School of basslets on HMS *Olympus*, a submarine wreck in Malta

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Wreck Diving in Malta

Reflections on a Wreck Diving Course

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The waters around Malta are renowned for their historic wrecks. Ally Wybrew tells the story of her dives on a couple of the wrecks during a wreck diving course she took in Malta.

It was eight o'clock in the morning, and I was staring out across a thin slip of sparkling Mediterranean Sea. Behind me, in an almost comically synchronised fashion, dive van after dive van was pulling into the parking spaces alongside Malta's Ċirkewwa ferry terminal. Mine was the first on the scene, and within five minutes of arriving, every space on the strip was occupied.

My punctuality at one of the country's most popular dive sites was down to Scuba Life Malta, the centre that was about to take me through the PADI Wreck Diver course. It was an obvious choice of speciality in this part of the world. Maltese waters are famous for their wrecks, which officially number around 80 sunken vessels, but rumour has it there are hundreds more.

While some were deliberately scuttled, many played a part in momentous battles of the 20th century, such as HMS *Stubborn*, an S-class submarine launched in 1942 and sunk by a depth charge three years later. In the shallows around Valletta, Malta's imposing walled capital, sits one of the region's most popular wrecks, a Tribal-class destroyer called HMS *Maori*, which still bears the wounds of its 1941 bombing at anchor.

Treasures like these are reason enough to learn wreck diving here, but Malta also holds a nostalgia for me. My first breath underwater was taken five years ago in Gozo's Xwejni Bay, around the headland I was looking at now. I remember feeling terrified, elated and pretty chilly (my decision to do my Open Water dives in February was a bold one), but it started me on the exhilarating journey I was on today.

Every summer (and increasingly every winter), I return to Malta to explore its incredibly clear waters, mesmerising geological structures

wrecks

Malta's walled capital of Valletta (right); Sunset over Ta' Ċenċ Cliffs in Gozo (below)

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and the towering, ghostly expanses of its wrecks. But it was no longer enough just to look at these resting behemoths; I needed to see inside. I needed to look under the hoods of MV *Karwela*, HMS *Maori*, *Um el Faroud* and more.

Training

The Wreck Diver course seemed like the way to go. Designed to give divers the skills they need to navigate submerged vessels safely, it expands students' knowledge of the laws surrounding wreck diving, the hazards specific to these kinds of sites and directional skills that will help orient the diver while exploring a sunken vessel. The training agency states that wreck penetration should "only be practised after you have received training in wreck diving," so here I was doing just that.

Gesticulating towards the water as he explained the day's plan was instructor Simon Hewart, a Maltese-British ex-military chef whose 24 years in the army showed in every aspect of his demeanour. Dive gear was stored in immaculate order, timings were strictly adhered to and briefings were as crisp and clear as his underwater signals, I found out later.

He opened the centre in 2017 with his partner, Jacqui, following two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. Naturally, wrecks hold more meaning for him than for the average recreational diver. "[A wreck] has a second life after it's been sunk," he told me on the way to Ċirkewwa. "Obviously, as an ex-serviceman, I think it's good to have something that reminds people of what happened in the past; you should never really forget. Having something down there so people—young people—can dive on it. That's history living on."

That is certainly one of the big attractions for me. There are pieces of underwater history all over the world that I am keen to explore—SS *Thistlegorm* in the Red Sea, USAT *Liberty* in Bali, everything in Chuuk Lagoon—but I know that many of them are challenging sites that require serious experience, so I want to be as equipped as possible to tackle them safely.

Dive plans

As I gazed out at the ridiculously blue ocean I was about to stride into, the sun beating a steady 32°C in an utterly cloudless sky, Simon briefed me on the day's diving. The plan was to visit Ċirkewwa's two wrecks over the course of three dives: the *P29*, a 52-metre German minesweeper sold to Malta in 1997 and scuttled in 2004, and the tugboat *Rozi*, a 35-metre vessel sunk in 1992 that has collected a solid amount of marine life in its decades beneath the surface.

