

# WAR MACHINES

## Inside the wrecks of Coron Bay

**ROUND WINDOW:** a school of jacks  
passes by a porthole on the Irako  
*All photography by John Nightingale*

Packed into one small bay in the Philippines is one of the most impressive collections of Second World War wrecks in the world. **John Nightingale** offers his guide to the area's best penetration dives



**O**n 24 September 1944, a squadron of 24 Helldiver bombers burst out of the sky above Coron Bay in the Philippines,

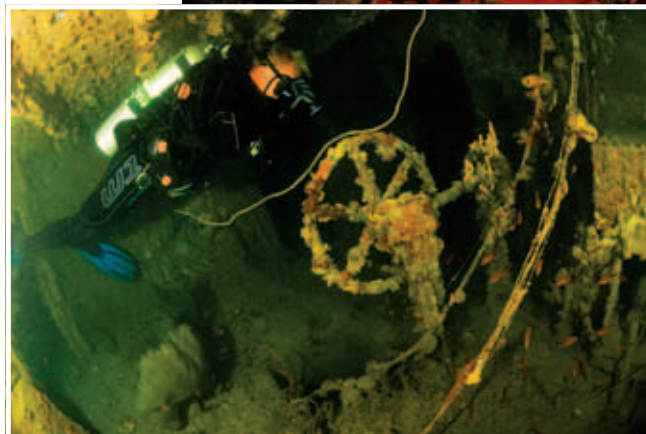
located the Japanese supply fleet hiding among the islands below, and proceeded to blow it apart. The dive bombers, escorted by 96 Hellcat fighters – some of which were also carrying bombs – had just 15 minutes to sink as many ships as possible before their fuel would get too low for them to complete the 340-mile return journey to their aircraft carrier. The attack was ruthlessly successful, and left a legacy that wouldn't be discovered until recreational diving came to this remote part of the Philippines.

Coron Bay has the best wreck diving in Southeast Asia, all packed into one relatively small area. There is nothing quite like the feeling of standing on a jetty, knowing that you have at least half a dozen huge wartime vessels lying within a short boat ride. Each wreck has its own special characteristics, but on the whole they are big, mostly intact, within reasonable diving depth and full of amazing artefacts.

If you prefer to explore the exterior of shipwrecks, these are ideal. The decks are wonderfully encrusted with coral and swarming with fish life. There are deckhouses, masts, cranes and lookout perches. The hulls have rows of portholes to give glimpses into the cabins. There are still anti-aircraft guns in place and huge circular gun mounts. Massive holds yawn beneath you, and in places the deck has been peeled back by the bombs, allowing you to float safely down into the belly of the ship.

If penetrating deep into wrecks is your passion, then Coron really is heaven on a stick. We're talking 170m-long ships! With good planning and a knowledgeable guide, you can make the most of them. You can pick your way through the passageways; penetrate down to lower levels; and find engine rooms with massive boilers, workshops strewn with tools and kitchens replete with pots and pans.

Coron Bay lies on the northern tip of the island of Palawan, the most westerly of the Philippine islands, but is easily reachable



