The USAT *Liberty* rests at 30-40m just off the coast of Tulamben, Bali, in the Indian Ocean

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Live & let dive

Off Bali's east coast, a bright and beautiful ecosystem has formed in the underwater wreckage of a WWII American military transport ship – and you don't need to be an expert diver to experience it.

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The *Liberty* is home to an astoundingly diverse array of marine life

IT IS JANUARY 11, 1942, and the US army transport USAT *Liberty* is en route from Australia to the Philippines with a hold full of rubber and railway parts. Near the Indonesian island of Lombok it is torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. However, the crew has time to react and two destroyers tow the stricken ship to Singaraja, a port on the north coast of Bali. They get far enough to beach it on Bali's east coast at Tulamben, allowing the cargo to be salvaged. There the hulk sits for 21 years, stripped of everything from ammunition to the wooden deck.

Then, in February 1963, Bali's Gunung Agung volcano starts smoking. It coincides with Eka Dasa Rudra, a hugely significant Balinese ritual that traditionally happens only once every 100 years, and locally the rumbling is seen as ominous portent. When the eruption comes on March 17, killing more than 1000, the force is so violent that it moves the *Liberty*. As lava flows down the volcano's sides, the ship shifts a few metres offshore, then slides down the underwater slope on its side, submerged at last.

The *Liberty* is 92 years old (it started out as a horse transport in 1918). Since it finally sank, it has become home to an extraordinary abundance of coral and other sea life – its 47 years underwater long enough for a complex ecosystem to develop, but short enough for the structure to remain superficially intact. It lies in warm, diver-friendly water perfect for the development of sea life. Oceanographers say its position is ideal for receiving plankton-rich water from the ocean current moving from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean.

> **Divers have a wreck to explore at a fairly constant depth, relatively close to the shore**

The *Liberty* is one of the most accessible wreck dives in the world: it sits in shallow water, mere metres from a beach, you can swim out to it and snorkellers can usually get a clear view of the stern from the surface. Even at its deepest point at high tide, the wreck sits at less than 30m depth. Most of it touches the bottom at less than 20m and can be explored in detail at 10m. That even puts it within easy reach of novice divers who have completed only the most basic qualifications, such as the PADI Open Water Diver certification.

Everything is on the diver's side. Professional and well-run dive shops provide English-speaking guides. The volcanic sand, while problematic for distance visibility, gives a contrast that makes the corals look brighter and better in photographs. And since the crew made it off safely when they beached, you're not diving on a wreck that is also a tomb – often an ethical issue in wreck diving. Fortunately, the *Liberty* even sank parallel to the beach, so divers have a 120m-long wreck to explore at fairly constant depth, relatively close to the shore. A thorough examination from stern to bow and back again can be accomplished with a 40-minute oxygen tank. ›

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For the diver, the *Liberty*'s appeal is that it feels relatively undiscovered

LOCAL DIVE SHOPS quote marine biologists who say there are 400 species of reef fish living around the wreck. Guides report seeing sunfish, rays, tuna and even whale sharks from time to time, but most of what you see is small and resplendently colourful. There are *Finding Nemo*-style clownfish, trevally and wrasse, anglerfish, pipefish, sweetlips and fusiliers. Our guide points out what looks like a lump of green-and-brown encrustation on a bulkhead. He taps it and a scorpion fish appears, the gaping mouth giving a view right inside its body, a girder lattice of bleached white bone.

The variety of coral in such a small space rivals anything you might see elsewhere: hard and soft, black and purple, brain coral, fan coral, staghorn, star. But more than anything, it's about the wreck. Divers walking in from the shore sight it at barely five metres under the surface. Schools of fish are still visible circling on the surface. As is common on wrecks, it's not always possible to tell what you're looking at: often it's just fragmented steel beams, lost beneath the coral life that has taken up residence on the hull. Then you catch sight of a wheel, crusted in sediment; an anchor chain; a gun barrel.

The *Liberty* lies off a holiday island that receives about two million tourists a year. Tulamben is a two-hour drive from Sanur or Kuta, more in traffic, and it's best to arrange your own transport. Most visitors will never know the wreck is there, preferring to stick with the beaches or Ubud's cultural attractions. Perhaps that's for the best. Part of the *Liberty*'s appeal is that it feels relatively undiscovered and offers the chance to dive on a ship with a century of memories, lying a mere 50km down the road from the tourist hub.›

