

+ HOW MANY SHORE DIVE SITES HAVE A WWII SHIPWRECK DRIPPING WITH SOFT CORALS, GORGONIAN FANS AND BLACK CORALS? HOW MANY SHORE DIVES DELIVER HUNDREDS OF FISH SPECIES, CRUSTACEANS, ANEMONES – AND EVEN PYGMY SEAHORSES? TULAMBEN'S USAT LIBERTY WRECK IN BALI HAS ALL THIS AND MORE!

: TEXT AND IMAGES JEFF MULLINS © 2006



# THE LIBERTY WRECK



The northeast coast of Bali is flushed by major currents connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans via the Lombok Strait which bring planktonic marine life from all over Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia. With sea surface temperatures of 26-30 degrees Celsius along with upwelling's of deep oceanic water from the Indian Ocean, this area has almost ideal conditions for planktonic life forms to settle and flourish. And settle they have! The USAT Liberty (United States Army Transport) wreck, just a short swim from the pebble shore at Tulamben, has become home to an incredible variety of tropical marine life, including soft and hard corals, sponges and ascidians. Fish life is spectacular – from the tiniest blenny to giant barracuda, from pairs of butterflyfish to schools of trevally that surround divers. Some of the Indo-Pacific's rarest creatures can be found on or near the wreck; squat lobsters, leaf scorpionfish, frogfish, pipefish, garden eels and shrimp gobies. No wonder this wreck is so popular, on busy days more than a hundred divers gear-up on Tulamben Beach to dive the Liberty Wreck only 50 metres offshore.

**DIVING THE WRECK** Loose pebbles at the water's edge make entries a little difficult on days with waves rolling in, but once in, the bottom turns to larger rocks, then a gradually sloping sand bottom. At the edge of the sand dropoff in around eight metres, the outline of the ship's stern is visible. The Liberty lies on its starboard (right) side, the rudder sits just above the sandy bottom, intact and still attached to the stern. A gun has toppled from the now vertical deck, and is up side down on the bottom at 20 metres. The entire hull is covered with luxurious growths of ascidians, hard corals, colourful soft corals, anemones and gorgonia fans. Large angelfish meander

around the many openings in the wreck, among them are emperor, blue and regal species. Coral cod, wrasse and butterflyfish are everywhere, the number of species is amazing. Some huge parrotfish with no fear of divers boldly come in for a closer look.

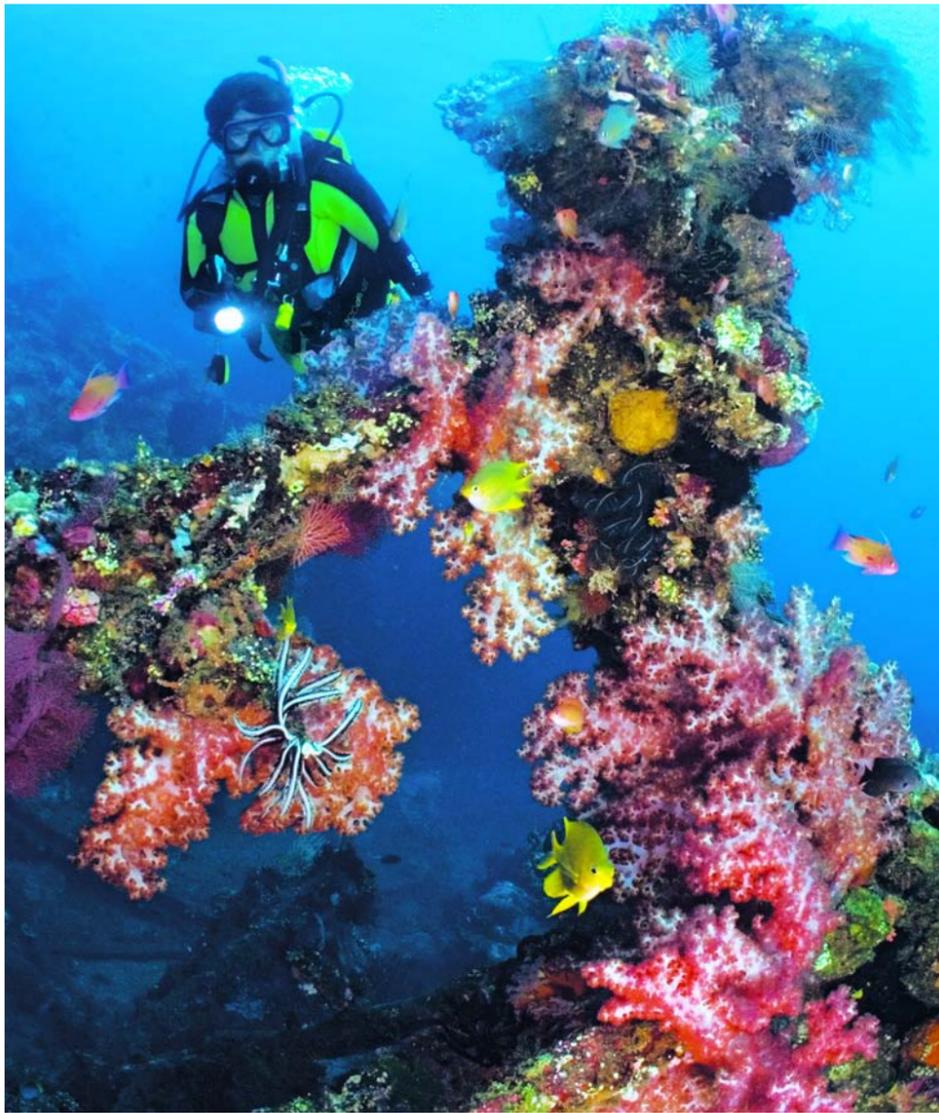
Swimming forward the remains of the ship's holds lay open, the steel framework encrusted with soft corals, resembling the ribs of some huge dead leviathan. Groups of yellow and black striped sweetlips hover around prominent sections of wreckage, where cleaner fish carry out their business. Around the mid sections lie the boilers and remains of the engine room. Scattered around are railway wheels, part of the Liberty's cargo.