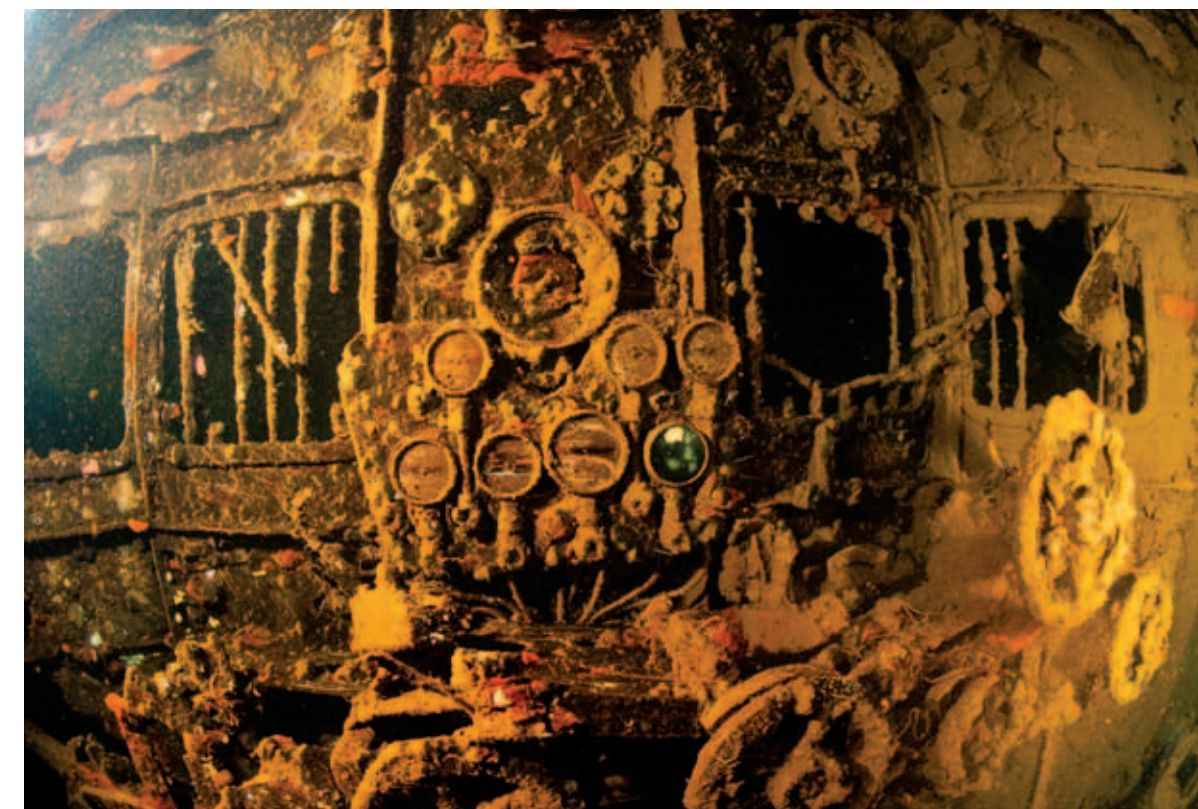
**DECK THE BOWS:** shoals of fish swarm over the deck of the Irako [main photo]; a diver inspects a wheel on the Irako [inset]

from by plane from Manila. Back in 1944, it was a 14-hour steam for the Japanese convoy, whose leaders hoped Coron Bay was beyond the range of US aircraft in the region. However, within less than a day

of their arrival at Coron Bay, Vice Admiral Mitscher, on board the aircraft carrier USS Lexington, ordered the 120 planes into the air and they set off to the very limit of their range. The first targets the Helldivers took on were the biggest – the Akitsushima, which carried sea planes and was heavily armed, and the Okikawa Maru, a 170m-long oil tanker. In no time, the Akitsushima was sunk and the Okikawa Maru fatally damaged.

Soon after, the Olympia Maru and the Kogyo Maru were under attack, and both went down with the loss of many lives. The Iraku, a provision ship, went down with flak guns blazing, and even the army auxiliary supply ship Kyokuzan Maru – hiding on the other side of Busuanga Island – was sunk before the attackers finally had to head off.

