



treasure trove of historical artefacts. This is the scene on a check out dive on USS Saratoga CV3, Bikini Atoll – the largest diveable aircraft carrier in the world – 3m longer than the Titanic.



Saratoga was one of 73 target vessels for the atomic tests performed on Bikini Atoll. In 1946 fully laden battleships, battle cruisers, destroyers, transport ships, landing craft and submarines were strategically placed inside the atoll for Operation Crossroads. Today these wrecks are the property of the Bikini people and since 1996 Bikini Atoll Divers have been taking adventurous souls underwater on incredible exploration dives. The history of Bikini, its people, the tests and the diving is an amazing story.

After WW2 the new superpower, the USA, wanted to do tests on the atomic weapons that had just destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Bikini Atoll was identified as the ideal venue as it is sheltered with predictable weather, it was under Allied control and only 167 people would need to

be relocated. The Bikinians were approached on a Sunday after church and told that they needed to give up their island paradise for “the good of mankind.” Perhaps they were intimidated by the monstrous battleships parked in their lagoon from which the officials had disembarked, or perhaps the Sunday spirit had something to do with it, but soon the Bikinians and some of their fishing craft were shipped off to Rongerap Atoll, 201 kms away. Bikini was transformed into a camp for 42 500 people involved in the tests including observers and the press. The first test was an aerial drop called the Able Blast. The press labeled it a spectacular flop. While it missed the target ship, it did sink 5 others: - HI MJS Sakawa; USS Anderson, USS Lamson, USS Gilliam and USS Carlisle. The day after the test US personnel boarded the remaining ships to retrieve test monitoring equipment. Radiation levels were extremely high but minimal protective clothing was worn. The world was still blissfully unaware of the invisible danger of nuclear fallout.





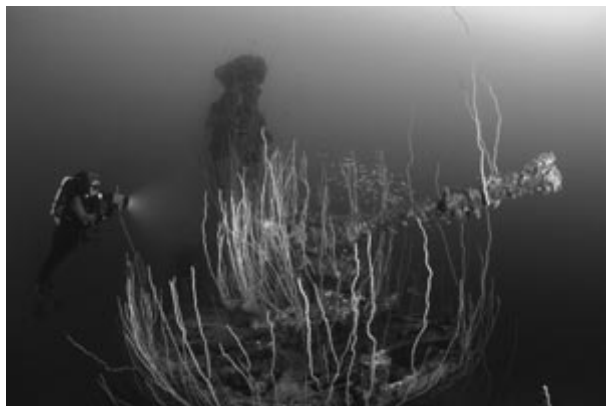
3 Weeks later the 2nd test took place. This was the Baker Blast, an underwater nuclear explosion. This one was a spectacular sight as tons of displaced ocean and pulverized coral was sucked upwards into a huge mushroom cloud. This blast sank 7 vessels immediately including the submarines USS Apogon, Pilotfish and Skipjack. USS Saratoga was badly damaged and sank a few hours later as did HIMJS Nagato. Others that were badly damaged but hadn't sunk were later scuttled. Although the 3rd test on Bikini was cancelled, the US continued to test further nuclear weapons in the atoll until 1958.



Meanwhile, the Bikinians were starving to death on their new island home. The lagoon produced little fish and there were small coconuts on this atoll. Once again they were moved, first to a tent city on Kwajolein and then to Kili Island where many of them still live today. In 1968 officials decided that Bikini was radiologically safe for the people to return. Subsequently in 1971 a few did, but within a few years medical examinations found unacceptably high levels of



cesium-137 ingested through eating coconut and banyan fruits. Once again the Bikinians were relocated. Following this, through efforts by Jack Niedenthal in 1982 legal action was taken against the US government resulting in the Bikinians winning a resettlement trust fund. Bikini Island though, remains elusive for Bikinians as all food must be imported making it unviable for traditional living.



Bikini Atoll Divers utilizes simple yet comfortable accommodation. Food is brought in by supply ship or plane, the water is safe to drink and ice-cream is on tap in the dining hall! The only other persons living on the island are Parks officials who maintain the island for the visiting scientists who monitor the radiation levels in the coconut plantation. The nearest island is 201 kms away and there is only one flight a week onto the atoll. Dive

safety is therefore of paramount importance and detailed briefings include the wrecks history, the dive plan and an emergency plan. The danger of diving Bikini is not the radiation but the depths.

Listening to Saratoga's history I realize that she demands a lot of respect. Sara was the first vessel to be launched as an aircraft carrier. At 251,1m long she was the largest vessel in the sea and could cruise at a speed of 22knots - the fastest at the time. Her cargo of 81-83 aircraft fought in many air strikes in the Pacific and was known to have sunk 1 carrier, 2 cruisers and several destroyers, plus damaging 1 battleship, several destroyers and numerous merchant ships and hundreds of aircraft. She became a legend when, in the battle of Iwo Jima she was badly damaged by 5 kamikaze pilots and 7 bombs but didn't sink. Firemen doused the burning deck which was rebuilt in only 5 hours.



