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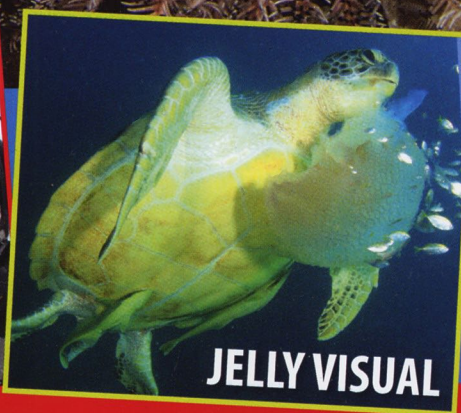
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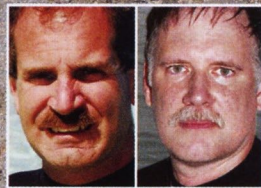
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FROM SMUGGLER TO SHIPWRECK



MICHAEL SALVAREZZA and **CHRISTOPHER P. WEAVER** get to dive Florida's *Golden Venture* and delve into the shady background of this notorious vessel

THE SEA FLOOR OFF FLORIDA is littered with shipwrecks of all sizes, shapes and types. Many have been intentionally sunk as part of a progressive and forward-looking artificial reef programme, and have become popular with scuba-divers looking to explore their remains.

Even though many of these ships were put down after becoming obsolete, they all carry with them the stories of their existence.

Some of these stories are mundane and routine. But some are different... darker, more tragic, more significant.

After a short run to the dive-site from the Boca Raton Inlet, we prepare to descend to the final resting place of one of these seemingly unremarkable wrecks, the *United Caribbean*. However, this vessel, intentionally sunk on 22 August, 2000 in

23m of water, once bore the name *Golden Venture* and the shadows of a tragic and notorious past.

With almost 25m of visibility the outline of the wreck is almost immediately apparent as we drop below the surface. Once fully intact, since its sinking the wreck has been torn into three pieces as a result of several hurricanes that passed directly overhead.

The highest point of profile is the wheelhouse, which rises to within 17m of the surface, and it is here that we first made contact with the wreck.

Like the rest of it, this area is covered in carpets of orange and yellow cup corals, evidence that the wreck has transformed nicely into a living reef.

The wheelhouse is the only area in which divers can penetrate the wreck. After ensuring the safety of going inside,

Above: The remains of the mid-section of the *Golden Venture*.

Below: This Goliath grouper (*Epinephelus itajara*) has taken up residence on the wreck.

we quickly enter the brightly illuminated structure.

Swimming through the bridge causes us to reflect on the curious notion that we are now floating through an area from which the commanders of this vessel once issued their criminal orders...



The infamous voyage

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 each, some with only the clothing on their back, these people didn't fully understand what lay ahead of them.

Most had paid upwards of \$40,000 to be brought into the USA illegally, and these debts would have to be paid through years of virtual indentured servitude.

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 6 June, 1993, however, this was all about to change.

As the chatter about leaving the boat and the prospects of starting a new life in a new country began to grow, the *Golden Venture* came to an abrupt stop. In the inky darkness, chaos fell upon the human cargo of this vessel.

Despite the shuddering of the engines and the straining of the propellers, the boat had stopped hard, stuck on a sandbar just a few hundred metres off 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* was now within shouting distance of the shore, and the sounds of the crashing surf could easily be heard in the darkness.

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.

Ten drowned in the effort, and the Immigration & Naturalisation Service took most of the remaining survivors



into custody. Many were held in various prisons throughout the USA while they applied for the right of asylum.

Some 10% were eventually granted asylum, minors were released and half of the remainder were deported.

President Bill Clinton eventually released the final 52 on 27 February, 1997.

After the stranding, the *Golden Venture* was initially confiscated by the federal government, but was eventually sold at auction and renamed the *United Caribbean*.

She began service as a cargo vessel throughout the Caribbean but was later purchased by Palm Beach County in Florida for \$60,000 and sunk as an artificial reef a mile off Boca Raton Inlet.

Swimming with ghosts

We leave the wheelhouse to swim along the mid-section of the wreck. Here, low-lying to the sandy bottom, are the bones of the ship. We encounter schools of tomate, grunt and snapper, along with the regal French angelfish and other tropical fish species.

But even as we swim among these beautiful inhabitants of the wreck, we can't shake the feeling that we are also swimming with the ghosts of a dark incident in our history.

Making our way forward towards the bow, some additional wreckage can be encountered, and it is here that divers can find Goliath grouper hanging out under the protective cover of the wreck.