**UNDER CONTROL:** the control panel on the wreck of the Akitsushima [right]



### THE IRAKO

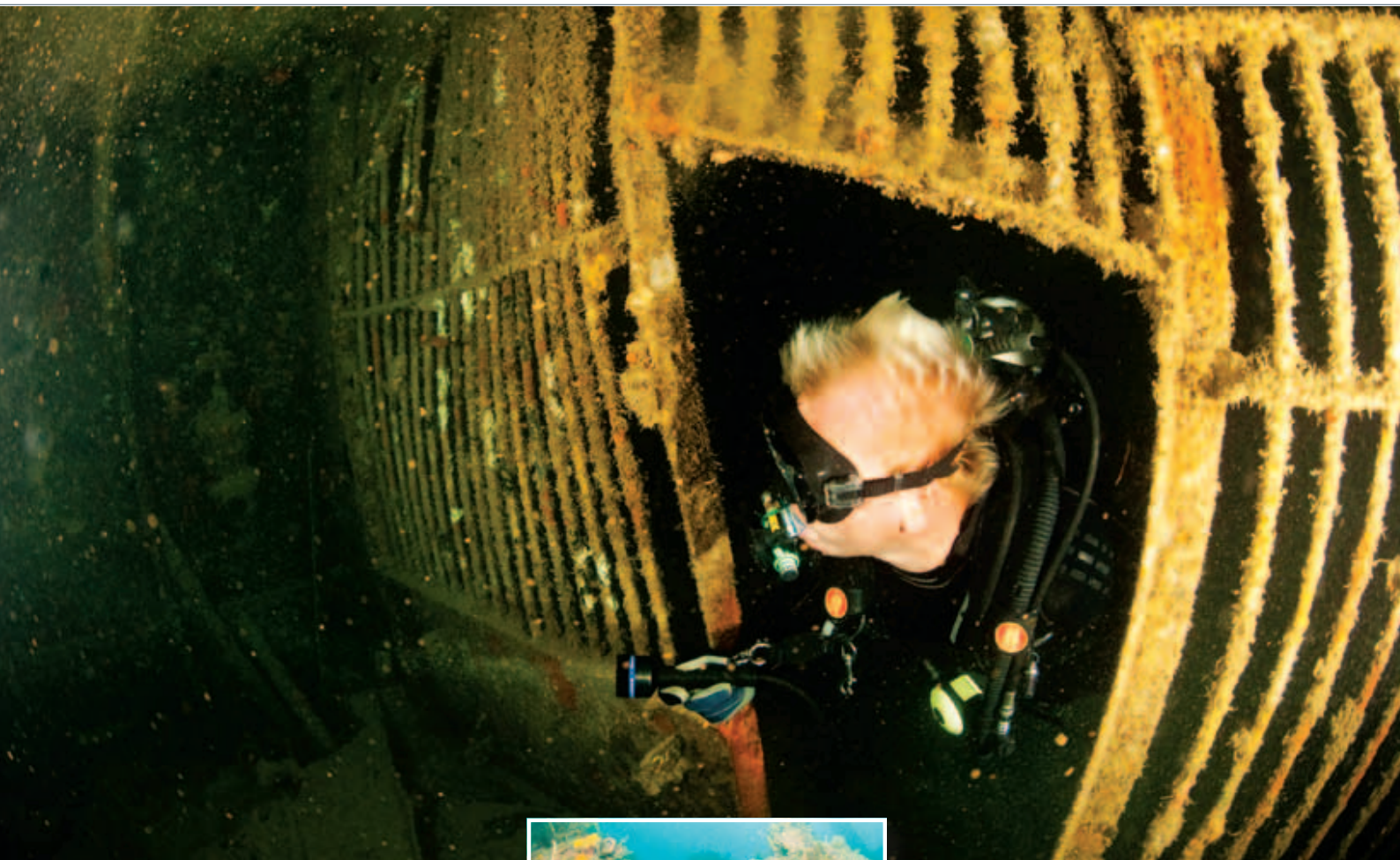
Every dive at Coron left me wanting more, but I had my favourites – and as far as I am concerned, the Irako has the most to offer wreck divers. At 147m long and 19m wide, it is a sizeable wreck. It sits virtually upright on the sea bed at 43m, with the deck around the 30m mark.

Because of the depth and the size of this wreck, it took many dives for me to begin to really find my bearings. One good way in was through the wheelhouse, past the wheel and into a big hold. From there, we set off through a maze of corridors and gangways. The Irako took such a pounding that some of the decks actually got compressed and are now only about a metre and a half in height.

As we made our way through, I saw doorways into rooms with strange items of machinery and ladders leading off in different directions – all potential routes for the next dive. The galley still had its huge rice cauldrons and other kitchen utensils, and when we entered the machine shop, there were pillar drills and lots of wiring hanging everywhere. Deep inside, we came across a bicycle leaning against the cabin wall.

Coming back out on deck and into the light was always brilliant, as we'd invariably be greeted by a huge shoal of jacks that poured around the sides of the vessel and filled the blue above. Then it would be time to ascend up a thick mast with big crosstrees and the crow's nest on top covered in huge barrel sponges. »



**THE AKITSUSHIMA**

When you dive on the Akitsushima, you are left in no doubt that you are on a ship of war. At 118m long and 16m wide, she was a large, well-armed battleship designed to carry seaplanes. Today, the wreck lies on its port side at 35m, with the crane that was used to lift the planes now stretching out across the sand.

