

Lust for rust - Chuuk Lagoon
By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock



Dan glances at the daily itinerary, scratches his fine curly hair and shifts a wad of Copenhagen chewing tobacco in his cheek. He digs out a diagram of the Yamagiri Maru from a fat file, shifts the Copenhagen to the other cheek and



starts the briefing.

"The Yamagiri Maru was a transport ship. It sank from a torpedo hit and is resting on her port side. We will enter the wreck through the torpedo hole, swim through her holds and then to the engine room, finishing up on the bow gun and kingposts. The engine room is interesting because....." Dan drifts off as he thinks of 'his' engine room. He remembers that he should be telling us about the large shells in one of the holds. Adjusting his moustache he chews on the Copenhagen once more and continues...

"the drums inside the hold were obviously full as they maintained shape during the sinking. The bow gun is but the engine room..... oh.. I love engine rooms. You gotta see this one." With that and a few gestures



towards the diagram we are off for our first dive. Dan checks his well worn gear - 8 years of diving on these wrecks have taken their toll. He takes another mouthful of Copenhagen and makes sure we are all ready to roll off the boat.

With his lime green shark-fin neoprene hood, bony bare legs and old fashioned fins, it is easy to follow Dan. He disappears through huge plates of twisted metal on the hull. He waits patiently while we examine the huge shells capable of sending a projectile 42km, loads of sake bottles and the fuel drums. I sense he is itching for us to follow him into 'his' engine room. We squeeze through railings and under loose cables, all the



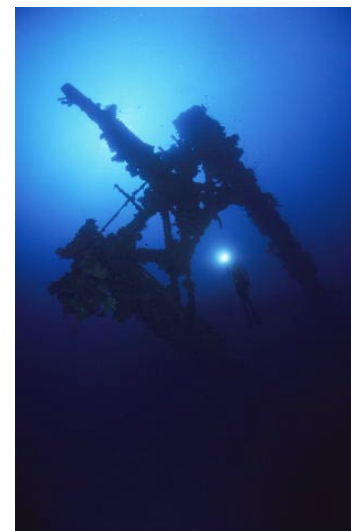
time minding our elbows and heads do not bump against the rusting metal. Inside



the engine room are 3 large cylinder heads sealed with impressive size bolts. In a corner we encounter a grim reminder of the war - a skull embedded in the ship's hull. Clearly the sailor was killed on impact when the force of the blast sending him flying and crushed his skull into the battered hull forever. The fire that ravaged the engine room blackened the

skull. This is a true war grave.

Truk Lagoon (as it was then known) was a Japanese naval base in WW2. The isolation of the islands and the limited entrances to the lagoon made it a seemingly safe base. The Japanese did not bargain on the formidable air attacks on the 17 February 1944. American forces known as Carrier Task Force 58 launched an attack code named Operation Hailstorm. US Hellcat fighters, Dauntless Dive Bombers and Avenger Torpedo Bombers departed from aircraft carriers at 2 hourly intervals. Over 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ days the strikes continued, sinking the Japanese fleet, crippling the infrastructure on Truk and destroying 270 aircraft.



Dan has a self confessed fetish for engine rooms. 'Always judge a wreck by the quality of the engine room' is his worldly advice to us. Inside the Kiosumi Maru he points out many intact gauges



complete with both Japanese calligraphy and English numbering clearly etched on the dials. Large wheels and knobs are waiting to grind the engine into action again. Strangely the fragile glass on the light bulbs is not broken; this after the ship was torpedoed and shelled from above. In an area above the main engine room we find an intact gas mask. To get to the engine room of the Kanshu Maru we follow Dan head first down 3 flights of stairs, rounding corners on each landing. Gauges, dials, thermometers and large boilers fill this compact engine room. Interestingly the Kanshu's engines were manufactured in England. If the British had known this was to be the fate of their engines would that have changed the pattern of war?



Outside the Gosei Maru, Dan waits patiently for us to finish admiring the phenomenal coral growth. Soft corals drape every porthole and opening while hard corals grapple for space on the funnels and hull. Curving graciously over the wreck the davits are dripping in soft corals and the cargo booms are festooned with marine life. Glassfish dance around the metal struts. The midship hold contains several huge torpedoes that were scattered during the sinking, some apparently exploded but since they weren't armed with warheads, the damage was minimal. Finally we allow Dan to escort us to the engine room where the neatness of the tool racks on the wall

complements the beauty of the outside of the wreck.

31 of the ships of the 41 ships sunk at Truk were civilian ships refitted for the war efforts. The Japanese, suspicious of an attack after spotting a reconnaissance plane circling high above the lagoon, had ordered most of the fleet to evacuate. Battleships, cruisers, destroyers and submarines left. The suffix 'maru' refers to those destined to return to civilian duties.



