

Stilling the engine to stop the boat in the whales' path, we held our breath as the group moved in our direction.

I stood in the stern, ready to pounce. Alongside me was Crann, the grand old man of the team, resplendent in a sky-blue wetsuit. Danny positioned the boat in the path of the whales, and cut the engine. Everything was perfect, the gigantic fin of the male dipping beneath the surface 6m away about to pass under the boat. And do you know what? Suddenly I didn't want to get in.

Crann, too, looked faintly perturbed at the proximity of this master apex predator. But the catcalls and abuse of the rest of the team finally drove us from the platform, and the boat quickly drifted away, leaving us treading murky water feet away from six hunting killer whales.

My strategy was surreptitiously to position Crann between me and the pod. I was certain that I couldn't outswim them, but fairly confident that I could outswim him. Reassured, I began to enjoy myself.

There followed an hour of exhausting twisting and turning, finning and diving, as the team and whales danced rings around each other. We finally dragged our weary bodies back onto the boat, leaving the whales to roll and turn, bathed in the remnants of the sun's rays as they too turned for the open sea – two groups of mammals with new memories of a golden bay in New Zealand.

Grenada

New Zealand to Grenada is an absurd distance, even on a modest-sized blow-up globe. Do the journey over 48 hours in a car, then a bus, then a ferry, then a series of seven aircraft, endless departure lounges, and finally a crushingly tedious queue that inches towards a glowering security official, and one soon becomes delirious.

This group hysteria manifested itself in a visit to a mammoth Los Angeles electronics store, during one of our stopovers. It resulted in members of the team emerging with a festival of hi-tech gadgets to amuse the bored traveller.

The entire beeping, whirring, glassy-eyed crowd of us finally made it to the True Blue Bay resort in Grenada in the dead of night, oblivious to all but the urge to pass out theatrically in our encouragingly plush rooms.

Due to its location in the Caribbean, Grenada has the distinction of being one of only a handful of islands to be surrounded by two major oceans.

On the leeward side is the Caribbean; on the windward side, the Atlantic. Just off the entrance of the harbour lay our target wreck, the *Bianca C* or "Titanic of the Caribbean".

The next day we emerged blinking into a shimmering Grenada day. Throwing together our gear, we made the short walk to the dock and our rendezvous with our hosts, Aquanauts.

The boats were spacious, the guides helpful, and within a few more minutes we were heading off to the *Bianca C*. This spectacular vessel has been under water since October 1961, having disappeared in a flaming Viking burial after an explosion in her boiler. The wreck is deteriorating fast, but it was still a great thrill to drift over those massive buckled plates, past the crumpled remains of the funnel with the elegant embossed "C" of the Costa Line still clearly visible.

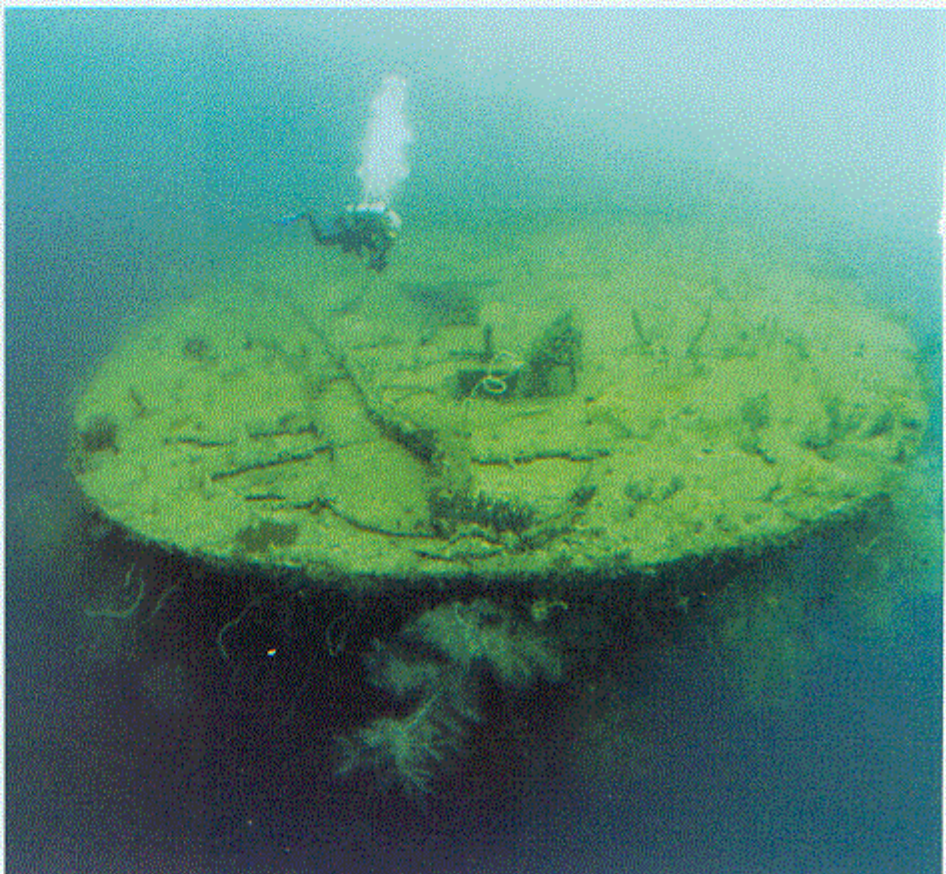
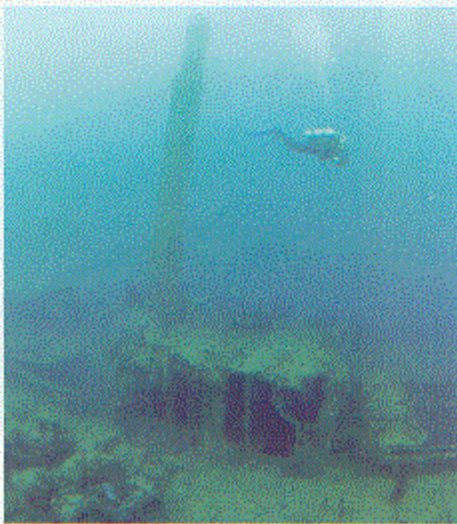
The team split to explore both forward and aft, my personal choice being the flare of the elegant bow, still slicing upright through the dark waters at 30m.

