

July, 2003 Feature Article

Maryland Wreck Diving

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I was introduced to diving in the Atlantic Ocean off Ocean City in 1994. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources was building artificial reefs off Ocean City and I volunteered to assist in inspecting some of the older sites that summer. My expectations were low, thinking that the water would be cold and dark, without a lot to see. I was amazed when I saw mussels, big fish and lobsters inhabiting man made structures. The water temperature was comfortable and the visibility over 20 feet! After surfacing, I was eager to dive again. Learning that dive boats ran to shipwrecks on weekends, I booked a seat and explored the Hvoslef, a 255' long Norwegian freighter that was torpedoed in 1942. I swam down the anchor line, passed through the thermocline and approached the bow that juts out of the sand. A large tautog with big white lips approached within 3 feet to see what I was doing in his domain. The following years my participation increased. I purchased more equipment and received advanced training in scuba and seamanship.

Scientific surveys have found that the ocean bottom along the Atlantic Coast south of the Hudson River is fairly smooth. For this reason, many coastal states have developed artificial reefs. The materials used for these reefs include ships, tanks, subway cars and concrete. States must follow rules and regulations limiting the disposal of materials, and whatever is used must be cleansed of any hazardous materials. Fish are attracted to reefs for several reasons. The structure causes upwelling and disruption of current patterns that can increase biological productivity in the area. A wreck provides a solid surface on which organisms attach and grow, becoming the setting for a marine food chain. It starts with microscopic creatures, plankton, worms, barnacles, mussels, crabs and baitfish. The wreck also provides shelter for many species of fish.

There are many shipwrecks and artificial reefs off Ocean City. The Internet, books and maps can tell their history and coordinates. The ocean dive season starts about May and runs through October. When compared to the warm water destinations, Maryland Atlantic wreck diving is just as good, but without the credit card debt and airport drama. Maryland divers have outstanding support from dive shops and charter boats. Costs can vary, but are usually under \$100 for a seat on a charter, and some dive outfits deliver scuba tanks for rent to the dock. While on the boat ride out to the dive site, anticipation is high. The divers range from very experienced to the novice. Husbands and wives, fathers and sons and buddies from work are typically aboard the charter. Solo divers will be paired up with a partner on the boat. Everyone is willing to lend a helping hand, a scuba tool or the item you forgot to bring. One time I did not bring my lunch and was offered more food than I would ever eat. I recommend that you develop a



relationship with your local dive shop and join a club. The phone book or an Internet search will point you in the right direction. Most dive charters leave the dock by 7 AM, but get there early to load your tanks and re-inspect your equipment. The dive master and captain are always on board, and he or she calls the shots. They are the professionals who are responsible but safety is everyone's business.



Scuba diving is not for everyone. Being a competent swimmer, able to strap on a tank and breath with a regulator underwater screen out many would- be candidates. I still remember my four spring cold -water checkout dives in Lake Chautauqua NY that were my final exam for my semester long scuba course. The instructor said the water was cold as we were struggling into leaky wetsuits. He was right! Risk assessment and safety training is must. Drowning and the bends are very real risks, but are minimized by proper training. Always dive with a buddy. Equipment redundancy

and contingency planning is key when diving. Always have a backup for what you cannot do without. An alternative air source, regulator and dive light are the major items. Plan for the unexpected, learn the hand and arm signals, know your buddies' limitations and your own! The proper preparation for a dive will make all the difference. Getting a good nights rest, nutrition and hydration make you a better diver.



