



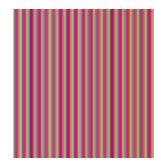
LEFT: DON WALSH MAY BE PAST 80, BUT THE FAMOUS ADVENTURER IS STILL GOING STRONG

OPPOSITE AND NEXT PAGE: THE FOUR-KILOMETRE JOURNEY DOWN TO THE TITANIC'S CRUMBLING WRECK MAY SOON BE A THING OF THE PAST



ROLLING IN THE DEEP

What would you do for fun if you had already dived the Mariana Trench? **Chris Wright** found out, courtesy of legendary thrill-seeker, Don Walsh



If you have a spare US\$60,000 lying around, you can still go and see the *RMS Titanic* for yourself — but not for much longer. This year's expeditions in Russian-built MIR submersibles, which will take dozens of tourists down to the wreck in July and August, may be the last trips of their kind for the foreseeable future.

Aside from one-off charters, the main company that offers these dives is called Deep Ocean Expeditions. Expeditions take two weeks at a time, sailing on a support vessel from St. John's in Newfoundland, Canada, usually carrying 20 tourists who

will dive. It takes about a day and a half to reach the area above the wreck; then submersibles go down in pairs, with a pilot and two paying passengers in each. It is a long day, typically 10 hours all told, so the two-week duration of the trip reflects the time it takes to get everybody down to see the wreck in suitable diving weather, while still allowing the pilots time to rest and do maintenance.

One expedition team member this time, making his 11th visit to the dive site, will be Don Walsh. Many will remember him as the only man alive today who has been to the deepest point in the world's oceans — Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench, a feat he completed in an odd-looking bathyscaphe called the Trieste, over 50 years ago in 1960. He first dived on the wreck of the *Titanic* about 10 years ago.

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The initial thing one sees of the wreck is, as Walsh puts it, "the money shot, coming right up to that bow". This, thanks in no small part to James Cameron's movie, is probably the most iconic sight of the wreck. Even after a two-and-a-half-

hour descent almost four kilometres down, the pilots — currently Yvgeniy Cherniaev and Victor Nischeta, who provide support for chief scientist Dr Anatoly Sagalevitch — are skilled enough to make it the first sight tourists encounter at the bottom.

"The Russian pilots have spent more time on the *Titanic* than Captain Smith did," says Walsh. "So once they land on the bottom they know exactly where to go."

The *Titanic* broke in half on its way down to the ocean floor, so the norm is to start at the bow, look at the front half of the ship, then follow a field of debris towards the stern, the tail end of the ship, about 500 metres away. "It's like somebody broke open a piñata and stuff fell out," describes Walsh. While anything made of wood, and any human remains, have long since gone, the hull is still largely intact, as are many

PHOTOS: EVERETT/TPG/CLICK PHOTOS (SUBMERSIBLE); GETTY IMAGES (DON WALSH)



of the fittings. Walsh recalls looking through windows on one of the decks and seeing the bathtub within the captain's cabin. There are still artefacts, ranging from champagne bottles to bits of clothing, pots and pans, that have survived well.

Visibility varies, although it makes no difference if you dive in the day or at night, since all ambient light is gone by about 200 metres anyway, and the water looks inky-black. Walsh, a lifelong oceanographer, explains that the *Titanic* is on the sea floor just south of the Grand Banks, an east-west ridge sticking out from Newfoundland, with the Labrador Current bringing cold water from the Arctic Ocean, southwards across the ridge. As the current rises over the ridge, it picks up organic materials from the ocean floor then sinks on the southerly side of the ridge — which is where the wreck is. When that current is flowing strongly, visibility is impeded, but this is partly offset by the fact that the MIR craft usually dive in pairs, meaning one can shine light on what the other is looking at.

In the time Walsh has been attending the site, the pilots have reported a steady deterioration in the ship's hull. Iron-eating organisms are feeding on the structure, creating rusticles — a word

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invented because of *Titanic* by Robert Ballard, who found the wreck in 1985, describing the strange, icicle-like rust formations on the wreck. In short, the wreck is gradually falling in on itself.

