

Getting Wrecked!

Tips for Successful Shipwreck Photography

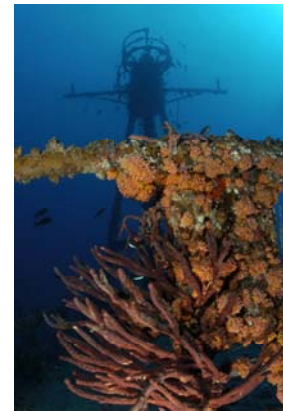
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There are few underwater subjects that peak the imagination and curiosity of the viewer more than shipwrecks. These vessels that were once alive with people and purpose are now silently committed to the sea. Whether the wreck is the result of war, conservation or misfortune, each has story that a photographer can bring to life.



Shipwrecks can be found at any depth, however the better more intact wrecks are usually found in depths greater than 60 feet which will require better time management and in some cases advanced training. Underwater, time becomes a factor of air supply and decompression limits, to avoid wasting that time and maximize photo opportunities a photographer should make a plan before getting into the water.

Start your plan by talking to the dive crew; they can best describe how the wreck is sitting, what are some of distinguishing characteristics (crows nest, guns, cranes, wheelhouse, and propellers); what is the depth profile of these features. Additionally, the divemaster can tell you of any resident animals and where they can be found. If you plan to include a diver in your photos you should remember to review your strategy with your dive partner or model. Once you get to the dive site listen the briefing, conditions such as currents and visibility may change your plan. Organize your plan to work from the deepest portion of the wreck to the shallowest and remember the old open water adage, “Plan your shoot and shoot your plan.”



Shipwrecks are accessible to all divers however nature of the environment presents some unique challenges in terms of equipment. Wrecks offer a variety of photographic opportunities regardless of camera or lens selection yet much of the wreck is going to require wide angle coverage. A wide angle strobe is often useful to help bring out the color and details of any prominent foreground objects as well as illuminating the interior sections of the wreck. Some areas of a wreck will have little to no light so to help your camera’s auto focus and you to see your subject you should have primary dive light. Some photographers choose to use their strobe’s modeling light while other affix a dive light to their camera rig. This is more a matter a preference however I prefer to use a dive light mounted on my housing independent of my strobes.

It is very common for photographers to turn on their camera and strobes before entering the water; however a wreck dive is the one time where I do not have my strobes on at the surface. If



the visibility is good the decent to wreck is a good opportunity to make some available light photographs. For available light photographs of wrecks I will set the sensitivity (ISO) of the camera to 200, set the camera exposure mode to aperture priority and work the aperture between f4 and f5.6. Available light images of the bow or superstructure with divers in the frame capture and convey the size and condition of the wreck.

As you work to tell the story of the wreck don't forget to shoot the interiors; areas where people worked and lived create a strong connection with the viewer. When entering the wreck you and your model should exercise great care as you move into position for a photo. Wreck interiors can be incredibly silty just one wayward fin kick, banging your tank on the ceiling or even exhaust bubbles will create a sandstorm of particles which will create backscatter and ruin your pictures. One technique that I use to minimize backscatter inside wrecks is to position my strobes as far as I can from the camera and then aim them slightly outward; in this way only the edges of the light from my strobes will reach the subject hopefully minimizing the backscatter in my image. Do not hesitate to move on to another subject if you are seeing too much backscatter in your images, your time on the wreck is limited no sense forcing a bad scene.

In South Florida many of the wrecks were sunk with the purpose of becoming artificial reefs; wrecks provide an excellent substrate for the development of hard and soft corals, sponges and other sessile animals. Regardless of how powerful your strobes are they could never effectively light an entire wreck, yet lighting a colorful coral formation in the foreground of your image will add a pleasing splash of color. Creating images which portray the wreck as a habitat will tell the story of how the role of the ship has changed.

There has always been a certain amount of intrigue and mystery surrounding shipwrecks and the sea. Deep diving and diving in overhead environments, such as a wreck, requires special training. Ignoring common sense safety and dive training rules just for a photograph is not worth it, there is always tomorrow to get that picture.

