

Sports

Witness the wondrous world underwater

The waters of Bermuda have been luring ships to their untimely demise since the colony's founding in 1609 with the wreck of the *Sea Venture* at Gates Bay.

Although bad for sailors, shipwrecks turn out to be great for divers.

At least 300 known wrecks surround Bermuda. The 171-foot dredger *King George*, scuttled in the 1930s, remains intact at 60 feet, teeming with fish and soft corals. The *Hermes* may be the islands' most popular dive, at 80 feet with great visibility.

Students of the U.S. Civil War tend to school around the *Mary Celestia*, a 225-foot/68-meter paddlewheel steamer chartered by Confederates to run the Union blockade, smuggling guns, ammunition, supplies and food. She hit a reef off Southampton and sank in 1864, now lying in 55 feet / 16 meters of water, with one paddlewheel frame standing upright like a Ferris wheel.

The *Pelinaion* was heading from West Africa to Baltimore with a cargo of iron ore when she struck the reef east of St. David's Island in 1940. The impressive 385-foot cargo ship lies at depths from 20–70 feet / 6–21 meters. Most noticeable are the giant steam boilers, huge engine standing upright and spare propeller strapped to her deck.

Besides wrecks, Bermuda offers nearly 300 square miles of coral reefs, where divers meet black grouper, tarpon and other exotic locals — many of the same fish found in the Caribbean.

Sitting atop extinct volcanic mountains, Bermuda's upper crust was built by corals that thrive in the clear, warm waters pulled up by the Gulf Stream. On the north side of the islands, shallow lagoonal reefs with a bit of sediment feature soft and branching corals. Beyond the big lagoon and adjacent to the south shore, the deeper corals of the rim reefs bear the brunt of wave action. They offer better visibility and have massive corals such as brain and star. Beyond the rim reefs, the deeper terrace reefs offer best visibility.

Aristotle classified corals as "flower animals," the literal translation of the class Anthozoa. Zoologist Sir Maurice Yonge was first to observe nocturnal feeding of hard corals, which live symbiotically with algae. In exchange for a safe place to live, the algae produce energy for the coral, which lays down a skeleton of calcium carbonate. The top layer is alive, and a colony can be killed by a single careless touch or kick by a diver.

Zillions of tiny coral polyps form massive structures, often big enough to be seen from space. Bermuda's coral reefs are healthy and contain many of the species also found in the Caribbean.

Bermuda maintains 29 protected marine areas for divers to enjoy. The best months to dive here are May to October. Expect visibility from 70 to 100 feet, sometimes to 150 feet, and water temperatures up to 85°F/29°C in summer, below 64°F/18°C in winter.

Open-water diving requires training and certification by an agency such as the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI, padi.com), but no certification is required to grab a mask and fins and go snorkelling. The scenery is similar, great spots are everywhere, and it's cheap. To wade out from the beach, try the snorkelling grounds at Church Bay in Southampton or Tobacco Bay in St. George's.

But there is no experience like open-water diving. Take advantage of your Bermuda vacation to get certified. Crash courses can be completed in as little as

two or three days, major resorts offer programmes, and PADI lists these local dive operators and trainers:

Blue Water Divers and Watersports

234-1034 / divebermuda.com

Dive Bermuda

238-2332 / bermudascuba.com

Fantasea Bermuda

236-1300 / fantasea.bm

Triangle Diving

293-7319 / trianglediving.com

Tucker's Point Dive & Water Sports

298-4050 / divinginbermuda.com