Spear gun fishing is another added plus. Black sea bass and tautog are the targeted species. Sometimes summer flounder are visible but it takes a trained eye to recognize their silhouette on the ocean bottom. These fish can be taken easily with a dive knife as long as they are not startled. While spear fishing you must obey federal and state laws and regulations. Federal waters are beyond the 3-mile line from the coast and called the exclusive economic zone (EEZ). COMAR 08.02.05.01 is the link for Maryland tidal spear fishing regulations. Remember that in Maryland tidal waters and in the EEZ you may not take striped bass while spear fishing. All threatened and endangered species and any highly migratory species (HMS) such as tuna and billfish may not be taken by spear gun with scuba gear. You must know and follow the general recreational fishing [regulations](#) for each species, only spear fish in state waters between June 15 to December 31, unless you are targeting the fish such as carp and ray fish. Fish taken from the EEZ are subject to both federal and Maryland creel and size regulations if possessed in Maryland. Not to worry, there are plenty of big fish on the wrecks thanks to the hard work of fisheries managers. Non-tidal spear fishing regulations are more complicated and should not be confused with tidal regulations.



I usually dive without a spear gun, preferring to search for lobsters with both hands free. Lobster hide in crevasses during daylight. They fear predators that use eyesight to locate prey, but will venture out in the night. They leave their hideouts in the dark and feed on the ocean bottom. Going inside the wreck or diving at night can be very successful when hunting lobsters. Scanning the darkness with a light reveals their eye stalks which glow when hit by the stream of light. Then all you have to do is grab without getting pinched. When exploring inside the wreck, a dive light is a must. Some people use a reel, which leaves a line to

follow on the way out. The silt on the bottom of the wreck is easily suspended and what was 15 feet of clear water can instantly vanish. One day I swam inside the Marie Swan, a tug boat that rests upright in 90 to 110 feet down. I saw the biggest black sea bass in my life. It had a big hump on its head the size of a melon. It was close enough to touch, then it retreated into the darkness of the hull.

K Scuba diving is not all about hunting. Many times I have been amazed by the act of being there, 100 feet underwater and just observing fish in their environment. Schools of amberjack can be intimidating at first when they surround and circle you looking for something to eat. Ocean sunfish and a basking shark are rare fish that I have encountered in the vicinity of the African Queen Wreck. Many people wonder about sharks. Mako and thresher sharks have been landed throughout many dive sites in the spring. The risk of a shark attack is very low, but this fear is in the back of peoples mind.

One time a remora (shark sucker) attached itself to a diver while he was ascending the anchor line; he said that didn't bother him, but he was wondering about its host. Wrecks that are broken apart and spread out in the sand are more difficult to explore than the intact wrecks. Strong ocean currents can reduce the visibility and increase your air consumption. Tides in the open ocean follow a clockwise pattern in the Northern Hemisphere, completing one loop within a tidal period. In the excitement of the dive, it is easy to become disoriented and lost. Sometimes you may need to fight strong currents back to the anchor line. Experienced divers remain oriented on the wreck and know the direction to the anchor line.



Most dive masters frown on the free ascent, which is heading toward the water's surface without the aid of the anchor line. Free ascents can cause the diver to surface too rapidly or allow the current to push the diver away from the dive boat. Swimming to the stern ladder and climbing aboard can be the hardest task of the day. It is always nice to see a helping hand on the boat reach down and grab your goodie bag, clear the back deck and bungee your tank to the rail. The steam home with a few two pound lobsters and tautog in your cooler is a time to relax and reflect on a great dive trip. When

you hit the dock, the gear needs the saltwater washed off and tanks need refilling. That night at dinner you plan the next trip.

D The Chesapeake Bay has plenty of diving opportunity as well. The cold water in late fall, winter and early spring allows for a few feet of visibility on the oyster beds. I have gathered plenty of oysters off Parson's Island in Eastern Bay. Many people dive commercially of oysters in the bay. These watermen utilize a compressor and air hose rather than scuba gear. An interesting bay wreck, the U-1105, a modified Type VII-C German submarine was sunk in 90 feet of water in the Potomac River at Piney Point. This submarine saw service in WWII, and surrendered to the British at the end of the war. The US Navy obtained U-1105, called the Black Panther for testing. It was damaged and sunk in 1949. [Saint Mary's County Recreation and Parks has a great website](#) for those interested in this local piece of history.

