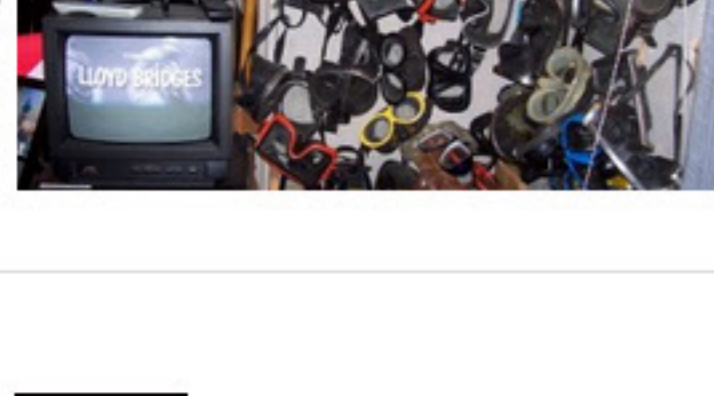
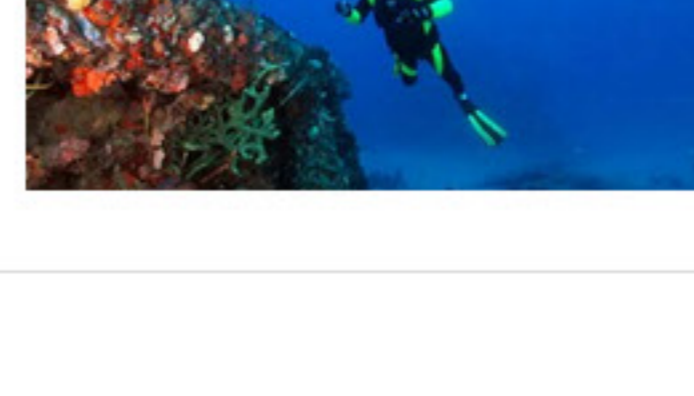