The first dive would see me mapping the *P29*, swimming over and around it, sketching entrances, exits and potential hazards on a slate, as well as taking pictures with a GoPro. The second dive would teach me how to lay a line externally on the *Rozi*, and the third dive would see us return to the *P29* to penetrate the wheelhouse, laying a secure line as I went. All the dives would include elements of buoyancy control, fin techniques and navigation. On each dive, Simon would identify a specific spot as "home," and then, at our turn time, I would guide us back to it. We would be breathing nitrox rather

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Diver at the gun of HMS *Urge*, a submarine wreck in Malta (left); Dive gear and traditional salt pans on the rocky shore near the *Karwela* wreck site in Gozo (above)

than air, so we would have a healthy bottom time—about 10 minutes at 30 metres—and the visibility promised to be Malta's standard summer season clarity of 25 metres.

We kitted up, ran through our buddy checks and stepped into the rippling water.

Diving the P29 wreck

As the shadowy outline of the *P29* took shape in the blue, goosebumps prickled my flesh. The huge man-made structure seemed so incongruous in such a quiet, organic environment. As we swam around the circumference, I sketched the distinguishing features of its hull: the dark, elongated windows gaping along its sides, the odd protrusions of rusted railings and unused instruments breaking up its otherwise sleek exterior.

Between sketching and snapping pictures, there was time for some photo ops; a gun still sat mounted on the prow of the ship, asking to be posed with. Reconnaissance complete, I guided us "home" and then spent some leisure time scouring the reef for nudibranchs and stonefish, even managing to spot an octopus crumpled in a crevice.

Surface interval

Our surface interval debrief took place in the company's converted camper van, a welcome respite from the sun and a comfortable environment in which to absorb Simon's underwhelmed reaction to my sub-par artistry. I seemed to have captured the important bits, though, so the feedback was concise.

The conversation turned to Malta's unique appeal as a diving destination. "It's totally different to everywhere else," Simon explained. "We've got swim-throughs, we've got caves, we've obviously got sand down at the bottom, and we've got wrecks. So, in such a small area, you get quite a lot of different types of marine life, where normally you'd have to go somewhere specific to find flatfish, stingrays and different types of marine life. It's a good variety."

He was also certain that the marine life in Ċirkewwa specifically was improving year on year. He put this down in part to the fact that the site was now a Marine Protected Area, which meant that boats were restricted from entering and stopping within a certain distance. Sugarfish, yellowfin tuna and stingrays were just some of the creatures he had spotted here over the years.

Practising skills

With chocolate bars ingested, hydration complete and nitrogen partially eliminated, we set about practising on land the skills for the next dive. Being able to use a line and spool effectively is one of the most important aspects of wreck diving, as it is imperative to have a physical object to guide a diver from any overhead environment back out to a safe ascent space.

Simon used a set of nearby railings to demonstrate how to secure a line, unreel the spool and then attach it to different points along the hypothetical wreck. I followed his lead and found it more tricky than expected. I repeatedly looped the line around the railing, unfurled it and looped it again before safely securing it at the end with a bolt snap. Doing it with one hand (while the other holds a torch) was harder than I had expected.

As he assessed my work, a few sections of line went slack, and we realised that someone had walked straight through it and broken the cord. I secretly hoped the luminous line would be more visible underwater. Apologies exchanged and the line reeled in, we kitted up and headed back down into the depths.

Diving the Rozi wreck

Watching the *Rozi* materialise was no less thrilling than the *P29*, even though I knew I would not be going inside. Covered in hydroids, the funnel and wheelhouse of the wreck stood proud, its somewhat squat form stamping its authority on the seabed.

On arrival, Simon demonstrated how to lay the line along the outside deck rails before handing it to me to demonstrate. Unsurprisingly, I found it harder to do underwater. Maintaining my buoyancy and managing the line required more concen-

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Diver on the *Karwela* wreck (right) and dive tanks on the rocky shore of the bay of Xatt l-Ahmar (far right) in Gozo

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tration than I had anticipated. I was reminded of the task-loading concept that had been drilled into me through so much of the course's e-learning. In the end, however, the line was taut, neat and, I hope, reliable.

