

Ghosts of the deep

SCATTERED ACROSS CORAL-STREWN
REEFS AND SUNKEN CLIFFS, BERMUDA'S
CENTURIES-OLD SHIPWRECKS BECKON
EXPLORERS TO UNCOVER MYSTERIES
FAR BEYOND THE FAMED TRIANGLE

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BERMUDA

They look like LEGO. Black cubes of it, scattered across the seafloor as if a toddler has thrown a tantrum and stormed off mid-play.

I exhale, lowering my neoprene-clad body deeper into the Atlantic for a closer look. The blocks aren't plastic, of course. They are, in fact, natural formations — dense nodules of manganese oxide that build up as minerals crystallise around wrecks — and which now litter the seabed like a checkerboard of shadow and shimmer.

It's unexpected. But then, the surprises haven't stopped since I arrived in Bermuda a few days before. This subtropical archipelago — a string of lush, fish-hook-shaped islands marooned some 600 miles off the coast of North America — is best known for its tailored shorts, prestigious golf courses and a certain mysterious triangle. But for me, it's what lies beneath the azure waters that holds the greatest intrigue — namely, a vast underwater museum of maritime misadventure, where centuries-old shipwrecks rest in eerie silence, each vessel heavy with secrets, stories and even this glinting array of treasure.

Sure, manganese oxide isn't exactly gold bullion, but it certainly glitters with a strange, otherworldly sheen. Treasure also makes more sense than scattered plastic bricks, an unlikely inventory item on *The Pelican*, the Greek cargo steamer I'm now exploring. From the moment I descend, it's clear shipwrecks here are different. I won't be tracking down any famous, well-preserved vessels — those that, despite their sunken status and toppled lanterns, will soon ready to power up and resume their routes at any moment. In Bermuda, shipwrecks have had it rough.

I feel like Simba from *The Lion King*, all wide-eyed as he wandered the elephant graveyard for the first time. Once 385ft long, this wreck is now a broken, jagged mass — and at just 30ft below the surface, I'm struck by how little separates it from the bustling world above.

"You'll be diving on wrecks that would be nearly impossible to reach in other parts of the world because of weather or depth," first, my affable guide from Dive Bermuda, told me earlier that morning. "Some lie in just five metres [16ft] of water, while others poke out above the surface. In Bermuda, shipwrecks are scattered everywhere."

Bert believes it's this easy access that makes Bermuda such a unique diving location, and I'm inclined to agree. Unlike other diving hotspots across the world, the vast majority of Bermuda's roughly 44 buoyed wrecks lie well within recreational diving limits, with many reachable by free divers and snorkellers, too.

It's not just this accessibility and variety that make Bermuda's dive sites so seductive though — the sunken vessels also bring with them an abundance of marine life. I ponder this while a shimmering silver Bermuda chub-chumps furiously at algae covering a steel beam. It's one of many that have taken up residence in and around *The Pelican*'s remains, a pleasing example of a new symbiosis between nature and industry.

A long & colourful history

"Point me to a slice of history you're curious about, and I'll reveal a shipwreck linked to it," says cultural anthropologist Dr Philippe Rospa the following day. We're at the lively Swizzle Inn in the capital, Hamilton, sipping potent rum cocktails. "Bermuda is oddly more intertwined with the 17th century than it should be," he adds, rescuing me from the need to dredge up my own patchy historical knowledge. And he would know. Officially, Philippe's title is 'Custodian of Historic Wrecks'. Unofficially, he's known as the 'Indiana Jones of Bermuda' — or, at times, the island's 'Sea Keeper'. His government role spans everything from documenting the region's sunken vessels to drafting preservation laws and educating the public on their importance.

In reality, his work is even broader: he's collaborated with UC San Diego to create 3D maps of the seafloor, as well as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to protect the Sargasso Sea. He also established the Sargasso Sea Alliance, which works alongside the Bermudian government, and has helped develop the first lionfish-killing robot with biotech inventor Colin Angle. He sports a mop of curly hair, has bright eyes, a penchant for gesticulation — and clearly knows what he's talking about.

Clockwise from top: Hamilton became the capital of Bermuda in 1819; Dive Bermuda is a five-star PADI dive centre at Grotto Bay Beach Resort & Spa; swizzle burgers are a local staple at the Swizzle Inn in Hamilton — best enjoyed with a rum swizzle
Previous pages: There are said to be more than 300 shipwrecks scattered around the reefs of Bermuda
Following pages from top: Horseshoe Bay is one of Bermuda's most iconic beaches, famous for its blue-pink sand and dramatic limestone cliffs; at Grotto Bay Beach Resort & Spa, guests can indulge in a massage inside a candlelit limestone cave





"Since 1609, every generation that's come to Bermuda has ended up hunting for shipwrecks," Philippe explains, over the crooning of the Itain White 'T's in the background. And with good reason: between 1600 and today, there's been plenty to find. Bermuda's turquoise bays and cedar-rich landscapes were once a crucial stop on trade routes between Europe and the Americas, drawing ships from nearly every major maritime nation. Combine that traffic with Bermuda's perilously shallow, reef-rich waters and the result is predictable: at least 300 ships lost to Davy Jones's locker, and there are almost certainly more still waiting to be discovered.