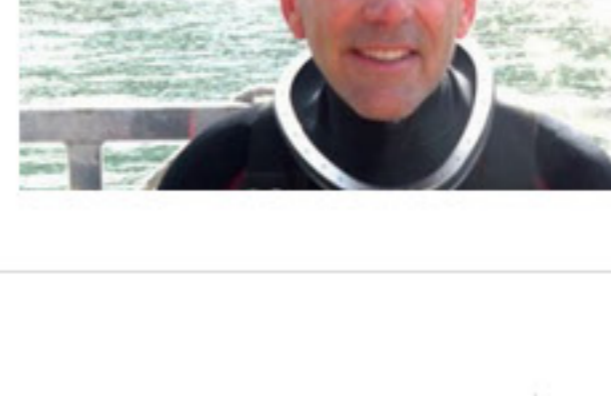
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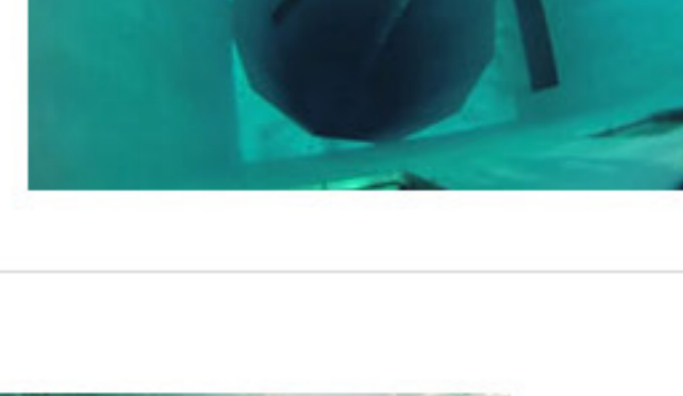
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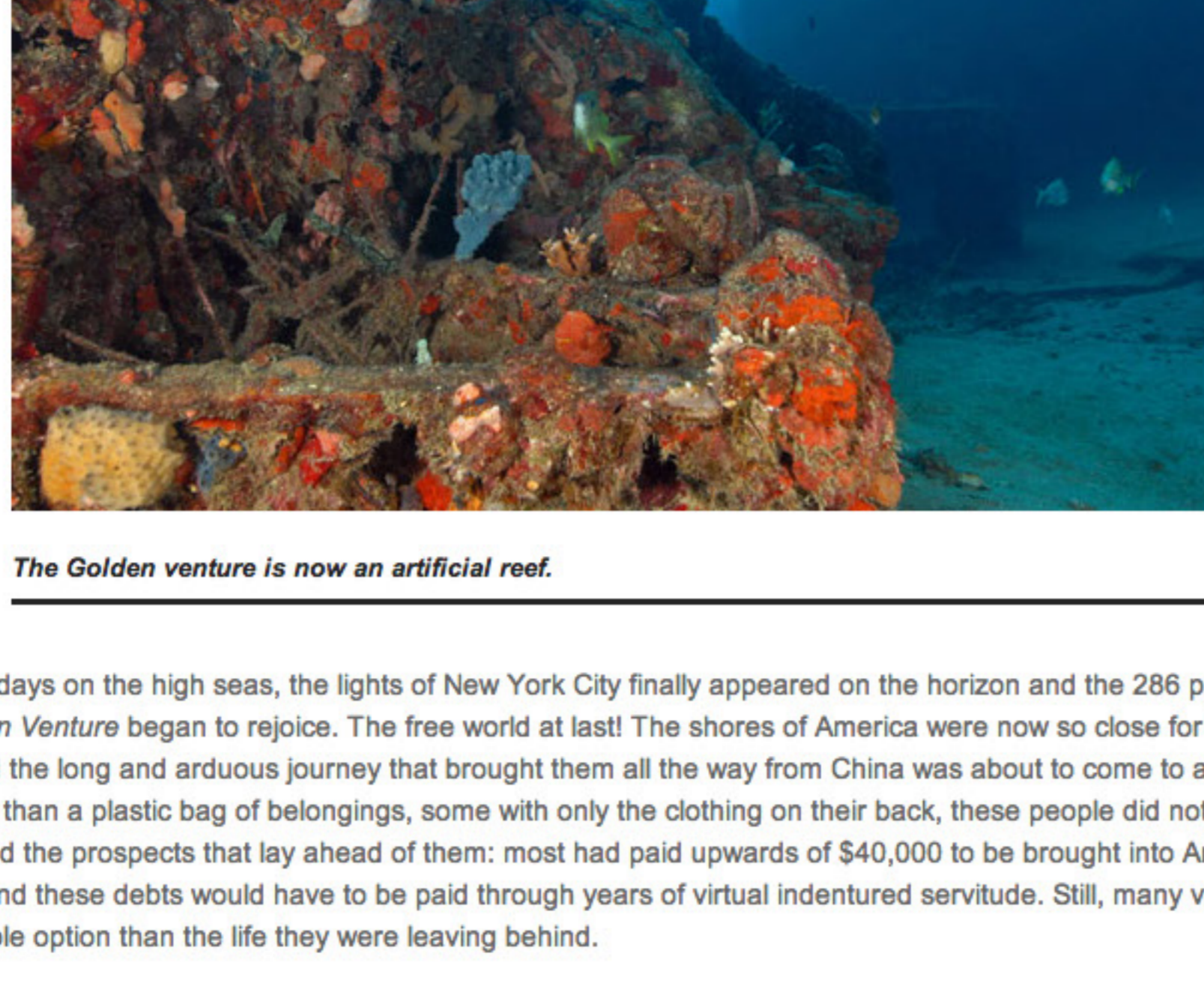
WRECKS

From Smuggler to Shipwreck: The Notorious Story of the Golden Venture

CALIFORNIA DIVER MAGAZINE - JUNE 2, 2014

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The ghosts of the past still exist on Florida's interesting and picturesque wreck.



