Exploring the Wrecks of Utila, Honduras

The island of Utila is a tropical haven off the coast of mainland Honduras, and part of the Bay Islands chain including Roatan and Guanaja. In the middle of a backpacking trip through Central America, I spontaneously decided to visit it to complete my rescue diving course.

I thought I'd stay there for a week to dive and improve my Spanish. Arriving upon Utila, following a 40-minute ferry ride, it was pleasantly surprising to find out that English is the main language of conduct, followed by Spanish. After my first lunch in a friendly local bar, I was able to learn a lot about the colourful history of the Island. Initially serving as a small port for British pirates in the 18th century, some of who eventually settled there, Utila was used as a stop-off for longer voyages. The island also experienced a large immigration of Cayman Islanders throughout further centuries. The direct descendants speak an interesting Creole English and are racially diverse.

I found it easy to delve into the Utilian culture as the island is small and locals incredibly friendly. The island was so inviting that I ended up staying for two months, diving with a local dive shop – Captain Morgans. During this time I had the great luck to dive practically every day and follow some specialist courses including deep dive, nitrox and wreck diving. Amongst the many dive sites of Utila is the wreck site of the Halliburton. Scuttled in 2001 to serve as a tourist attraction, the boat lies at a depth of 35 metres. Wreck dives are carried out primarily in groups of two for the purposes of practicality and safety.

I and another diver were first trained in ¨reeling¨ techniques on land. This allows divers to penetrate a wreck from a certain entry point and to manoeuvre themselves gradually throughout the inner body of the

ship (hopefully without getting lost). On our first dive I specifically remember descending slowly, and at roughly 10 metres the large hulk of the Halliburton soon became visible. My dive partner Adrian and I swam around the wreck in order to orientate ourselves to its position. Initial feelings of nervousness soon turned into awe as it dawned upon us we would soon be able to enter this colossal ship. Sixteen years submerged under the waves had turned the Halliburton into a living time capsule.

Colourful corals adorn port windows and shoals of small fish have made various ship compartments their new home. On our second dive we mapped all the various entry points until we eventually found one right underneath the Captain’s deck. Together we started our seemingly ominous entry into a space almost devoid of natural sunlight. Not for the claustrophobic, I had to catch my breath as few times as the passage narrowed. Using our reeling techniques we managed to find our way inside into the base of the ship. This was even more interesting as I imagined what this section of the ship could have been used for before it found its fateful way down into the depths of Davy Jones´ locker.

Large pools of oxygen had formed on the ceiling, where previous divers had left traces of their visit. We circled the base of the ship once, before reentering into the sunlight. Glad of having gained insight into another world, I was also relieved to emerge into the open ocean. This was one of many incredible dive experiences that I enjoyed on Utila.

Initially an amateur hobby, spending two months on this island awakened a passion for a new sport. I was also able to go lion-fishing, dolphin spotting and swimming with whale sharks. Simply put – it is hard to leave this island.

I would highly recommend it for any novices who would like to further their dive experience.

About the author:

With a passion for diving, Sanne is an avid backpacker and has spent the last five months traversing through Latin America. One of her goals has been to experience some of what the beautiful region has to offer, including some serious underwater exploration. She is a masters student of Sustainable Development in Austria.