Forward of the last cargo hold the ship's remains become almost unrecognisable. One of the torpedoes struck here, the twisted steel beams testify to their destructive power. The bow is the deepest part of the wreck at around 35 metres on the bottom. Separated from the bulk of the wreck, the bow has a gun still attached to



From the left • The main cargo hold is fun to explore - its very well lit and larger fish often lurk in the shadows.  
 • Mantis shrimp are easily spotted, most commonly around the stern area.  
 • Nudibranchs abound; the beautiful *Nembrotha kubaryana* is quite common.  
 • There's at least two varieties of pygmy seahorses; this *Hippocampus Bargibanti* was near the bow at 34 metres.  
 • Early morning visitors are often greeted by a group of bumphead parrotfish.

“ A school of a thousand or more bigeye trevally have at various times taken up residence... and often surround divers in a swirling fishball ”



the foredeck and is festooned in sponges and soft corals. The intact bow is one of the highlights of the Liberty – tremendous soft corals surrounded by swarms of basslets, plus many pelagics pass by in the blue-water off the wreck.

The wreck often turns up some interesting marine life. In my dives I have regularly seen a huge barracuda hanging around the forward cargo hold plus an oversized cod that manages to disappear into the wreck's lower section's when approached. A very large coral trout greets early morning divers; this fish has a prominent dark patch on one side of its face, is a little shy but can be approached when it's being attended by cleaner fish. Around the stern a group of big bumphead parrotfish are often seen by the first divers. A school of a thousand or more bigeye trevally have at various times taken-up residence on the wreck; they often surround divers as a swirling ball of fish. Divers may see whitetip sharks cruising through on feeding sorties, and on odd occasions oceanic sunfish and whale sharks have been sighted here, usually around the bow or the deeper mid-ship area. Pygmy seahorses are resident on a



couple of gorgonian fans around the wreck, though these have been getting fewer in recent times.

Many divers visit Tulamben on day trips from the main accommodation areas in Bali's south, but to really take advantage of the Liberty wreck's diving opportunities, an overnight stay is almost essential. An early morning dive on the wreck is hard to beat.

**HISTORY** This is not a Titanic sequel, but it does have an unusual twist. The USAT Liberty was carrying railway parts, rubber products and explosives to the besieged allied troops in the Philippines during World War II. While passing Bali in the Lombok Strait on 11 January 1942, she was hit by two torpedoes fired from a Japanese submarine. No one was killed in the attack, but the disabled ship began taking on water. Two allied destroyers towed the stricken Liberty towards Singaraja Port on Bali's north coast, but it soon became apparent she was steadily sinking. The next day, the Liberty was beached and abandoned 60 kms short of Singaraja at Tulamben.

The war continued for three more years and salvage plans never eventuated. The hulk of the Liberty sat for 21 years almost against the shore, where local fishermen fished from her decks into the deeper waters of the seaward side. That is, until 1963 when nature intervened.