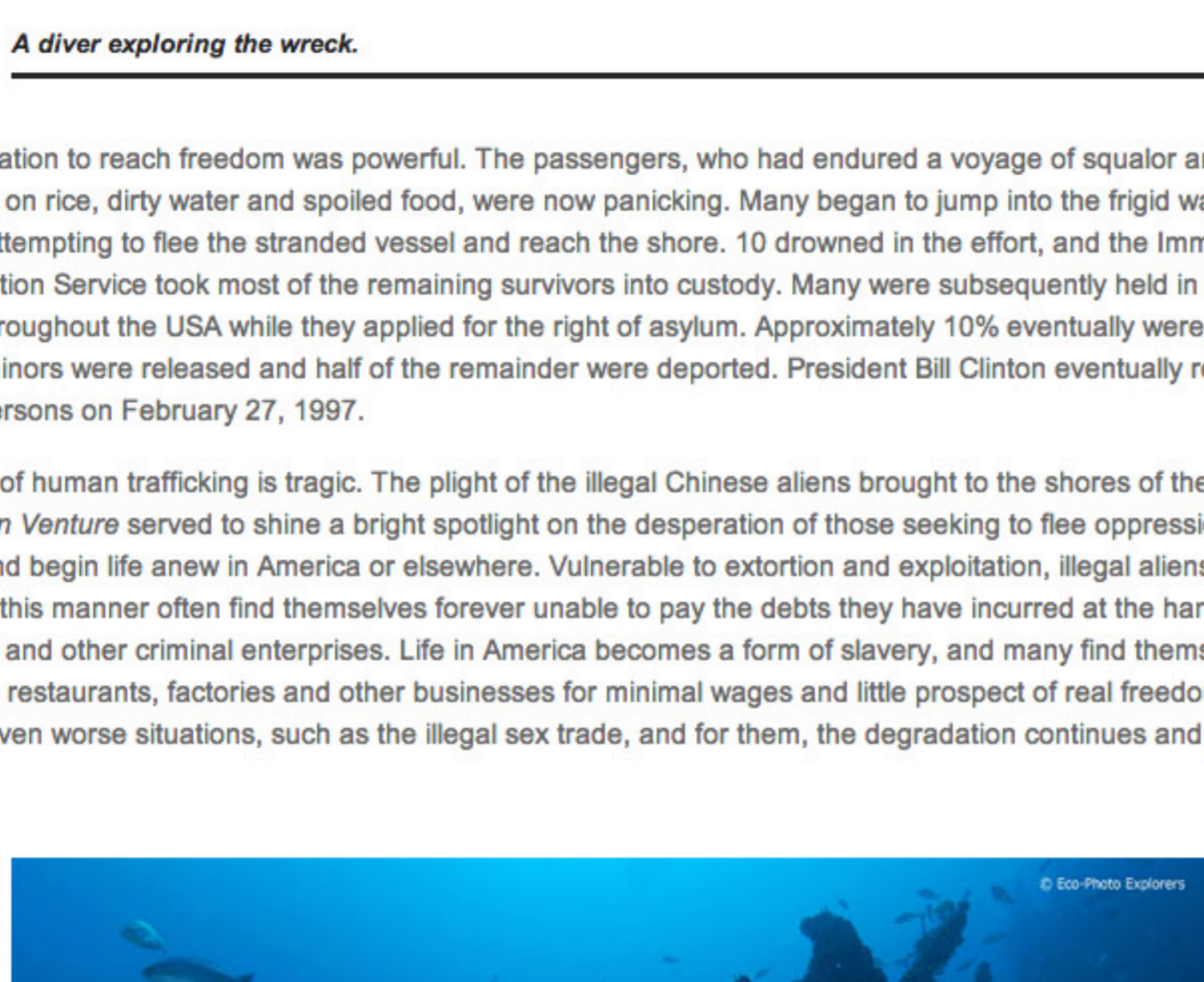
The Golden venture is now an artificial reef.

After 114 days on the high seas, the lights of New York City finally appeared on the horizon and the 286 passengers of the Golden Venture began to rejoice. The free world at last! The shores of America were now so close for those on board and the long and arduous journey that brought them all the way from China was about to come to an end. With little more than a plastic bag of belongings, some with only the clothing on their back, these people did not fully understand the prospects that lay ahead of them: most had paid upwards of \$40,000 to be brought into America illegally, and these debts would have to be paid through years of virtual indentured servitude. Still, many viewed this as a preferable option than the life they were leaving behind.

Words and photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver

The passage on the Golden Venture had been arranged through Chinese gang leaders and contacts in New York and the entire illegal human trafficking operation, known as "Snakehead", had been working undetected for years. In the dark of night on June 6, 1993 however, this was all about to change.

