remnants of the cargo of eggs on the seabed

Blue plastic bottles line the 'ceiling' of the Upper Cargo Deck

Diver approaching a truck cab





puffing, eyes wide as dinner plates. Or a seal doing an impression of a middle aged man in a wetsuit flopping into a RIB. The kindly bearded face of skipper Andy blots out the sun. "Y'alright there, mate?" (Andy's from Yorkshire. I can't do the accent.) "You're never going to believe this, Andy. But there's a MASSIVE wreck down there!"

The RIB zips us back to the harbour in no time, or no time at all, depending on who is at the helm. We stroll back for brunch at Michael's cafe adjacent to the dive shop. The owner is a local of considerable character, who imparts his wisdom with the customers whether they like it or not, but he'll also cook you a full English with a pot of tea for less than it should cost on the promenade. And you've earned it. The first dive on *The Zen* is in your logbook, so mop your plate and digest the details with new found friends and a sea view.

Some time after noon we start to gather for our respective briefings for the second dive of the day, the RIB able to take two or three small groups who can drop in at the stern, middle or bow, such is the size of this wreck. Newly filled cylinders are driven to the harbour and passed down to the divers in the Zeus. Within five minutes we're rolling back in and dropping down at the stern. Now there's a fresh



*Companionway light
The Zenobia attracts
prolific fish life
There are number-
ous snags within the
wreck*

DIVING THE ZENOBIA

“...DOORWAYS HAVE
BECOME HUMAN-SIZED
LETTERBOXES TO POST
YOURSELF THROUGH.
CARPETED FLOORS BECOME
FURRY WALLS.
IT'S A WEIRD WORLD...”

perspective to fully appreciate the wreck. The size of the prominent starboard propellor dwarfing divers, the graffiti scratched into the grey lichen covering the hull. Big block capitals; 'SIMON some bloke IS GAY'. Now that's a claim to fame.

We creep to the edge of the stern looking down into the depths. Over we go, base jumping underwater, free-falling in slow motion through the thermocline into colder darker water in the shadow of the two massive stern doors, checking our descent to slide between them at 28 metres. Now along the deck to see the twisted trucks discarded like toys to boredom. Below us the open ribcage of a lorry once full of butchery, now a mound of bare bones.

As if this sight weren't surreal enough we now penetrate the upper levels of the wreck. With the Zenobia lying on the bottom at ninety degrees, doorways have become human-sized letterboxes to post yourself through. Carpeted floors become furry walls. It's a weird world halfway towards *The Poseidon Adventure*. Pipes, tubes, and wires, dotted with alien sponge life weave between sanitary ware, stuck like art in this topsy-turvy underwater gallery.

There's room to move in here and plenty of ambient light, but hanging cables provide numerous opportunities for snags over the top of cylinders, so as always when inside a wreck, caution should be exercised and eyes should be everywhere. Ascending, we exit into the blue through one of the windows where the glass has been removed to allow plenty of access from a potentially dangerous environment.

Back in the harbour before 3pm, cameras

and divers are carefully unloaded, leaving all the kit in RIB, which is then towed back to the shop to be washed down. The staff go about their boat chores in good spirits and there's a clean rinse tank and plenty of rails to hang suits and BC's, a shower, change cubicles and storage crates for accessories in the adjacent wetroom. Once in civvies it's time for an habitual Cyprus coffee, possibly a nap, bearing in mind they're showing reruns of *Knight Rider* starring David Hasselhoff at 5.30. ish. And if all that diving has given you an appetite, try Melitzi's outdoor eatery 10 minutes stroll along the front, heading towards the bright lights. The locals eat here too, and no wonder.

Now I'm joined by British technical divers Neil Black and Adam Florio, who've been creating their own hardcore penetration route into the bowels of the wreck, besting sealed doors with hammer and chisel. This is their third 'holiday' of exploration on *The Zen*, as they painstakingly move into areas closed while the ferry was still afloat. You can hear them banging away as you fin over the outside of the wreck.

"Ting! - Ting! - Ting!" (That's Neil.) "Ting!Ting!Ting!Ting!Ting!" (And that will be Adam...)

Their earnest discussions over dinner about the potential pitfalls awaiting them on the Dark Side of The Sealed Door; silt, debris, hanging cabinets, chemicals, it all sounded like something out of 'Dungeons and Dragons'. Only real.

