



The *Zenobia* is one of those wrecks most divers have heard of, even if they haven't dived it, but what is that makes some return to Cyprus year after year to revisit the site? DAVID BAKER, Chairman of Richmond Sub Aqua Club, has been asking around

The wreck of the *Zenobia*: Disneyland for Divers

AS I SAT WAITING for the plane to take off from Heathrow, bound for Larnaca in Cyprus, I wondered what it was that caused the members of Richmond Sub Aqua Club to return year after year to dive one particular wreck.

This was my eighth visit in nine years to dive the "Mighty *Zen*", but I was still considered by some on the trip to be a *Zenobia* novice. Members of RSAC have dived the wreck every year for the past 25 years, and at least two of the 18 of us on that flight in October had been present a quarter of a century ago.

I decided to try to pin down what it is about the *Zenobia* that maintained this attraction. "It's like Disneyland for divers," was the initial comment from Martin Pipe, one of those two original visiting divers. He has been back every year since. "It's constantly changing and there's always something new to discover," added Niall Elder, another *Zenobia* veteran.

The roll-on, roll-off ferry sank on her maiden voyage in 1980, without loss of life. She was on her way from Sweden to Syria, loaded with 104 trailers of cargo.

Problems with the computerised ballast-control system caused the *Zenobia* to list to port and eventually sink in 42m of water, close to the port of Larnaca. Initially diving on the wreck was forbidden by the Cypriot government, but today it is ranked as one of the top recreational dive-sites in the world.

One of the first to dive the wreck was Ian McMurray, owner of Octopus Diving. Over the years Ian has probably carried out more dives on the wreck than anyone

else on the planet.

After several years of trying, he was eventually granted a licence to take a limited number of divers out to the wreck, and divers from RSAC were among the first to make the journey.

IN THOSE DAYS THE WRECK of the *Zenobia* presented a challenging dive for technical divers, but one that was hugely rewarding. "The cafeteria was still full of tables and chairs, the tartan carpet on the floors and bottles in the optics behind the bar," said Martin. "The lorries were still hanging from chains in the upper lorry-deck, and finning underneath

lorries have been cut, the bulkheads in the accommodation blocks have rotted away, opening up the passageways, and many of the windows and hatchways have opened to make the wreck easier to navigate.

For those who like a challenge, the middle lorry-deck is now more easily accessible, as is the engine-room and chain-locker.

When the *Zenobia* was declared a protected marine reserve and fishing was banned, sea-life began to colonise the wreck. Now patrolling *en masse* in and around the wreck can be found grouper, jack, tuna, barracuda, sea bream, moray eels, lionfish and the odd turtle.



SO WHAT DOES this ageing wreck offer to the new diver? I asked two RSAC divers on their first visit what they thought.

"I was just blown away by the sheer size of the wreck," Guilhem Duprat commented. "The superstructure is still largely in place and there is so much to see and explore both outside and within the wreck. I did eight dives in four days,

and just began to scratch the surface of what the *Zenobia* has to offer."

Carole Jones said that she took some convincing to join the trip to Cyprus, as the wreck had always been described to her in terms of its technical difficulty and opportunities for penetration of the dark cargo holds.

What she found was very different. "I just loved descending in the blue and seeing the wreck emerge below me though a cloud of divers' bubbles. I never expected to see so much sea life, nor to see a turtle.

"That encouraged me to venture into the holds and so begin to understand what others see in this impressive wreck."

Viking Divers, with which we dived in 2017, is one of many dive-operators offering guided and unguided diving on the *Zenobia*.

While the wreck retains much of what made it a challenging dive for the technical diver, it is now also a safe and exciting place for recreational divers.

Twenty-five years on, RSAC hasn't tired of exploring the wreck of the *Zenobia*, and I'm sure we will be returning for many years to come.



David Baker celebrates his 400th dive with other RSAC members.

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