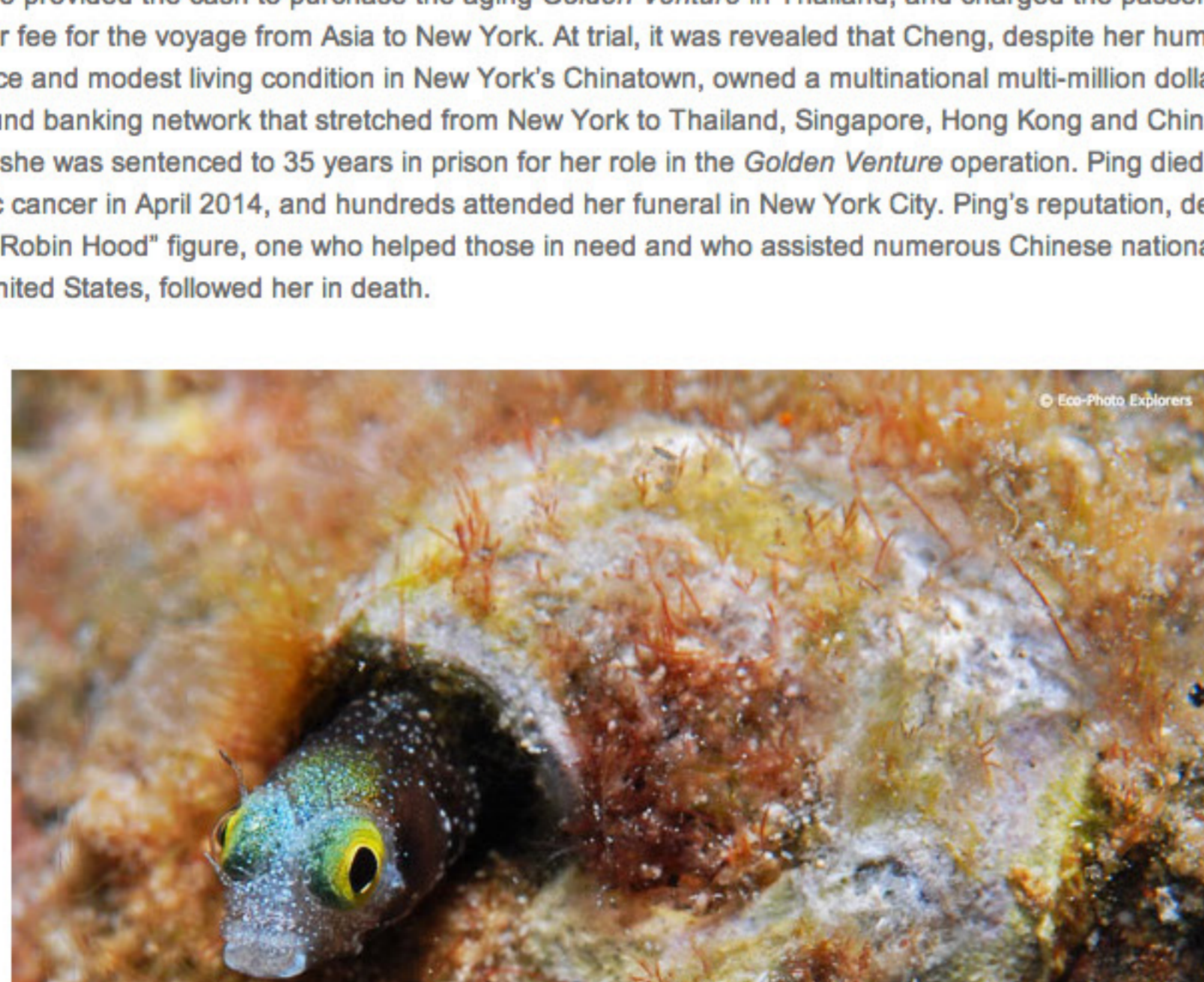
As the chatter about leaving the boat and the prospects of entering a new country to start a new life began to grow, the Golden Venture suddenly came to an abrupt stop. In the inky dark of night, chaos fell upon the human cargo of this vessel. Despite the shuddering of the engines and the strain of the propellers, the boat had stopped hard, stuck on a sandbar just a few hundred yards offshore from Rockaway Beach in Queens, New York, located along the south shore of Long Island. After travelling from Thailand, and stopping in Kenya to pick up additional passengers, the Golden Venture, which had also rounded the Cape of Good Hope, was now within shouting distance of the shore, and the sounds of the crashing surf could easily be heard in the darkness.