Skills complete, we circuited the wreck, traded glances with some local amberjacks, gazed into the gaping mouth of a moray eel that had made a pipe its home and then returned to ours on land.

The debrief was short, with the challenges of the tasks obvious. Practice was everything, which was why we would be heading back into the water a third time to fine-tune them.

This time, we took a longer surface interval to ensure sufficient off-gassing, during which Simon expounded upon his favourite wreck in the region—the *Um El Faroud*. "It's not a historic wreck. It sank after an accident in the dry docks that killed nine people. It's there as a bit of a memorial to those who passed away," he explained.

Um El Faroud

It was a name I heard a lot in Malta. The wreck of *Um El Faroud* was popular with recreational divers thanks to its accessibility from shore and its impressive size (115m long). "It's quite good because you have the back section, which has all the rooms—the engine room and everything—which is brilliant for penetration, dropping down and having a look round," Simon said. "Then also on the front section, you've got where the oil used to be stored, so there are these vast rooms. Or you can go over the top of it, turn around and just look at the sheer size of it. It's quite spectacular."

By comparison, the *P29* was a humble beast but perfect for our purposes. By 3 p.m., we were ready to go again, and Simon was psyched. He explained that afternoons were the best time to dive here. There were fewer people, more marine life and better visibility.

Revisiting the P29 wreck

This time, I would circumnavigate the inside of the wheelhouse, laying line as I went. In my mind, it seemed an achievable enough task, but the dive was nothing if not surprising. Although the wreck site was not exactly busy in the morning, it was positively ghostly now. I watched Simon swim backwards through the familiar wheelhouse doorway, then followed him in after tying off the reel outside.

Inside, the space was smaller than I had imagined, and the handy protrusions I had envisioned were far less prominent in the dim light amongst the flitting damselfish and algae-encrusted metal. In this confined space, I was hyper-aware of the closeness of my surroundings and the damage I could inflict with relatively little effort. I was desperate not to disturb anything—no fin-scraping, no cylinder bumping—yet I found it harder than ever to slow my momentum.

Maintaining a static hover is vital inside a wreck. It stops you from kicking up dirt and obscuring visibility, damaging your surroundings and complicating tasks.

I needed to make a near-dead stop in order to tie my line efficiently. I learnt this quickly as I fumbled my first attempt and had to repeat it in a more appropriate spot. It was further confirmation of what I had already suspected—backfinning was key. I focused on my breathing and made small, modified frog kicks to keep myself in position.

As I exited, a well-fed fireworm drifted down in front of my face, reminding me that rusty bits of metal were not the

View from Medina of Malta's picturesque landscape with Valletta in the background (right); Diver over the deck of the *Karwela* wreck in Gozo (far right); *Flabellina pedata* nudibranch (centre)

only hazards to worry about on the wreck. I also noticed a change in my breathing. I had been puffing with concentration. An increased SAC (Surface Air Consumption) rate while focusing on a task was to be expected and also managed—but you needed to be aware of it to do so.

Post-dive thoughts

This was one of many learnings I was contemplating on my return to shore, along with the very real problem of task loading and how things that seemed simple on land took on a new dimension underwater. I was also struck by the fact that although I always felt safe and was never far from an exit, the cramped interiors of a wreck could quickly lead to big problems if a diver did not remain calm.

I talked through these points with Simon as we changed and dismantled our gear. It had been a full day, yet it never felt rushed or overwhelming. The new skills felt relevant, challenging and beneficial, and I also enjoyed building on my existing skills. Ordinarily, this course would be taught over two days, but since I had completed one wreck dive as part of my Advanced Open Water course, I was able to fit the rest into one stint.

As the day drew to a close and the truck revved up for departure, I felt a bead of excitement growing inside me. Now a certified wreck diver, I could begin planning trips to some of the world's most thrilling sunken vessels. With a bit more training, the likes of the *Zenobia* in Cyprus and the wrecks of Scapa Flow were now within reach. Yet, with rumours of another 100 wrecks discovered in Maltese waters, there seemed no need to rush off any time soon—I had the perfect underwater playground to explore right here on my doorstep. ■

Ally Wybrew is a travel writer who splits her time between the United Kingdom and Malta.