How long is left before the *Titanic* disappears? "There are only guesses, but 30 years from now there won't be anything to look at," Walsh says. "The metal is being eaten up."

That however is not the reason that the trips to the wreck are stopping; instead it is largely because the Russians need their submersibles back.

"The MIR craft were built for the Russian Academy of Sciences for academic research, but when they were finished, the Soviet Union collapsed, and over the years there was never enough money going into marine science in Russia to support this system full-time," says Walsh. Consequently, for many years, Russia has leased the machines out to "various treasure hunters and documentary filmmakers — and tourists. But this has never been something they wanted to do," he adds.

Now it appears Russia has enough scientific work to support their use full-time, and there is not another set of submersibles like it anywhere in the world. Other craft can go equally deep, but generally they require two crew members and can only take on one passenger at a time, which would push costs beyond the very high, to the unattainable as far as tourism goes. It is tourism's loss.

Walsh, who after all went down 11 kilometres in a metal ball too small to stand up in to set his Challenger Deep record, considers the MIR submersibles "rather spacious: two couches, and a window for each one, with a larger window for the pilot. I feel more discomfort flying on a 747 [airplane] to Australia."

"I guess my claim to fame is I had lunch on the *Titanic*," muses Walsh. "Halfway through the dive we landed near the bridge where Captain Smith was last seen and ate our sandwiches." It is not an experience many other people will ever have. ●

TITANIC: THE AFTERMATH PREMIERES IN APRIL IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND



THE FIDDLER AND THE SHIP

Christopher Ward is the author of the bestselling book *And the Band Played On*, and the grandson of a violinist onboard the *RMS Titanic*. He talks about his grandfather, who was one of the victims of the disaster

What inspired you to write your book?

I felt I owed it to my children and to their children to tell something of the family story. The most interesting part of the family story revolved around my mother's father, Jock Hume, who was a violinist on the *RMS Titanic* on its fateful journey. He was 21 years old when he died.

When I got to the archives, which is where other bodies that were recovered are buried, I suddenly realised that this was a shocking story, which had never been told before. In other words, what happened after the *Titanic* sank. When it sank, there were 1,500 people in the water. Half an hour later, many were dead, including my grandfather.

Can you tell the readers more about Jock?

He was a brilliant fiddler and he quickly found work on various passenger liners. By the time he was 21, he'd literally travelled the world. In the year before his death, he had crossed the Atlantic three or four times, for instance. He left behind his fiancée, my grandmother Mary, who was expecting his child, my mother. They were due to be married when the *Titanic* returned from its maiden voyage — and of course it didn't return.

What were Jock's last moments like?

The band had probably gone to have a drink in their cabin and relax together. But they were called upon when the ship struck the iceberg, to cheer up passengers in the first-class lounge.

They played ragtime music?

Indeed, they played ragtime music as the lifeboats were being loaded, to avert panic. When the last lifeboat had departed and there was no hope left, they took their instruments up on deck, which was freezing cold. The temperature was two degrees below zero in the sea, and probably colder on deck. They played hymns to comfort those who realised they were going to die.

Do you see any modern parables to the *Titanic*?

You know, I've thought about what happened when the Twin Towers [in New York] went down, and it seemed to me that it was very similar.

It's a great modern structure, something that everybody had been very proud of, which suddenly came apart. There was a "band" at the World Trade Center when the building came down, except it wasn't a band, it was firemen helping people, creating calm and doing everything they could.

What surprised you in your research about the *Titanic*?

I discovered that two weeks after the ship sank, Jock's father received a bill for the brass buttons on his uniform before the family had even been told that he was dead.

When they knew that his body was likely to have been recovered, they asked to bring his body home to Scotland. They were told normal cargo rates would apply, which was an approximate amount of £25 to £30. This was a small fortune in those days and quite beyond the affordability of an ordinary family.