A diver exploring the wreck.

The motivation to reach freedom was powerful. The passengers, who had endured a voyage of squalor and hardship subsisting on rice, dirty water and spoiled food, were now panicking. Many began to jump into the frigid waters of the Atlantic, attempting to flee the stranded vessel and reach the shore. 10 drowned in the effort, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service took most of the remaining survivors into custody. Many were subsequently held in various prisons throughout the USA while they applied for the right of asylum. Approximately 10% eventually were granted asylum, minors were released and half of the remainder were deported. President Bill Clinton eventually released the final 52 persons on February 27, 1997.

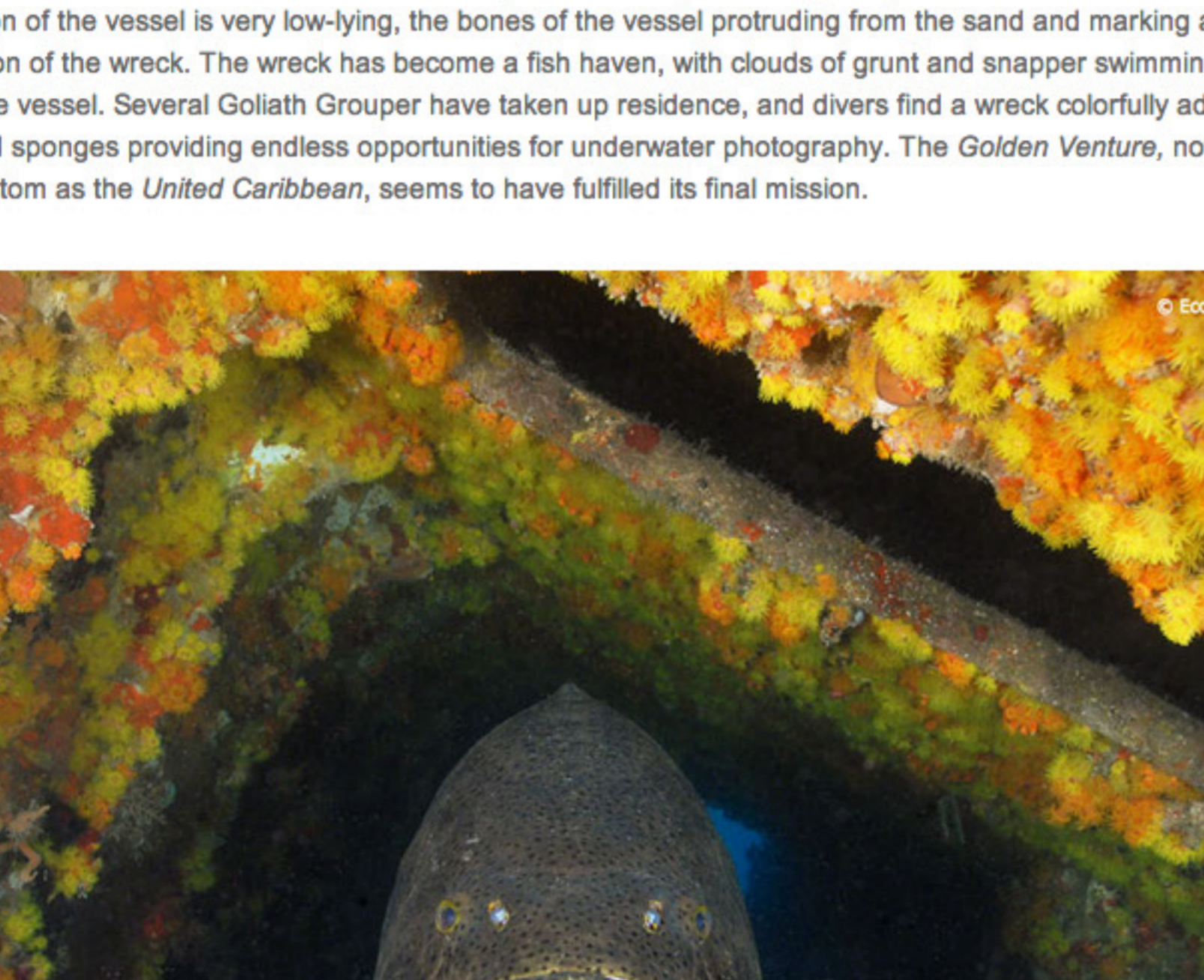
The story of human trafficking is tragic. The plight of the illegal Chinese aliens brought to the shores of the US onboard the Golden Venture served to shine a bright spotlight on the desperation of those seeking to flee oppression and poverty and begin life anew in America or elsewhere. Vulnerable to extortion and exploitation, illegal aliens ferried abroad in this manner often find themselves forever unable to pay the debts they have incurred at the hands of gangsters and other criminal enterprises. Life in America becomes a form of slavery, and many find themselves working in restaurants, factories and other businesses for minimal wages and little prospect of real freedom. Some drift into even worse situations, such as the illegal sex trade, and for them, the degradation continues and grows deeper.