For me it's the Upper Cargo Deck, an experience I describe on a postcard home as 'a bit like finning through a church in the dark, jumbled trucks strewn on the floor, thousands of blue bottles littered against the ceiling'. Obviously I scuba through churches underwater all the time but without the trucks and bottles.

Next day it's down to the seabed at the stern, threading a route between the wheels of symmetrical trucks at a site I christen 'Axle Alley'. Inevitably the deeper and longer dives start to build up deco time on the bar slung at five metres on Dive-In's permanent mooring. Chris suggests an SDI Nitrox course - I can even read the manual on Sunday, the shop's dry day. But Polish divers Vlad and Diana suggest chicken doners and a carafe of red wine; we occupy the

The *Zenobia* was built in 1974, weighing 10,500 tonnes, a 172 metre long roll-on roll-off ferry carrying 104 trucks from Malmo, Sweden, en route for Syria. After a demonstration of the auto pilot, the vessel developed a list. The inability to tackle inherent instability issues with the ship meant that although the *Zenobia* made it to Larnaca, it continued to list, and with water flooding in through an open door below the waterline, was finally abandoned and sunk in the early hours of 7 June 1980. She now lies on her port side in 42 metres half a mile from the fishing harbour, under the flight path to Larnaca airport, with the upturned starboard side 16 metres below the surface. A variety of penetrations of differing difficulty, and fish action in the shape of amber jacks, groupers and barracuda, means the wreck has something for everyone from Open Water to full-blown Tech.



Axle Alley

LOGISTICS

Aeroplanes? I used Flight Centre www.flightcentre.co.uk

Kip & Kit? Accommodation & dive packages, including kit hire, can be booked in advance with Dive-In.

Ground Control? Email Operations Manager Chris Demetriou dive_in_larnaca@cytanet.com.cy See the website www.dive_in.com.cy Telephone Dive-In on +357 24 627469

Bucks? You can settle up using major credit cards. Take Euros for kebabs & ice cream.

Techno? Charging batteries for your underwater camera equipment, ipod, mobile phone? Cyprus loves the good old British 3-pin plug.

When? Year round, but it's seriously hot topside from June - August.

Wrist watch?

Cyprus is 2 hours ahead of GMT

restaurant for six hours and the Nitrox course gets put back a day.

But under Kelvyn’s easy tutelage I’m soon getting to grips with the upgrade. After all, if compressed air was so great, everyone would be using it. The benefits of Nitrox soon become apparent within the operating range of the dives, although it adds to the final bill as does the souvenir polo shirt at the end of the week, but you wouldn’t go home without it.

Because I’ve had a brilliant time here, exceeding my expectations, which as this is a world class wreck were already pretty high to begin with. And before you think this is some kind of Love-In with Dive-In, I’d suggest a second table with shaded seating outside the shop would be a welcome addition. There are other dive shops in Larnaca offering the wreck, if that’s the way you chose to live your life.

The Zen’s exact position in ‘Top Wrecks of The World’ can be debated endlessly, but it makes the top half of any serious list, even a short one. Throw stones Red Sea wreckies, but I prefer it to *Thistle*gorm.

The Zenobia Project

Neil Black and Adam Florio discovered a one-metre square opening at 20 metres, a passage leading into the wreck blocked by a pair of one and a half inch bars. Using hacksaws and taking it in turns to work in the confined space, they removed these as close to the frame as possible, then filed the sharp edges to avoid snags.

The passage dropped down into a large room containing pump units, all covered with a thick red silt. In low visibility they encountered a closed watertight bulkhead door, but were now experiencing a stinging sensation. Neil removed a label from one of the blue barrels and research on the internet revealed they’d

been exposed to hydraulic fluid. They’d entered the steering room. Undeterred they tackled the piston ram holding the door, then the 50 bolts holding the door runners with an adjustable spanner, having to leave 10 bolts when their holiday leave expired. Returning to Larnaca the following year, they removed the remaining bolts,

having taken the precaution of clearing everything over their heads that might be disturbed by the impact of the tonne weight of the falling door. After 32 dives over two and a half years, they’d finally entered a new passageway, discovering the open doors to the electrical store, the engineering store, and the workshop, recovering the engineer’s blackboard as a hard-won trophy.

To see the photos and read the *Zenobia* Project in depth, see Neil’s website www.deepdives.co.uk



Neil Black on the deco station