These huge fish, now protected by law, have been making a recovery in Florida waters after being fished to near-extinction years ago. They glower at us from the deeper recesses of the wreckage, their fearsome countenances belying their peaceful nature.

Searching along the bottom, we find the comical polka-dot batfish creeping along the sand. These fish resemble some sort of distorted Mr Potato Head, with their oddly shaped mouths and other appendages.



Top left: The polka-dot batfish has an angry-looking scowl.

Top right: A regal French angelfish (*Pomacanthus paru*) patrols the wreck.

Above: A diver explores the wreckage.

Indeed the *Golden Venture*, now reposing on the bottom as the *United Caribbean*, seems to be fulfilling its final mission as an artificial reef and fish haven.

Our dive concludes with a return to the wheelhouse and an ascent on the upline.

As we bid farewell to the wreck, we reflect on the importance of this little-known ship in the tragic story of human trafficking and forced labour.

A call to action

The plight of the Chinese people aboard the *Golden Venture* shone a light on the desperation of those seeking to flee oppression and poverty and begin life anew in America or elsewhere.

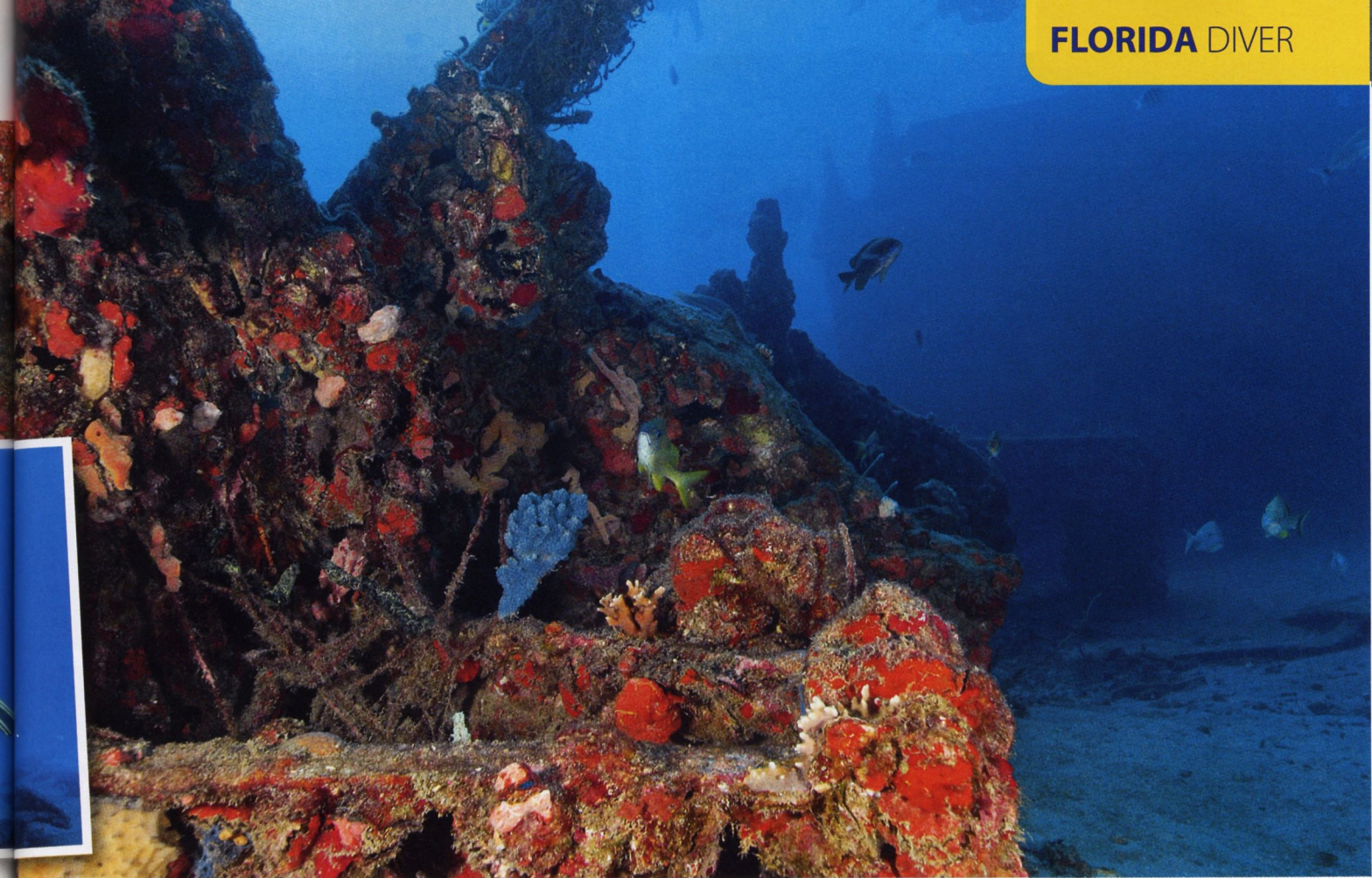
Vulnerable to extortion and exploitation, illegal aliens ferried abroad in this way often find themselves forever unable to pay the debts they have incurred at the hands of gangsters and other criminal enterprises.