The remains of the ship's midsection.

But as a result of the Golden Venture's high profile stranding, covered extensively in the media, those responsible for this particular effort were brought to justice. Behind the Golden Venture was one of the most powerful Chinese gang leaders at the time, Guo Liang Chi, leader of the Fuk Ching gang. Also known as Ah Kay, Guo was a cold-blooded gangster responsible for murder and torture. His gang also specialized in human smuggling. Arrested in Hong Kong, Guo eventually cooperated with federal authorities and was handed a light sentence in exchange for information that led to the prosecution of over 35 gang members in the United States.

One of those that Guo helped identify was Cheng Chui Ping, known in the Chinese community as "Sister Ping". It was Cheng who provided the cash to purchase the aging Golden Venture in Thailand, and charged the passengers on board their fee for the voyage to Asia to New York. At trial, it was revealed that Cheng, despite her humble appearance and modest living condition in New York's Chinatown, owned a multinational multi-million dollar underground banking network that stretched from New York to Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong and China. On March 17, 2006, she was sentenced to 35 years in prison for her role in the Golden Venture operation. Ping died in prison of pancreatic cancer in April 2014, and hundreds attended her funeral in New York City. Ping's reputation, deserved or not, as a "Robin Hood" figure, one who helped those in need and who assisted numerous Chinese nationals in getting into the United States, followed her in death.

