

Jungles, Jeepneys & The Japanese Navy

by IVAN HOUSTON

Busuanga Island in the Philippines is largely overshadowed by its more talked about neighbours but as Ivan Houston discovered on a recent diving holiday the wreck diving off Coron Bay is certainly worth finding out about!



THE LITTLE twin-prop plane banks sharply to the left and, for a fleeting moment, all I can see out of the tiny window is blue sky. My stomach protests, but the other passengers including my partner, Amy, seem unfazed. Thankfully, we soon level off and the pale gravel runway of YKR airport comes into view.

It has been raining and the whole island steams. As we step off the plane, a stray dog with a deranged expression pads over to greet us. Around us, Filipinos chatter excitedly. We struggle through the noisy crowd, collect our luggage and board a jeepney bound for the south of the island. However, the driver is nowhere to be seen.

The skies open and a tropical down-pour ensues, so we sit and wait. An hour later the driver arrives, looking totally nonplussed. Not a moment too soon, we set off along a rough dirt road that takes us through dense leafy jungle inter-

spered with wide open plains. Welcome to Busuanga Island, Palawan.

We are here to dive the Coron wrecks, relics of the Imperial Japanese Navy sunk by US forces in and around Coron Bay during the Pacific operations of September and October 1944. The Micronesian states of Chuuk or Yap may be better known, but as we will discover, Coron is very accessible from the UK and it deserves to be recognised as an outstanding wreck location in its own right.

Today, there are at least ten Japanese vessels for the visiting diver to discover, including cargo ships, a seaplane tender, anti-submarine craft, oil tankers and more. All are in good condition. Depths are between 20 and 45 metres and, as visibility averages 20 metres in 30-degree tropical water, it's like diving in a hot

tub. Nearly all the wrecks are an easy boat journey from Coron Town on Busuanga Island. And there are fantastic scenic dives and cave dives for those so inclined. Being committed wreckies, we spend most of our week exploring the Japanese fleet.

It's day one and we step gingerly from the jetty onto the *bangka*, our dayboat for the week. The *bangka* (pumpboat) is the traditional method of inter-island travel in these parts. Reputedly powered by recycled car engines, I hope

we've got a sports car but secretly suspect we've ended up with a banger. No matter, things look up as our guide, our skipper and our gear are already on board. Being early in the season, we're the only ones on the boat.

The first dive we make is on the 5000 tonne, 130 metre cargo ship known here as the *Tangat Wreck*. Lying upright in 30 metres, it's a fantastic introduction to the week's diving. We make an easy penetration through various holds and, half way through, I have a close encounter with a pufferfish.

One minute it's in my torch beam, the next, vanished. I wonder if I've imagined it. This wreck is substantially intact and covered with corals; the hull and superstructure pulse with life. Lionfish sway in the current at the bow and stern. Clownfish waggle sweetly, never straying too far from the comfort and safety of their anemone homes.

Our appetites whetted, back on the boat we have a long lunch (freshly caught crab) before making a second dive on another cargo ship, the *Olympia Maru*. Similar in size to *Tangat Wreck*, this one lies on her starboard side and is a more intense experience. We make a long penetration through the prop shaft and into the holds, it is dark but spacious and there are portholes in the hull above which let a little light in. Exiting the holds, we see enormous cup corals all along the exposed side of the hull. It is a strange but beautiful sight, so unlike

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an array of fish congregate at one of the wrecks

anything in UK waters, and a fine end to the first day.

Day two. Today we experience two of Coron's 'big 3', the 4,650 tonne seaplane tender *Akitsushima Maru* and the stunning 10,000 tonne leviathan *Tai Ei Maru*. With a 9.00 am start and an hour long boat ride out to the first site, we kill time by taking pictures of the small, pretty islets that pass by. It is nearly 11.00 am before we begin our descent to the *Akitsushima*, but worth the wait.

The wreck lies on its port side and I can see immediately that all of the main features are still in place. The seaplane crane and tracks, enormous rudder, bridge and mainmast, and bow gun wacking (although the gun itself has been salvaged). We fin deep inside and discover a number of live shells scattered in a corridor mid-ships.

It is dark and silent in here, and we move slowly and with care as there are many jagged edges ready to snare us. Amy has a heart-stopping moment as her octopus hose snags on something unseen, however, she recovers her regulator - and her composure - and we proceed ever more cautiously. Finally, we exit near the bow and swim alongside the deck back towards the shot.

A school of batfish entertain us and a barracuda buzzes overhead. Near the stern, we are tempted to venture back in for a minute to study the huge wheels that once drove the seaplane winch. They are over 4 feet in diameter and in perfect condition.

In the afternoon, we explore the oil tanker *Tai Ei Maru*. This 185 metre monster sits upright in 28m, and is substantially intact save for the bow which suffered particularly heavy damage from US bombers and which now points up at 45 degrees towards the distant surface.

