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FEATURES

UNDER THE SEA

Long Island's Unseen World

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Beneath the waves off Fire Island, the ship sleeps quietly. When the ocean decides to take a vessel as her own, the wreck becomes a part of it, playing a crucial role in the circle of life. Once riding along the high seas, serving as a haven for the people who sought to cross the oceans, the ship is now home to fish, lobsters, other sea creatures and plants. It is still a haven, but is something more.

On a chilly March night in 1886, the SS Oregon, a steamer in England's Cunard fleet, made its way toward New York as the perfect transport for more than 1,700 souls. By all accounts, it was a clear night. As the passengers slept, the 518-foot ship navigated the rolling waves of the sea, only a couple of hours from its destination. At approximately 4:30 a.m., a jolt wracked the ship. Reeling from the impact of colliding with a three-masted schooner, the Oregon drifted from the site of the crash. Although never proven, it has been theorized that the Oregon was struck by the Charles R. Morse, which went missing with its nine-member crew that same evening. No wreckage or survivors were ever found.



The Oregon spent the last few hours of its life afloat, and all of the passengers and crew were saved. Just as he should have done, Capt. Phillip Cottier was the last to leave the ship as it sank quietly beneath the surface, settling 130 feet down, 5 miles south of Fire Island.



Today, the wreck of the Oregon is one of the most popular underwater destinations on Long Island, a regal star of its day that is now home to an undersea community. Each year, hundreds of divers explore this relic of the past. It is part of the unseen world of LI that exists below the surface of every body of water surrounding our shores.

It is a world that very few choose to enter. But those who do are consistently amazed at what they may find.

"Less than 1 percent of the world [scuba] dives," says Randy Randazzo, owner of the Hampton Dive Center in Riverhead. "It's a special thing to do."

With 548 miles of shoreline, LI is home to thousands of wrecks and other underwater structures that provide a perfect environment for sea life. Those who take up scuba diving locally quickly find a paradise under the water's surface, filled with incredible artifacts, tropical fish and local species. Huge striped bass circle overhead, and lightning-fast blackfish, or tautog, pick at the underwater structure. Schools of porgies, or scup, look like floating silver dollars



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under the sun's rays. Fluke and flounder wait silently in the sand or mud, ready to pounce on prey as it swims by. Anemones and other life more commonly seen on the coral reefs of the Caribbean and elsewhere sway slowly in the current. Scallops and mussels abound.



Despite this wondrous world lapping at our feet, not many people choose to go there.

"There are thousands of certified divers on Long Island, but that does not represent the number of people that actually dive Long Island's waters," says Randi Eisen, executive vice president of the Long Island Diver's Association, an advocacy group established 20 years ago that fights for continued beach access and other issues impacting the scuba community. "Many get certified before vacationing in the [Florida] Keys or the Caribbean, but once they dive right here, they are always amazed at what they see."

Diving is not only for the young. "People can get certified as young as 10 years old," says Eisen. "But I know plenty of people that dive into their 60s, and in the Caribbean into their 80s."



Randazzo says the No. 1 misconception about local diving is that visibility is poor. "Everyone thinks you can't see anything," says Randazzo. "But on a clear day, you can have visibility up to 70 feet in the ocean."

Visibility is easily affected by boat traffic, wind, current and other factors. Experienced divers know when and where to go.

While beach diving is popular, the wrecks that surround LI's shores are the mainstay of the local underwater industry. The remains of the Oregon join the Black Warrior, Iberia, Linda and the other ships that met a watery grave off local beaches.



But wreck diving is not for the inexperienced, says Dan Berg, owner of the Baldwin-based Wreck Valley dive boat. Berg is a well-known expert on local sunken ships, and has produced detailed 3-D images of many of the popular shipwrecks. He cautions that diving can be a risky venture, and that the best prevention is preparation.

"I think a lot of people make the mistake of diving on wrecks too quickly," says Berg. "The progression should be beach dives, maybe even swimming to small wrecks from shore. As the person gets comfortable, going from 30, to 60, to 90 feet, then it is time to hit bigger, deeper wrecks like the Oregon."

Berg explains that whether you are at 30 feet or 130 feet, the same problems will usually arise. If a diver can handle the stress of an incident, such as losing a mask or regulator (the equipment that fits inside the mouth and allows a diver to breathe), then the same tactics can be used at a deeper location. Wreck lines can separate, divers can get



disoriented, and visibility can become zero.

"Guys that skip those steps, if something happens, may not be prepared," says Berg. "Things are much more difficult to deal with at 130 feet than 30 feet."

When you're underwater, you cannot just shoot to the surface, either. The breathing air in a diver's tank compresses as the water gets deeper. Divers need to go up slowly, take their time, and in some cases, decompress, to avoid a buildup of nitrogen gas in the blood, a sometimes deadly condition known as decompression sickness or "the bends."

There are other factors that can cause problems, including nitrogen narcosis and oxygen toxicity. A diver must know about every danger he or she faces before taking on more challenging dives.

But with the right training, diving is a relatively safe practice that allows humans to enter the most forbidden of all worlds, that which exists solely under the sea.

One of the most popular practices of divers is chasing lobsters. With a \$10 permit from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, a diver is allowed to take six legal-sized lobsters per day, according to Eisen.

The process for catching a lobster sounds easier than it is. The crustaceans are spotted mainly in holes and crevices on the ocean floor, or on wrecks. Berg says that once they are spotted, he leans his weight on the massive crusher claw while pulling the lobster free of its hiding space. The lobster may seem menacing, but Berg laughs as he describes another creature, one he thinks is one of the most dangerous inhabitants of local waters.



"Blue claw crabs," says Berg. "They come after you if you are anywhere near them. Most of the other [creatures] run away. Not them."

Spearfishing is also a popular sport among the diving community. The Ponquogue Bridge in Hampton Bays is one of the hot spots for spearfishers, who hover around the structures of old and new bridges, seeking out striped bass, fluke, sea bass and blackfish.

According to Randazzo, the Ponquogue Bridge is also a great spot to see tropical fish that are often swept into the bays on the Gulf Stream. That phenomenon repeats itself throughout the Island, and many people diving in bays see the brightly colored tropical fish right in local waterways. "You just never know what you will see," says Randazzo.

Although it did not happen on LI, Randazzo recalls one of the craziest and funniest things he says he ever witnessed underwater. While diving in the waters of the Caribbean island of Turks and Caicos, a barracuda wound up with someone's mask on its head, and swam away like a diver. Another time, on the wreck of the John C. Fitzpatrick off the coast of Cape Cod, a pod of dolphins played with the divers.

These days, scuba diving certification courses run around \$250 to \$300 and consist of four classes and pool time. An open-water test is required to complete the process. There is no shortage of places to go, and a diver can choose one of 12 dive boats on LI to find a new underwater adventure. Most concentrate on local wrecks. But there are still popular beach dive sites, including Clark's Beach in Greenport (also known as Secret Beach), the Montauk jetties, Caumsett State Park and the Ponquogue Bridge.

Once a person is introduced to LI diving, it can become an obsession. "I got certified in 1984, because I always wanted to be

like Jacques Cousteau," says Eisen. "Now, my whole life centers around diving. I go every week. There is always something new to see. I am amazed every time I dive on LI. It's a different world."

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