Life 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 worse situations, such as the illegal sex trade, and for them the degradation continues and grows deeper.

But as a result of the *Golden Venture's* high-profile stranding, which was covered extensively in the media, those responsible for this particular initiative were brought to justice.

Left: The *Golden Venture* on the sandbar off Rockaway Beach, Queens, New York.





Above: The *Golden Venture* is now an artificial reef.

It was Cheng Chui Ping, known in the Chinese community as “Sister Ping”, who provided the cash to purchase the ageing *Golden Venture* in Thailand, and charged the passengers their fee for the voyage from Asia to New York.

At trial, it was revealed that Cheng, despite her humble appearance and modest living conditions in New York’s Chinatown, owned a multi-national multi-million-dollar underground banking network that stretched from New York to Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong and China.

On 17 March, 2006, she was sentenced to 35 years’ jail for her role in the *Golden Venture* operation. Ping died in prison of pancreatic cancer in April last year.

Slavery, and its close relative human-trafficking, is thriving, and affects businesses, suppliers and consumers.

Below left: The modest apartment house where “Sister Ping” ran her human-smuggling operation.

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

Estimates are that 21-35 million people are currently trapped in modern-day slavery, with someone enslaved every 15 minutes around the world.

Although most organisations agree that the highest incidence is in Asia, particularly India and China, virtually every country in the world is affected. Even in the UK it is estimated that 8500 people are enslaved.

Recently, the global seafood business has come under scrutiny as fishing operations in Thailand, the world’s third largest seafood exporter, along with Indonesia and Burma, have been shown to be using slave labour to work the vessels that catch the fish that eventually find their way into our shops.

In the often shadowy world of international fishing, how can we divers who care about the marine environment and the health of the world’s oceans reasonably expect such operations to respect fishing regulations when they are willing to break society’s laws and moral codes by using slave labour?

Perhaps a small, unremarkable wreck off the coast of Florida can help to inspire in divers a call to action to begin to help eliminate this scourge from the modern world.

vessel and close your eyes, because the ghosts of the past still exist here.

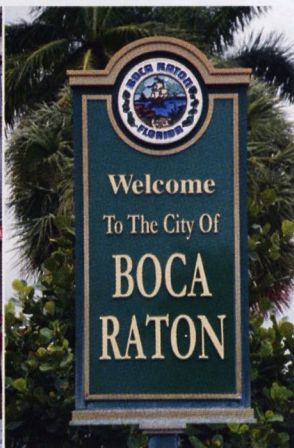
The pain of the desperate passengers, exploited by criminal enterprise and victims of the continuing problem of immigration, can still be felt on this shipwreck.

Swimming over the mid-section, imagine for a moment the squalor and inhumane conditions that existed for four months as the ship ploughed its way towards America.

As you swim over the bow, think of the fear and panic on board as the ship ran aground.

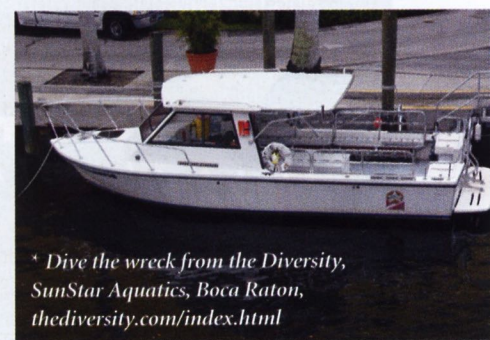
And remember the 10 lives lost that fateful night in New York as terrified passengers jumped to their death in their final desperate effort to achieve freedom.

Divers exploring this wreck can help the world address the problem of modern-day slavery by connecting their dives with the history of this vessel, and with the difficult issue it represents. █



The lonely vigil

The *United Caribbean* makes a nice wreck dive, but pause for a moment as you swim through the decaying structure of the



* Dive the wreck from the *Diversity*, SunStar Aquatics, Boca Raton, thediversity.com/index.html