The Rio de Janeiro Maru was both a passenger liner and cargo ship. One of her holds was packed full of beer crates to serve the troops on victory. Most of the wood has rotted away leaving heaps of beer bottles. The sight had me singing about 99 bottles of beer on the wall as I descend flight after flight of stairs heading down towards the engine room. The engine room is full of gauges, dials and thermometers and a distribution board complete with electrical switches.



Also a passenger ship, the Heian Maru, was fitted out as a submarine tender. The passageways are stacked with periscopes while torpedoes and warheads are stored in the holds. It is easy to enter the wreck through the massive hole torn by the torpedo hit. After that it requires some maneuvering skills to get to the engine room. Obediently we follow Dan over railings, down ventilation shafts and under cables. I shine my torch around the



tightly constructed room appreciating the machinery. Haunting hollow eyeballs



stare back at me. I realize my beam is shining on a skull. I pause for a moment and then exit the tomb. May that poor soul rest in peace.

Of the diveable wrecks in Chuuk Lagoon, not all engine rooms are worth visiting. The San Francisco Maru is just too deep for recreational divers to do more than goggle at the contents of her holds and the massive kingposts. Due to the cargo of mines, torpedoes, bombs, artillery, munitions, aircraft parts and fuel supplies, she is often referred to as 'The Million Dollar Wreck'. A row of trucks tempts divers to explore deep within her gloomy hold. Huge army tanks balance on the sides of the deck. Hemispherical mines are packed neatly in large crates. The menacing bow gun points serenely towards the deep blue. The Amagisan Maru is also too deep to bother with engine rooms. The rusting staff cars and bicycles in her large holds are far more interesting. In shallower water the bow gun may be impressive but by far the most scenic structures are the large kingposts resplendent with marine growth.

The Sankisan Maru was carrying highly inflammable weapons when the Allied Forces attacked. The Captain and crew abandoned ship for fear of her cargo exploding. She was never torpedoed or bombed but strafing started a fire that no-one was around to extinguish. The crews' fears were realized



as the weapons exploded obliterating the rear of the ship. We explore the holds in the front of the ship. Hold No 3 has thousands of medicine bottles which apparently contained morphine. Hold No 2 has trucks and truck parts that sadly have rusted beyond recognition. Hold No 1 is littered with small arms ammunitions, many of these cartridges held together in clips.



The oil tanker, Shinkoku Maru, is the 2nd largest wreck in the lagoon. Shinkoku means 'Nation of God' and this engine room was surely a tribute to this god. Inside the vast room I have this feeling that I am on the stage of a theatre production.



Sunlight filters through skylights throwing dappled light onto the many catwalks traversing the room. Ladders and staircases lead up and down to gauges, pipes, dials and wheels. Evidence of the torpedo that caused her demise is in the deepest part of the engine room. With such a large room filling with water there was no way the ship could have been saved.



"Fujikawa! Fuji-ka- wa! Fuji-kawa!" Dan is excited at the next dive and shouts Fujikawa in as many Japanese accents that he is capable of. He shifts his Copenhagen to the other cheek and scratches his head as he contemplates this great dive. The Fujikawa Maru is possibly the most dived and yet still one of the most beautiful and interesting wrecks in Chuuk. One hold contains fuel drums and another has fighter aircraft parts - wings, engine cowlings and fuselages. The passageways make a scenic swim through past window frames curtained by soft corals. The massive stern gun mounted on a circular platform is strangely beautiful thanks to the coral growth and fish life.

Chromis, rockcods, damsels and fusiliers have no fear of this once terrifying machine. The bridge houses an intact telegraph indicator and an authentic wok rests on the large coal stove in the galley.

But for Dan, the Fujikawa's engine room is the ultimate. This is entered via the open skylights. Catwalks at various levels crisscross the engine room. Hanging on the distribution board is a gas mask ready for emergency use. Adjacent to the engine room is the much smaller machine room containing an abundance of vices, lathes and drills. The shelves in the smaller spare parts room are neatly packed with lights and lamps. Dan excitedly points to a weird robot-like machine with big knobs and buttons and corrugated pipes leading out at the sides. This is a compressor designed to pump carbon-di-oxide into the engine room in the event of fire.

Dan shouts into his regulator "R2D2".

His Copenhagen dislodges. He spits it out, grins widely and gives a double thumbs-up sign. Yes, this is the ultimate engine room.





Travel info:

Location: Micronesia, 7 degrees north of equator, SE of Japan

Language: Chuukese; English widely spoken

Visas: US required for transit via Guam

Getting there: Fly on Continental Airlines via Guam

Currency: US Dollar. Not all operators accept credit cards.

Best time to go: Weather consistent throughout the year, although less rain and therefore slightly better visibility September to April.

Water temp: 28 degrees throughout year



Travel Contact: www.expeditionfleet.com

For a gallery of images from Chuuk visit

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