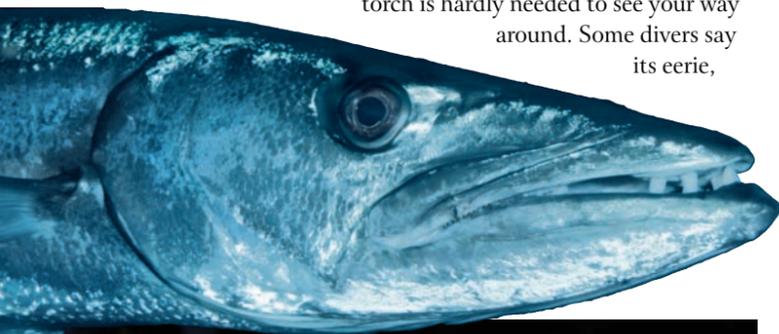
Bali's highest volcanic peak Mount Agung towers over 3000 metres above the landscape behind Tulamben, its peak often obscured by clouds. Agung is the Balinese Holy Mountain, all Hindu temples on Bali face towards it. In 1963 the volcano erupted, sending lava flows, mud-slides and hot ash down its steep slopes. Whole villages were destroyed and thousands of people killed or injured. During the eruption earthquakes rocked the shores around Tulamben. These and later tremors shook the wreck of the Liberty and she finally rolled sideways below the surface and down a steep sand slope. Corals and encrusting life rapidly began colonising the wreck. By 1980 the Liberty had become a virtual mini-ecosystem. Almost every surface was covered with living creatures and fish surrounded the wreck, living in and around the remains. Little has changed in the last 40 odd years, except some careless divers have broken some of the huge plate corals that grew around the middle of the wreck. But most of the fish and



From top left • The beams and deck supports of the wreck are festooned with soft corals that add a splash of colour to the wreck; here Dawn Mullins checks out the coral growth on the superstructure. • The black sands surrounding the wreck are home to hundreds of shrimp gobies a long with their accompanying shrimp living in burrows • Traditional outrigger canoes (Jukung) ply the local waters and pull-up along the shore in Tulamben Bay. • Schools of trevally have at various times taken up residence at the wreck, they often stay circling in one place for hours.

coral life is just as diverse and the wreck itself hasn't deteriorated very much at all.

**NIGHT DIVING** A night dive on the Liberty wreck is outstanding and will become your benchmark for all future night dives! The best time is at or near to a full moon, when a torch is hardly needed to see your way around. Some divers say its eerie,



From top left • This big barracuda is often hanging around the hold area • Off the deeper bow area is a resident school of square-spot anthias, one of the wreck's most colourful residents • This huge coral trout has been a resident on the wreck for many years; it has a dark 'birth mark' on one side of its face • Porters carry tanks to the wreck entry area on their heads! Try it yourself with rubber thongs across a pebble beach.

while others say it is almost a religious experience. Fish can be found sleeping all around the wreck and schools of flashlight fish are found in some darker areas – switch off your torch to see their glowing green flashlights. Parrotfish can be found sleeping in holes, slipper lobsters scoot around in search of food and you'll definitely stumble into nudibranchs, shrimps and crabs that seem to be crawling over every surface of the encrusted wreck.



**THE PORTERS** First-time visitors to Tulamben are astounded to see women walking along the pebble-lined shore with two scuba kits stacked on their head. These are the Tulamben Porters, a group of mostly ladies (and a few men) that carry scuba gear from the various dive centres in Tulamben to the actual dive sites. This is a great service that costs very little and saves divers the heavy haul along the pebbles to the bay's dive sites. You'll be amazed at how strong the ladies are!

**GETTING TO BALI** All major regional airlines regularly access Bali. Check with Singapore Airlines, Silk Air, Qantas, Air New Zealand, Garuda, Philippine Airlines for special travel packages and best season to visit. Most dive travel agents can book your diving and accommodation, but make sure they've experienced the island and the diving firsthand.



Jeff Mullins has been exploring under the seas of Australia, southeast Asia and the South Pacific for 35 years. He began taking underwater photographs in 1976 and has since been published worldwide. Jeff was awarded the PADI Hallmark of Excellence Award for Outstanding Contribution to Photo Journalism in 1995. A regular contributor to Sportdiving Magazine, his first article was published in 1979. Currently Jeff and his wife Dawn run dive tours from their property near Tulamben in Bali specialising in small groups of divers with an interest in underwater photography and marine life - [www.reefimages.i8.com](http://www.reefimages.i8.com) Jeff & Dawn have also recently published a book titled *Reef Wreck & Critter*, a pictorial guide to Tulamben's dive sites and marine life - [www.tulamben.i8.com](http://www.tulamben.i8.com)