

NEW JERSEY

THE (UNDERWATER) GARDEN STATE

By Michael Salvarezza and
Christopher P. Weaver

The water was completely black. Although we had descended through clear, almost tropical water, a few minutes of digging in the muck had thrown up clouds of inky dark mud and visibility was now completely obliterated. With our eyes useless in this curtain of silt, we used our fingers to feel along the bottom. In this surreal atmosphere, our ears easily picked up the sound of tinkling glass from all around us. We were bottle diving on the wreck of the *Asfalto*, an unknown wreck sitting in 95 feet of water, 16 miles southwest of New York's Jones Inlet.

The *Asfalto* is a low-lying wreck, about 300 feet in length thought by some to be a barge that sank on March 12, 1932. And despite the ease with which the bottom is silted up, many divers flock to this site for the opportunity to discover antique bottles of every shape and size. The wreck lies close to the site used by garbage barges years ago to discharge their cargo and in the decades since its sinking, it has become a magnet for old-fashioned bottles of all types rolling down a small underwater slope. Today, this site is a treasure trove of fascinating artifacts.

Its just one of the many special underwater sites that New Jersey holds in store for divers exploring her waters.

All along the 130-mile coastline of the Garden State, divers can explore a wide variety of wrecks of every time period in American history. And for shore divers there are plenty of adventures to be found within swimming distance of land. For divers, the words "Jersey Shore" have a totally different meaning!

Shark River Inlet is one of New Jersey's premier shore diving hotspots. Located in Avon-by-the-Sea in Northern New Jersey, Shark River Inlet is a small tidal river inlet with stone jetties or bulkheads on both sides that offers diving opportunities in several locations along the jetties and upstream in the river. Like all New Jersey shore dives, visibility can vary from a few feet to 15 feet. Divers exploring these waters will find an abundance of Anemones, Crabs, Lobsters and bottom dwelling fish. For local divers, Shark River Inlet is not to be missed.

There are similar sites up and down the New Jersey coast but a favorite for divers in southern New Jersey is the **Holgate Jetty**. Located on Long Beach Island, this cement block and rock jetty offers divers opportunities to look for Lobster, crabs and other crustaceans along with schools of blackfish. In the late summer and early autumn, Holgate Jetty is often home to tropical fish making their way up the Gulf Stream and divers looking to stock their home aquariums flock here to find these wayward treasures. And for the truly stout of heart, look for the occasional Bull Shark or Thresher shark that can sometimes be found patrolling these inshore waters.

While New Jersey's shore dives can be rewarding, the excitement of exploring the shipwrecks offshore is unequalled. Because of the shipping lane approaches to New York City, ships have been sinking in these waters for centuries. Accidents, weather related tragedies and wartime activity have sent ships of all types to the bottom. Some estimates of the total number of wrecks offshore from New Jersey are between 4000 and 7000! Many of these shipwrecks are accessible to divers.

For example, The **RP Resor** was a 445-foot tanker, which sank in 130 feet of water on February 28, 1942 after being torpedoed by the



Beautiful Lingcod
Photo by Michael Salvarezza

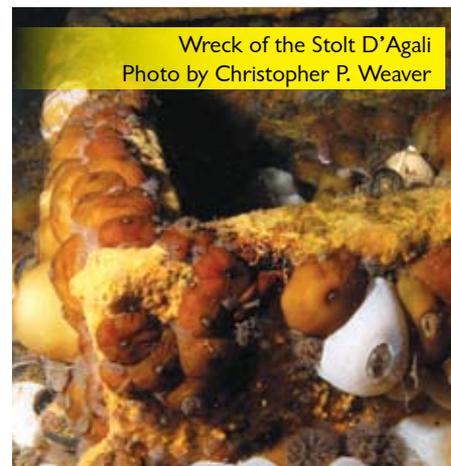
U-578. After a massive explosion, the RP Resor burned for several days and the flames were visible from the beaches at Asbury Park. It finally sunk beneath the waves and today the wreck, which is deteriorating each year, is one of New Jersey's most prominent wreck dives.

The wreck of the *Varanger* lies 35 miles offshore from Sea Isle City, another victim of a torpedo attack from a German U-boat in 1942. The *Varanger* was a tanker loaded with 12,750 barrels of oil and was inbound to New York from Curacao when she met with tragedy, sinking in 140 feet of water. The *Varanger*, like the RP Resor, is often blessed with exceptional visibility and abundant marine life. Bergall, Sea Bass, Pollack and Eels are plentiful on this wreck.