The *Bianca C* was a splendid dive, and worthy of further exploration, but Paul, our guide, was anxious to show us that Grenada had more to offer than this elegant old lady. How right he was.

The *Shakem* was a superb wreck, spookily well-preserved after only four years of immersion. It too sits upright, in 20m of water, curtains billowing from cabin windows in eerie undersea breezes, cargo of cement neatly packed in place. At the bow two chains run from her hawsers, framing the vessel's passage through the seabed.

Throughout the expedition we always bore in mind that when exploring wrecks, particularly their silty internal avenues and labyrinths, things could go very wrong very quickly. An inadvertent fin-kick against crumbling substrate,

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, BELOW: above the deck of the mighty *Bianca C* liner in Grenada; bow winch on the *Shakem*; View of the bow of the *Bianca C*; a threesome of diver and nurse sharks by the prop on the *San Juan*



a flickering torch, a wrong turn, a lost line, and you're suddenly in the dark heart of your worst nightmare.

We had been guided well throughout, and had devised a strict code of operation within the team to prevent any dramas.

Our closest brush with Davy Jones came on the second to last day, and involved an unfortunate kit incident, a small breakdown in communication, and Crann performing a neat piece of escapology.

With the guide and his buddy, Crann had entered the *Shaken's* small engine-room. Ever the gentleman, he had allowed the other two divers to enter first, following on with his torch-beam fixed on Mike's steely backside.

Twist piled on turn, hither on thither, until at the critical point of the penetration, his torch failed. Looking ahead in the blackness, he searched vainly for Mike and Paul's beams, but they had turned behind a solid engine block and were hidden from view.

Heart racing, he fished out his spare torch to find that the beam hardly penetrated the stirred-up silt ahead. Lines had not been laid because of the fear of entanglement in the tiny space and twisted pipes of the engine-room, and the fact that the dive entered and exited the space at different points, complicating line-recovery on completion.

Crann ultimately extracted himself through a small ventilation shaft by some judicious removal of gear and inelegant contortions. The picture of calm throughout the expedition, even he was rattled, and ascended the shotline wild-eyed and rust-covered.

The guide was blameless and had already initiated a search pattern for Crann even as he exited the engine-room. It was a simple kit failure but also a reminder that penetration of wrecks must be taken seriously by everyone, regardless of experience.

Our final dive was on the *San Juan*, a beautiful trawler crawling with urse sharks. We were followed throughout by a huge Nassau grouper, which swam repeatedly into shot and had to be elbowed aside by frustrated lensmen, only to loom gigantically in another viewfinder seconds later.

Glancing behind me as I drifted away from the wreck towards the surface on our last dive, I saw him still peering forlornly after us, his home a ghostly shadow behind him.

The perfect picture to carry with me as a reminder of the splendour of the world of wrecks. ❏



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- A DVD of the *Ultimate Wrecks* expedition will be available later this year. Readers interested in joining next year's Full Circle Top 10 Wildlife Dives expedition should visit www.fullcircleexpeditions.com