"The fact that we still can't find several known and quite significant wrecks speaks volumes about what remains hidden in the past," Philippe explains. "There's a whole range of ships that came in, hit the reef and sank in the lagoon. They're probably still there."

He likens Bermuda's underwater terrain to Mount Everest. "It's essentially a mountain peak. Beyond the reef, it drops off sharply — around 120 metres (393ft) in most places — so if a ship hit the breakers and drifted more than a kilometre (0.6 miles) out, it's gone over the edge and you're never going to find it."

It's easy to see how so many ships met their fate here. Gazing out from the dive boat on route to The Pelican the previous day, it was impossible to miss how the sea shifted before my eyes — from a softly rolling sapphire carpet to a puckered fabric of razor-sharp reef edges. By the time it was my turn to take a 'giant stride' off the back of the boat, the scuba diving term had never felt more appropriate. I needed an extra dose of courage to step into this sea, which I wasn't certain wouldn't bite back.

Treasure troves

If the remnants of *The Pelican* made an impression, Bermuda's biggest shipwreck trumps it the following day. One of the largest cruise liners in operation at the time, the 490ft-long *Cristobal Colon* ran aground on North Rock reef in 1936 after the captain mistook a communications tower for a lighthouse. It had been sailing from Cardiff to Mexico, manned by 160 crewman and, thankfully, carrying no passengers.

The enormous vessel ground to a halt almost vertically atop the reef, an open invite for locals to

tuck in. "Salvaging a wreck is the quintessential Bermudian pastime," Philippe had told me. "In the late 1800s, every shipwreck was like a grocery or hardware store arriving by sea. Since almost everything had to be imported into Bermuda, a shipwreck crashing on the reef meant a treasure trove of materials." Though the ship was heavily plundered over time, traces of her interior remain for those who know where to look — and furniture, chandeliers and even a brass safe are all rumoured to have found new life in private homes across the island.

It takes just a few minutes to descend through the crystal-clear water, but it feels like slipping back in time. I deflate my BCD (buoyancy control device) and sink past shafts of sunlight until the wreck begins to materialise, first as shadows, then structure. "It's like a ghost city under the sea," Irt had said earlier with a smile. Years after its wrecking atop the reef, the *Cristobal Colon* was bombed by the British and US armies for target practice, sending it to the seabed and the reason divers, like myself, can now drift between it 50ft below the waves.

As I breeze between the chunks of old machinery, it's impossible not to think of *Cristobal's* story. In many places, it's hard to tell wreckage from reef: arrow crabs cling to the roof of cylindrical piling, parrotfish hover over bulkheads, damselfish dart between turbines and propellers, and tiny yellow wrasse flit through the currents, cleaning their scales. All around me, feather, brain and branching coral thrive.

But it's not nature alone that captivates me — it's the questions. I wonder whether the crew really were Spanish loyalists fleeing the civil war, and whether the bronze nuclear masthead that crowned the prow still lies buried. With every twisted beam, broken mast and rusted keel, I find myself pondering what these wrecks once were, about the hands that maintained them and the futures they now hold. Perhaps Bermuda's greatest mysteries extend far beyond its infamous triangle. □

HOW TO DO IT: British Airways flies directly from London Heathrow to Hamilton daily. Stay at Grotto Bay Beach Resort & Spa, the country's only hotel that offers an all-inclusive package, from \$340 (£253). Dive Bermuda, the on-site dive centre, offers two-tank dives from \$95 (£46) per person. grottokey.com bermudacabagrottokey.com

BERMUDA

TOP THREE MARITIME ADVENTURES

1 The Bermuda Underwater Exploration Institute

This vast museum-meets-education centre dives deep into all things oceanic — from the evolution of scuba diving to the intricacies of marine conservation. There's even a dedicated section delving into the mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle, with glass-encased artefacts recovered from historic shipwrecks. Throw in one of the world's largest seashell collections and a host of interactive exhibits, and it's a day out as captivating for families as it is for ocean enthusiasts. buei.bm

2 National Museum of Bermuda

Bermuda's biggest fort is an apt setting for this collection of exhibits narrating the country's complex history. Everything from the Transatlantic Slave Trade to Bermuda's pan-Atlantic relationships and role in both World Wars is told through videos, photos and intricate exhibitions. There's also an entire warehouse dedicated to the shipwrecks in Bermuda's seas. nmb.bm

3 Gibb's Hill Lighthouse

Purchased on one of Bermuda's highest points, the 179-year-old Gibb's Hill Lighthouse has witnessed nearly two centuries of island life. It remains a key navigation device for sea and air vessels (its light can be seen from ships 40 miles away and planes from 120 miles) and each floor explores a different piece of its history. Climb the 185 spiralling steps to take in some of Bermuda's most impressive views, explore the vintage signalling equipment and lighting apparatus, and uncover the fascinating role of lighthouse keepers. bermudalighthouse.com