The *Stolt D'Agali* was a Norwegian steel-hulled tanker that collided in a dense fog with an Israeli luxury liner, the *Shalom*, in 1964 on Thanksgiving Day. Both ships survived the collision, but a 140-foot section of the *Stolt's* stern was sliced off and promptly sank. Today, this section of the ship is one of the most popular New Jersey dive sites. Rising from 130 feet of water to 65 feet, there is ample profile and plenty of picturesque wreckage to explore. The *Stolt D'Agali* often boasts clear water and plentiful marine life. On one dive, we sat transfixed on the top of the wreck while a pair of 8-foot Mola Mola circled us within

touching distance for the better part of 45 minutes! Interested divers can also catch a glimpse of history by visiting the Museum of NJ Maritime History where they can see the recovered anchor from the *Stolt*.

Nearby to the *Stolt D'Agali* is the wreck of the *USS Algol*. The *USS Algol* was intentionally sunk on November 22, 1991 as part of the New Jersey Artificial Reef program. Sitting in 140 feet of water, but reachable in 70 feet, the *Algol* presents exciting opportunities for divers of all skill levels. For properly equipped, trained and experienced divers, there are excellent penetration dives to be made on this enormous wreck. Although the wreck was prepared for safe diving prior to its



Wreck of the Stolt D'Agali
Photo by Christopher P. Weaver

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sinking, the accumulation of silt over the years makes any penetration potentially dangerous without the proper training! Divers exploring inside the wreck will find many pieces of equipment left intact, while divers swimming outside along its superstructure will find a wreck completely covered in marine life.

Another fascinating part of the artificial reef program in New Jersey is the **DelJerseyLand** inshore reef site. Lying in water equidistant from Cape May, New Jersey, Ocean City, Maryland and the Indian River Inlet in Delaware, this is a cooperative regional effort first permitted in 2006. Today, in addition to the **Gregory Poole**, a retired 175-foot Navy vessel that was sunk as part of the reef in 2007, the reef consists of a number of retired Brightliner New York City subway cars. Plans to further expand the reef are underway with the anticipated sinking of the **USS Arthur W. Radford**, a 563-foot destroyer last deployed during Operation Enduring Freedom that will become the longest vessel ever sunk intentionally in the Atlantic Ocean when it is eventually sunk in these waters.

Other popular wrecks often visited by the New Jersey and New York based charter boats include the **Bald Eagle**, a broken up barge in 90 feet of water, **The Texas Tower**, the remains of a sunken Air Force radar platform, **The Gulf Trade**, an oil tanker sunk in 90 feet of water, **The Pinta**, a freighter sitting on its side on 90 feet of water and the **Tolten**, a Chilean freighter sunk in 95 feet of water after being torpedoed in 1942. With so many choices, a New Jersey Wreck diver can spend a lifetime exploring sunken maritime history in these waters and never run out of new adventures!

Whether you are a nautical historian, an artifact hunter, a lover of marine life or an underwater photographer, New Jersey offers something for everyone. Dive sites ranging from easy shore entries to challenging, adrenaline fueled wreck dives and everything in between can be found up and down the New Jersey coast. Why not suit up and give it a try? ■



Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver head Eco-Photo Explorers (EPE), a New York based organization promoting interest in protecting the underwater environment by creating awareness through the use of underwater photography.

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Finders Keepers
www.marineexpeditionsservices.com/
Finders_Keepers.html

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www.garlooent.com

Gypsy Blood
www.gypsyblooddive.com

Independence II
www.deepexpeditions.com

Jeanne II
www.jeanne-ii.com

The John Jack
www.john-jack.com

Lady Godiver
www.njdive.com/LadyGoDiver.htm

Miss Atlantic City
www.missac.com

Ol'Salty
www.olsaltytwo.com

Sea Lion
www.atlantic-wreckdivers.com

Sea Tiger
www.fishonnj.com/seatiger.htm

Tuna Seazure
www.northeastscubasupply.com/boat_tour_
ts/about_tuna_seazure.html

Ursula
www.pics.com/~donk/ursula/Startframe.htm

Venture III
www.njdive.com/venture.htm

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