We begin this dive by swimming past the biggest rudder I have ever seen - easily over 6ft high - before squeezing through a narrow propshaft into the depths of the ship. What really excites me about this dive isn't the features, or the fish, it is the experience of being inside the vessel's enormous oil tanks. There is so much space, the water is so clear, and the only light comes from our small torches and one or two small ventilation hatches somewhere far above us.

We defy gravity and move freely in any direction we choose, at will, seemingly without the distractions of water or buoyancy aids or other divers. It's awesome. At one point, Amy and the guide both disappear from view and things become tense as I am enveloped in total darkness. I can see nothing in my torch beam and hear only my own heartbeat, feel only a rising sense of

anxiety. And then I see in the distance a faint light, someone's torch, a homing beacon guiding me back to safety. And as I fin gratefully towards that light, my anxiety melts away.

We spend over an hour on the *Tai Ei Maru*. Despite the maximum depth approaching 30 metres, it's such a big wreck that the deck, which is festooned with corals and swarming with tropical fish, lies in only 10 metres. Nitrox is widely available in Coron and we take full advantage of it on this dive and, in fact, all our deeper dives this week.

On the third day, we get to dive perhaps the best-known wreck in this relatively unknown place. It's called the *Irako* and is a must for the visiting wreck enthusiast. This 9,570 tonne, 160 metre Japanese Navy provision ship was bombed by US Navy Air Group 31 on September 24, 1944. The bridge super-structure was set ablaze and she sunk

over the bow with many casualties. *Irako* now rests upright in 46 metres and is thus a more serious endeavour than many of the other Coron wrecks.

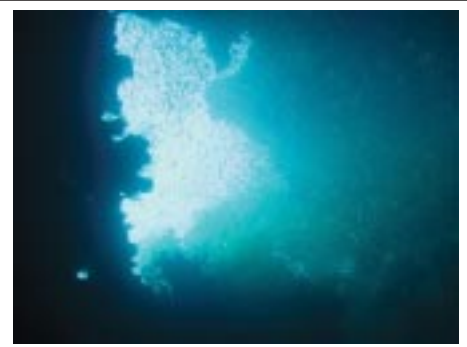
As we leave the surface, the bomb damage to the bridge is still clearly visible, however the real attraction of the *Irako* lies

in what lies in it. We drop down into the stern of the wreck and enter the first of a series of rooms. The first is a kitchen or food store, a very silty one at that. We move carefully to protect the visibility but don't stay too long as the water is soon cloudy with 60 years worth of mud. Before leaving, I manage to spot a number of Japanese beer bottles strewn across the floor, and stacks of canned goods piled against a wall. It's an odd, reflective moment.

We pass through a corridor and into another small room, a workshop, and can see various machines including a lathe. Our bubbles dislodge rust from the ceiling, and an orange cloud soon swathes us. Finning into a larger room, there are three big mixing machines once used to prepare food for Japanese sailors. Intact portholes, some with glass, let shafts of light in. After a short time, we make our way out of this fascinating, moving place and head back to the shot to decompress. I reflect that this is a wreck to visit again and again; there are many features and we have seen little on our first dive here.

Over the next few days, we explore more of what Coron has to offer. We dive on the *Kogyo Maru* (and see a bulldozer and cement mixer lying in a hold), the *Irako* again (even better the second time), and the *Kyokuzan Maru*, another fantastic wreck which lies to the north of Busuanga Island.

On the fourth day, our boat breaks



the wreck of the Kogyo Maru

down, confirming my suspicions about the quality of its engineering. Fortunately a nearby boat gives us a tow. I decide that life would be boring if everything went to plan, and Amy agrees. We even find time to visit a cave at the south of Coron Island and a spectacular inland lake which combines a halocline and a thermocline (you have to dive it to believe it!).

Boarding the flight back to Manila, I reflect on the week's adventures. Diving Coron has left an indelible impression on us both. We are left with images of mesmerising lionfish and excitable clownfish, of cartoon pufferfish and kaleidoscopic corals. We will remember the warmth and clarity of the sea, the colours, the sheer profusion of marine life. But most of all, we are left with fantastic memories of exploring the incredible, awe-inspiring wrecks of Coron Bay.

The Philippines are served from the UK by a range of airlines. Ivan and Amy flew from Heathrow to Manila with Gulf Air (0870 777 1717; www.gulfairco.com).

Connecting flights from Manila to Busuanga Island are available from two domestic carriers, Asian Spirit and SEAIR. Asian Spirit can be contacted on +63 851 8888, SEAIR on 851 5555. Internal flights operate from Manila's Domestic airport, which is a 10 minute taxi ride from Ninoy Aquino International.

Seadive Resort, Coron Town, Busuanga (+63 48 550 9207; www.seadiveresort.com) can provide a full range of services for the visiting diver, including food and accommodation, dayboats with guide and chef, equipment sale and rental, and training.

Philippine Adventure Diving (01273 494428; www.divepi.com) are a specialist travel agency based just outside of London who can help to arrange all of the above. They can also arrange for transfers and overnight stays in Manila on request.

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