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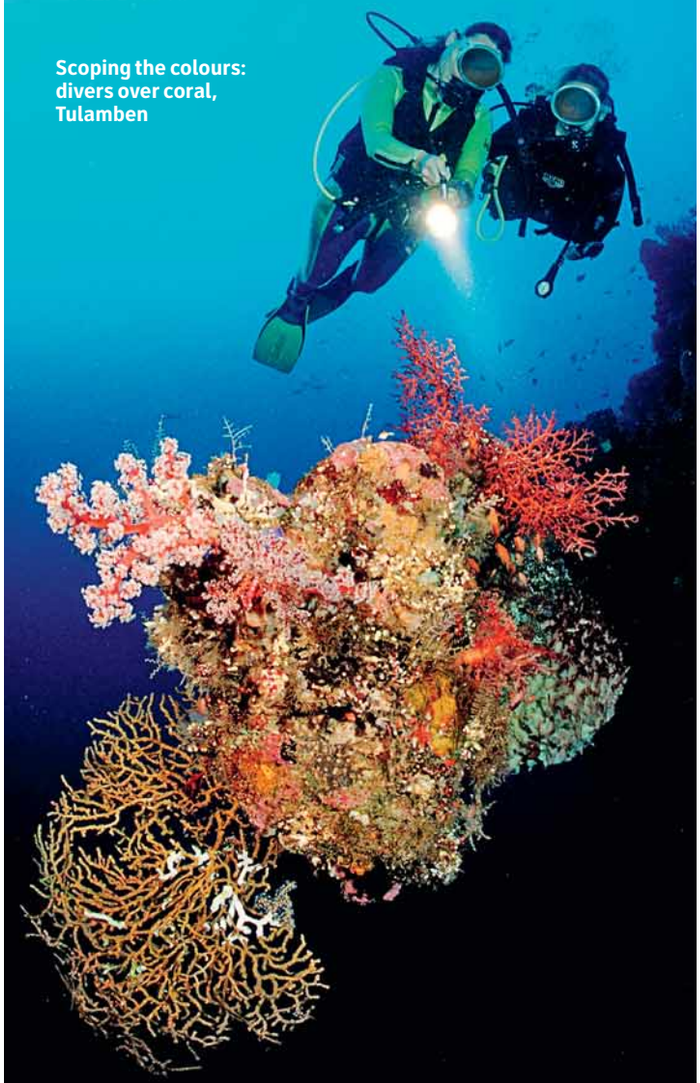

Scoping the colours: divers over coral, Tulamben

Dive five dives

Ships have been sinking almost as long as ships have been floating. This means a world of wrecks for divers to explore, from fishpond dinghies to the *Titanic*. Many are inaccessible (most of the wrecks at Whitefish Point in the Great Lakes, for example, are more than 40m down) or need specialist diving equipment such as trimix breathing gas. Here, a selection that most recreational divers can reach.

SCAPA FLOW, SCOTLAND

The best wreck-diving sites in the world are often those where the worst things have happened. From a maritime perspective, they don't get much worse than the scuttling of an entire fleet. That's what happened to the German High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow in Scotland's Orkney Islands after WWI in 1919. There are 25,000-tonne battleships, although most of the bigger ships are at 20m to 40m depth, which requires advanced dive certification. There are plenty in shallower waters, among them the *Tabarka*, which capsized in 12m of water.

TRUK LAGOON, MICRONESIA

On February 17, 1944, American forces launched an assault on Truk Lagoon, which was serving as a base for the Japanese Imperial Fleet. Sixty ships and 275 planes went to the bottom. Unlike Scapa Flow, many of the wrecks are in 15m or less of water and the visibility is generally far superior. The nature of the lagoon also means currents are not a major problem. The warm waters attract marine life such as rays, sharks and turtles.

GRAVEYARD OF THE ATLANTIC, NORTH CAROLINA

Many ships have gone down off the Outer Banks of North Carolina and Virginia – more than 1000 since record-keeping began, sunk by shallow shoals, frequent wars and a confluence of cold Canadian water and the Gulf Stream. Today that tropical current provides warm, clear water for divers and the wrecks start at less than 10m down. Unlike Scapa Flow or Micronesia, where the wrecks are from the same era, the vessels here date from 16th-century Spanish galleons. However, two easy dives are the *WE Hutton* and the *Suloide*, both sunk in WWII – the latter hit the wreck of the former – lying at a depth of less than 20m.

VARNA, BULGARIA

This town on the Black Sea offers something you don't get every day: not only underwater wrecks, but an underwater Roman port. There is also a multitude of WWII material to investigate, such as merchant vessels, landing craft, torpedo boats and submarines – and last year an unexpected dive destination was added when the airliner of the country's former communist leader was sunk to create a new dive site.

THE RED SEA

The Red Sea is a beautiful place to dive whether looking for wrecks or not. Many divers start here. The two most popular wreck dives are at 30m, which necessitates training beyond entry level. This can be acquired easily in Egypt's Sharm el-Sheikh. The SS *Thistlegorm* is a war grave – 128m long, its cargo of neatly stacked motorbikes, trucks and guns still intact – sunk by German bombers in WWII. The *Dunraven*, a Victorian steam and sail ship that hit a reef in 1876, is at a similar depth.

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