The second dive on Sara we head down her elevator shaft into the hangar deck. Rows of incendiary bombs and AN Mark 64 aerial bombs greet us as we enter. It may have been down here for 50 years but the live ammunition still makes me nervous. Parked in a corner is a Curtis SB2C Helldiver that is intact apart from the engine cowling that has fallen off. The pilot's dials and gauges are frozen in position. The hangar deck ceiling has collapsed crushing many of the planes but amazingly there are fluorescent lights that survived both the blast and the sinking. Exiting the hangar deck we arrive in the mess. Crockery and cutlery is scattered all over the place. With too little time to scratch we proceed to the command tower where the compulsory decompression stops allowing us time to explore each of the decks.



The bow dive on Saratoga is a phenomenal experience. Sara sits upright on the lagoon floor at 52m. The bow curves gracefully towards the flight deck at 32m. Her heavy anchor chains lie tossed on the sands below. A giant hole is reminiscent of the stockless anchor's size. A healthy growth of long whip corals blurs her sharp outline when viewed from afar. I feel dwarfed by her pure size. Out on the sand beyond the bow are 2 planes that were blown off the flight deck in the blasts. One is a Helldiver and the other is a TB Avenger Torpedo bomber. The bomb bay of the Avenger is open revealing her lethal cargo. Sadly both planes now resemble dead insects with their wheels protruding helplessly in the air.



Over the week we dive on 7 different wrecks. Nothing has been removed from these wrecks. Each one remains armed

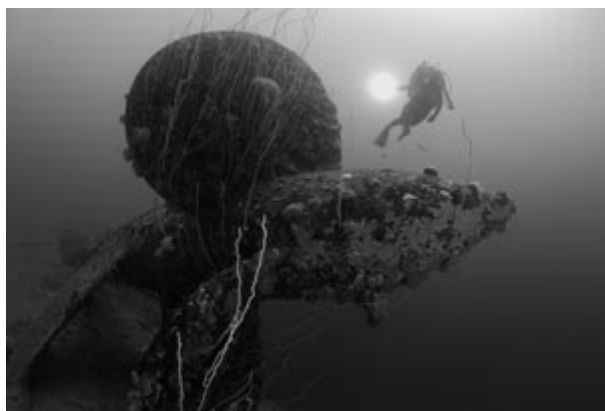


with tons of unexploded ammunition and massive guns. At the stern of USS Lamson, a 104m long Mahan class destroyer, racks of depth charges are positioned for quick release into the ocean. There are 5" 38 calibre guns, 50 calibre Bofor machine guns and 20mm anti aircraft guns. Interestingly the red glass on the engine telegraph survived the blast. The USS Anderson is also a destroyer – hers was the only vessel whose ammunition went off in the tests yet the glass in her portholes survived as did at least 12 torpedoes stored on her deck. Being so close to the Baker blast the battleship USS Arkansas was unceremoniously dumped upside down. The superstructure didn't have time to fall off resulting in her now resting on it with the turrets of the No 1 12" 50 calibre guns

projecting out from underneath her deck. Wooden crates filled with unexploded emerald green proximity fused ammunition lie alongside. USS Carlisle was a transport ship loaded with 5" 38 calibre anti aircraft guns and Bofor machine guns and a consignment of ammunition. In the 1940's transport ships were hurriedly made using inferior steel. Today her metal parts creak eerily. The USS Apogon is perhaps the most intact diveable submarine. In fact the Apogon was pumped out and re-floated after the blast but it wasn't worthwhile to maintain the pumps so she was left to sink again. On the Apogons'



bow the open torpedo door reveals a 24MK torpedo ready to be fired. In front of the conning tower a 5" 25 calibre gun aims towards the bow.



The most infamous of the ships is HIMJS Nagato. This was Admiral Yamamoto's command centre for the attack on Pearl Harbour. The Nagato rests upside down on top of the biggest guns imaginable. With some tricky bearing and elevation calculations these guns could fire an unbelievable distance of 33kms. The projectiles for the 4 twin mounted 16" guns weighed in at 900kg each. Swimming underneath the deck is unnerving - there are several tons of once hostile steel overhead. The

gun barrels are hard to describe - is it the length or the width that makes them so formidable? The Japanese inscribed tampion still plugs the barrel of the No1 gun. The pagoda (bridge) was built exceptionally high to accommodate the gun director's view. This fell off as she turned turtle and is lying alongside the upturned hull. As I swim past I wonder in which deck Yamamoto heard the call 'tora tora tora' signaling that the attack on Pearl Harbour was a success. I move away from the horrific thoughts and head for the 4 giant propellers. Nature is now in charge of these props that once powered this heavyweight battleship to 26,7 knots. Lightly encrusted with red and orange growth, it is a reminder that everything has an end. For me, this was the end of an incredible journey into the past and hopes for a return in the future.

How to get there:

Marshall Islands flies to Bikini from Majuro on Wednesdays.

Continental Airlines flies to Majuro either from Guam or Honolulu.

Minimum requirements

Divers should be comfortable with their equipment.

Dive Insurance and Advanced Open Water Qualification is essential.

Average Depth 45 - 50 Metres

Contact details: - www.bikiniatoll.com

For more underwater images and stories visit PeterPinnock.com

To view a gallery of pictures from Bikini Atoll visit:

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