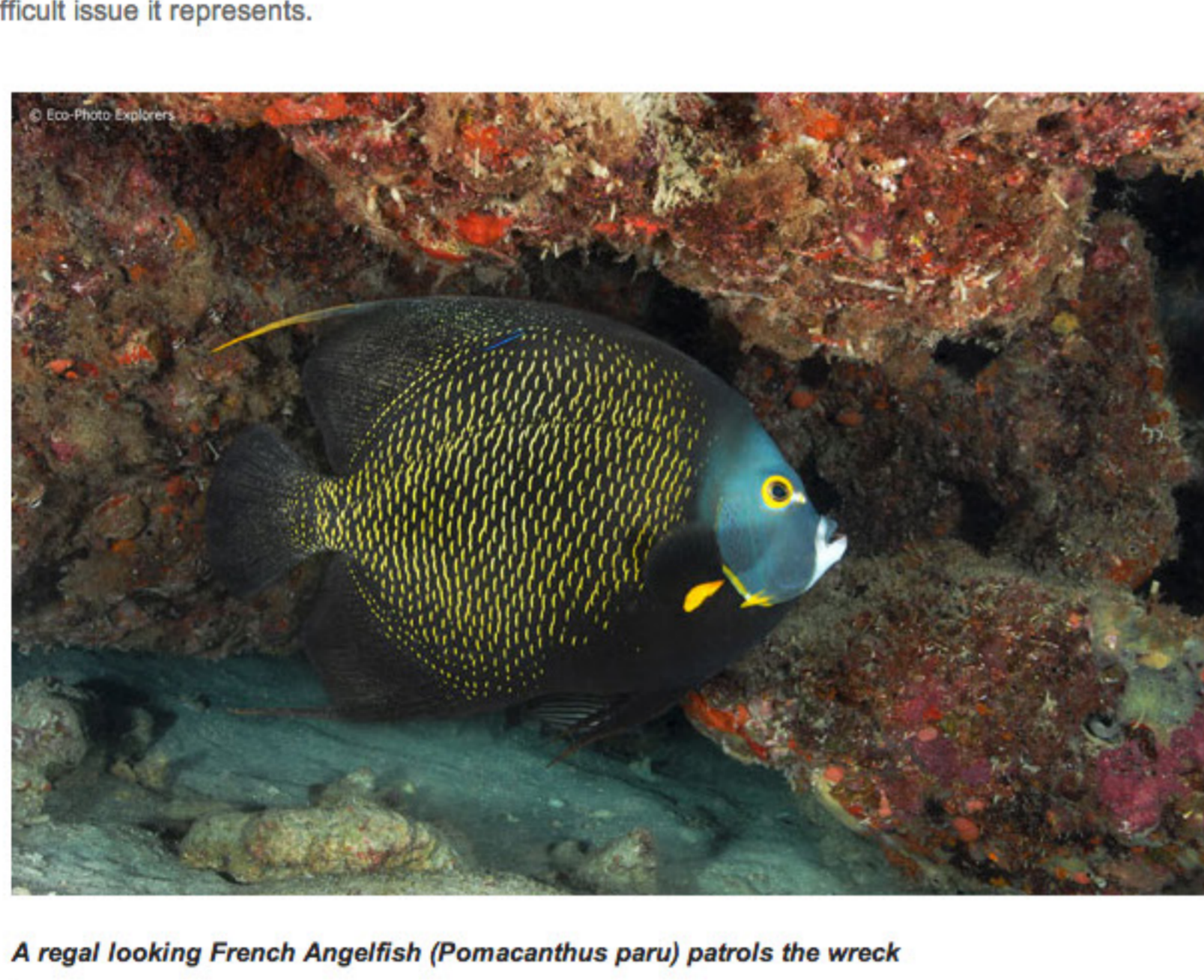


This Goliath Grouper (Epinephelus itajara) has taken up residence on the wreck.

For divers, this should be more than a wreck dive off the eastern shores of Florida. Pause for a moment as you swim amongst the decaying structure of the vessel and close your eyes. The ghosts of the past still exist here. For many wreck divers, understanding the history of a shipwreck is an essential attraction and for the United Caribbean, (AK/A Golden Venture), this history is meaningful. The pain and suffering of the desperate passengers, exploited by criminal enterprise and victims of the continuing problem of immigration, can still be felt on this shipwreck. Swimming over the mid-section, imagine for a moment the squalor and inhumane conditions that existed for four months as the ship plodded its way towards America. As you swim over the bow, think of the fear and panic on board as the ship ran aground. Certainly, remember the 10 lives that were lost that fateful night in New York as terrified passengers jumped to their death in their final desperate effort to achieve freedom.

Words and photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver

The United Caribbean rests in silence 70 feet below the surface of the Atlantic off Florida's Palm Beach coast. She continues to be a testament to the tragedy of human trafficking. Her notorious past is now a memory buried below the waves. But perhaps this memory will live on and, in a reverse of fortune, the United Caribbean can serve as an inspiration for good...perhaps the light of illegal human smuggling can finally be eliminated if we can all align on true reforms in this area. Divers exploring this wreck can help by connecting their dives with the history of this vessel, and with the difficult issue it represents.



A regal looking French Angelfish (Pomacanthus paru) patrols the wreck

Spotlight on the Golden Venture/United Caribbean

Golden Venture Documentary Movie: http://www.goldenventuremovie.com/

Dive Operator: SunStar Aquatics Boca Raton, Florida

Diversity Dive Boat Phone: (561) 368-9952 http://thediversity.com/index.html



The final resting place of the Golden Venture is just offshore of Boca Raton Inlet in Florida.



Schools of fish, like these Smallmouth Grunts (Haemulon chrysargyreum) inhabit the wreck.



A regal looking French Angelfish (Pomacanthus paru) patrols the wreck



The Golden Venture wreck is now adorned with colorful corals and other marine life.



The Golden Venture wreck is now adorned with colorful corals and other marine life.



The Polka-Dot Batfish has an angry looking scowl.