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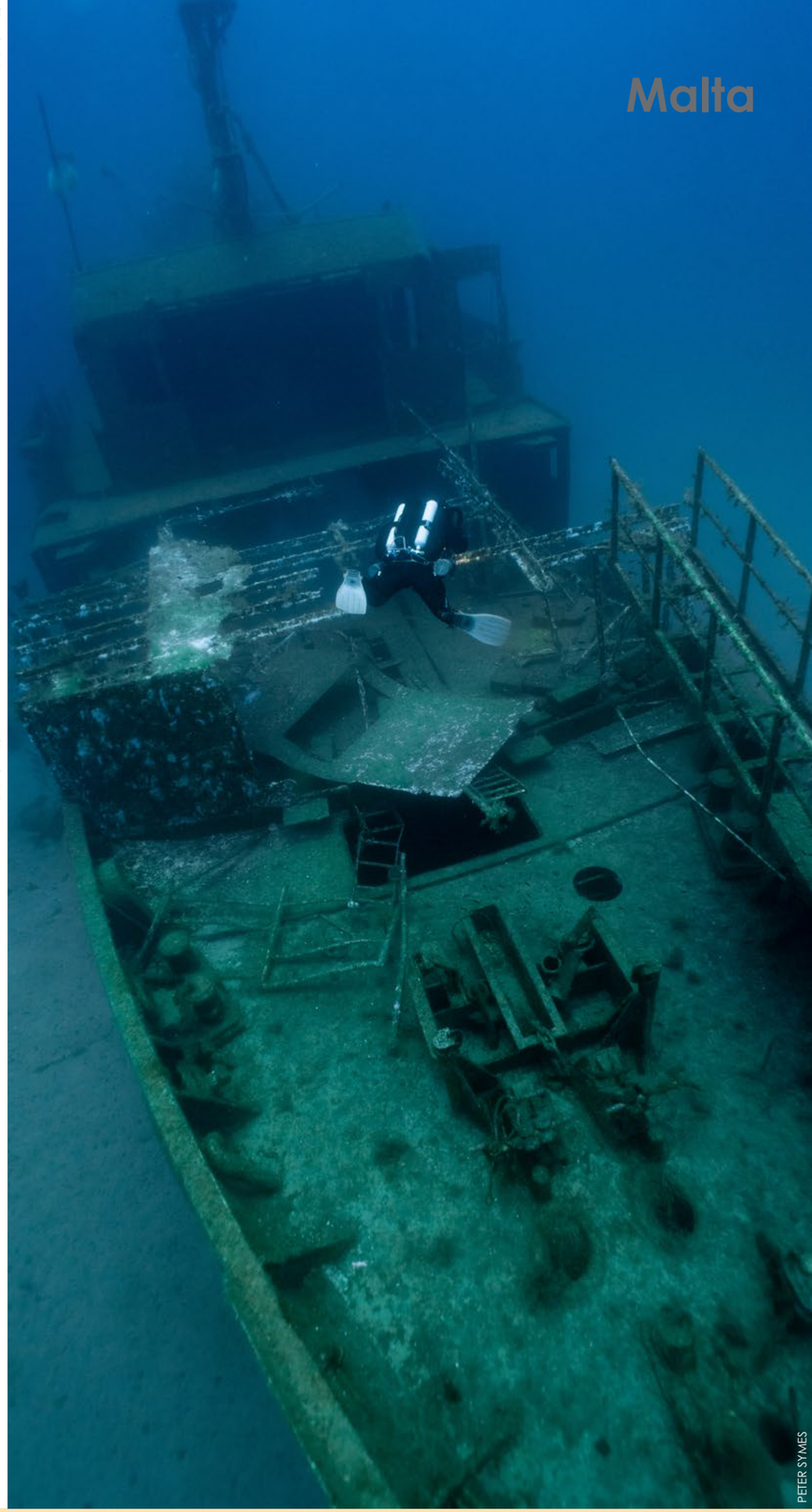

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