As you swim around the crane, you come across an anti-aircraft gun – nearby, you can penetrate through a hole in the hull and get in among the impressive-looking machinery that operated the crane. From there, you move into the most badly damaged area, its twisted metal bearing testament to the sheer ferocity of the bombardment.

We carried on through the engine room between the two huge engines, and then a narrow descent took us into the control room, with panels covered in gauges and dials. Backtracking through a small hole into the second floor, we passed a bank of what looked like giant corkscrews – the machinery for raising the shells onto the deck to feed the guns. It still had shells in it.

If you keep your eyes open, you start to spot munitions lying around, and there is another anti-aircraft gun hanging from the deck, with circular gun mounts bolted to it. As we ascended up the vertical deck, my



**TRAP DOOR:** the brig on the Olympia Maru [main photo]; hovering above the stairs on the Olympia Maru [inset]

buddy caught a reflection from his torch inside a deck winch drum and looked inside to find a chronometer that had been lying there undisturbed for the past 65 years.

**THE OLYMPIA MARU**

For a long time, this wreck had not been identified, and was often called the Tangat wreck. It lies very close to Sangat Island, sitting upright in 30m of water, and is 122m long and 17m wide. Because of its comparatively shallow depth, this is a good wreck to start with. It is easy to navigate around the main deck as there are

lots of masts and open cargo bays that make for an easy entry into the ship.

We dived from the rear hold, through a small gap and into the second hold. Here we came across what appeared to be a prison cell, before we squeezed through into the engine room and past the boilers with their exposed tubes. A number of tight swim-throughs led us out past piles of barrels into a deckhouse. I particularly remember this wreck for the resident marine life: there were bright orange bushes of black coral, crimson sponges, lots of big puffers complete with remoras, and scorpionfish nestled along the rails. It makes a wonderfully atmospheric night dive, with sleeping fish and turtles tucked in all over the place. »

**THE OKIKAWA MARU**

Another of the shallower wrecks, this oil tanker lies upright at 26m with the decks up around the 12–15m mark; it is covered in corals from end to end. There is plenty of scope for exploration, as it is 160m long and 20m wide and you can go all the way inside, entering via the prop shaft. There are plenty of routes in and out of the holds, so it's a relatively easy penetration and there's a reasonable amount of ambient light inside. The bow section took the brunt of the attack and is turned up towards the surface.

**THE MORAZAN**

For many years, this ship was mistakenly referred to as the Olympia Maru, but some careful detective work has revealed it to be the Morazan, a freighter supposedly built in England in 1908 and captured by the Japanese in Shanghai in 1941. This 95m-long vessel lies on its starboard side at a maximum depth of 25m and has four cargo bays to investigate. It's an easy wreck to explore, with light streaming through many openings – it is possible to dive through its entire length inside the structure.

**GETTING THERE**

There are regular flights between Manila and Busuanga Airport. Travel from the airport into Coron Town takes about an hour and, while the scenery is lovely, the road is very bumpy.

**DIVING**

Most of the dive centres use the wooden double outrigger boats called *bancas*; it takes around 90 minutes to get out to the main body of wrecks. There are also a couple of resorts near Coron that offer a more relaxed stay and have their own dive centres. The alternative is to stay on Sangat Island, which is closer to the wrecks, putting most of them within a 15–30-minute boat ride. Sangat is a peaceful little island, with sandy beaches and a dozen traditional-style huts owned by an English diver ([www.sangat.com.ph](http://www.sangat.com.ph)).

**WHEN TO GO**

The Philippines has two seasons: the dry season from December to June and the wet from July to November. You can dive the Coron wrecks all year round, with visibility a bit better in the dry season. The water temperature is around 27–30°C, making this ideal for a 3mm wetsuit – take a full-length suit to protect you from sharp surfaces inside the wrecks. Visibility was generally around 10–15m while I was there, dropping slightly some days and getting better on others. ●



**GOING IN:** there are plenty of routes in and out of the holds on the wreck of the Okikawa Maru [above]; abundant life on the deck of the Morazan [right]