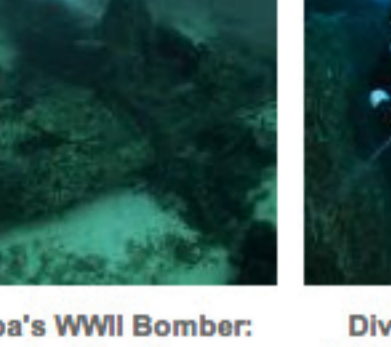
This Goliath Grouper (Epinephelus itajara) has taken up residence on the wreck.



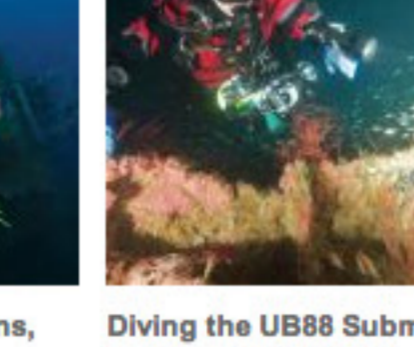
The Golden Venture is now an artificial reef.



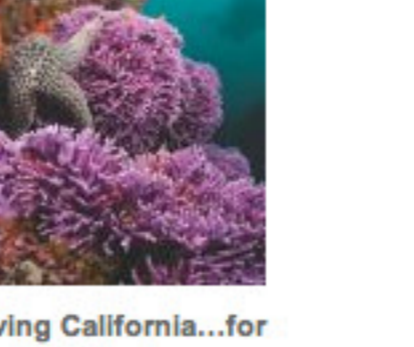
A diver exploring the wreck.



The bones of the Golden Venture.

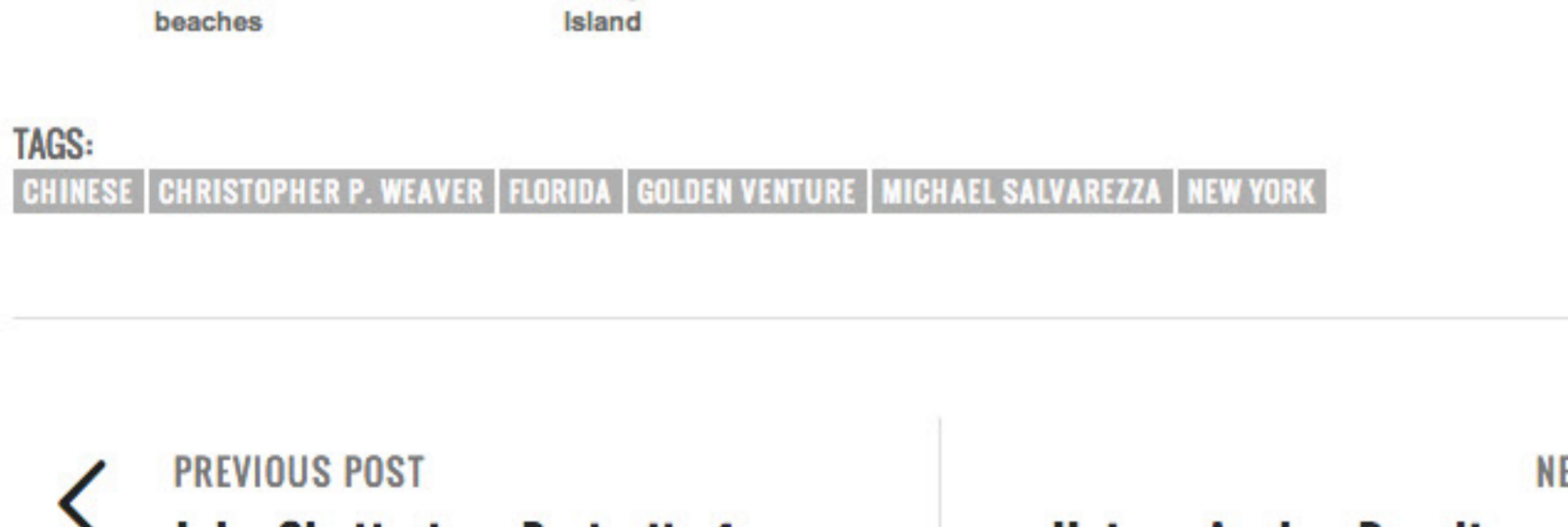


The remains of the ship's midsection.



The wreck is home to lots of creatures, large and small.

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