

This BSA M20 motorcycle in Hold 2 of the SS *Thistlegorm* was part of a shipment of military equipment on its way to aid the Allies during World War II.

Uncover the secrets of the Red Sea's greatest wreck, the SS *Thistlegorm*.

# FULL PENE TRATION

BY TRAVIS MARSHALL PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER MUSTARD

**I**t's a little after daybreak. The quiet on board breaks without warning, replaced with loud commands delivered in terse Arabic as the agile crew swings into position to man the lines. We have arrived.

My dive boat has been motoring along the coast of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula for nearly four predaylight hours. I walk out of the main cabin, where I've slept most of the bumpy ride huddled on the thin cushions of the bench lining the wall, and see the divemaster disappear over the side, bounce-diving to tie a guideline from our stern to the wreck. I pour a cup of thick Arabic coffee and groggily prep my gear in the early morning light. In a few minutes, I'll hop off the stern myself and make my way to the seafloor to penetrate the deepest bowels of what is arguably the most famous and historically rich shipwreck in the Red Sea.

A dive trip to the British supply ship *SS Thistlegorm* requires no small amount of effort, but it's unquestionably worth it for an opportunity to slip inside this veritable World War II time capsule, buried by a hailstorm of German bombs in 1941 while en route to deliver her cargo of supplies to Allied troops in Suez. After sinking, the *Thistlegorm* lay undisturbed for about 14 years, explains John Kean, an experienced *Thistlegorm* guide and author of the book "*SS Thistlegorm: The True Story of the Red Sea's Greatest Shipwreck*." At which time a budding explorer named Jacques Cousteau — piloting (continued on page 52)



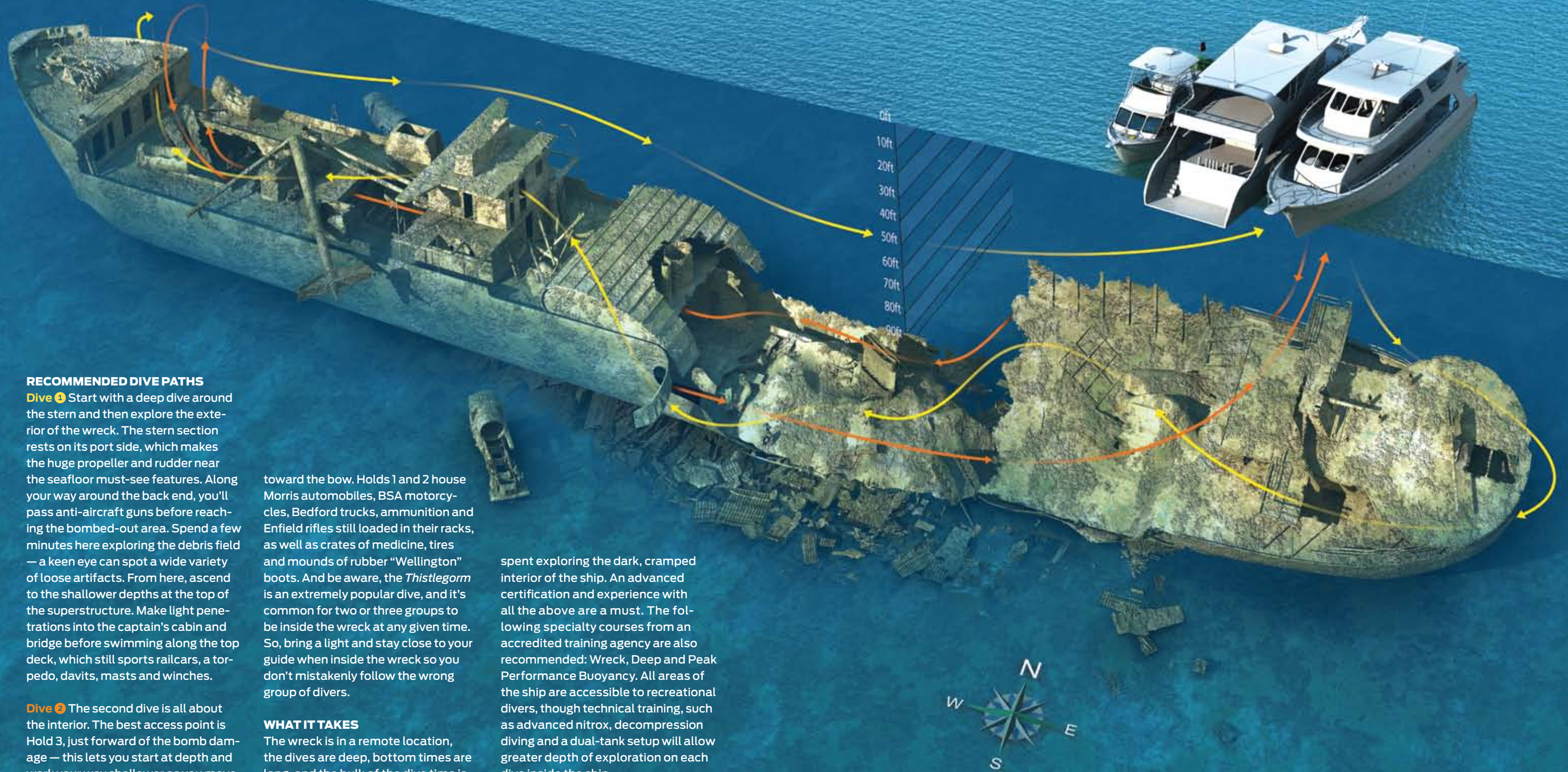
This steam locomotive was blown clear of the wreck and sits off the port side.

The *Thistlegorm's* winches and fallen foremast have become a playground for the Red Sea's abundant fish life.

## GO INSIDE THE THISTLEGORM

ILLUSTRATION BY ARTTOMEDIA.COM

While it's possible to cover the majority of the wreck in one dive, the *Thistlegorm*'s size and the richness of her cargo mean this wreck is worth numerous dives. Follow the dive paths below to hit all the highlights.



### RECOMMENDED DIVE PATHS

**Dive 1** Start with a deep dive around the stern and then explore the exterior of the wreck. The stern section rests on its port side, which makes the huge propeller and rudder near the seafloor must-see features. Along your way around the back end, you'll pass anti-aircraft guns before reaching the bombed-out area. Spend a few minutes here exploring the debris field — a keen eye can spot a wide variety of loose artifacts. From here, ascend to the shallower depths at the top of the superstructure. Make light penetrations into the captain's cabin and bridge before swimming along the top deck, which still sports railcars, a torpedo, davits, masts and winches.

**Dive 2** The second dive is all about the interior. The best access point is Hold 3, just forward of the bomb damage — this lets you start at depth and work your way shallower as you move

toward the bow. Holds 1 and 2 house Morris automobiles, BSA motorcycles, Bedford trucks, ammunition and Enfield rifles still loaded in their racks, as well as crates of medicine, tires and mounds of rubber "Wellington" boots. And be aware, the *Thistlegorm* is an extremely popular dive, and it's common for two or three groups to be inside the wreck at any given time. So, bring a light and stay close to your guide when inside the wreck so you don't mistakenly follow the wrong group of divers.

### WHAT IT TAKES

The wreck is in a remote location, the dives are deep, bottom times are long, and the bulk of the dive time is

spent exploring the dark, cramped interior of the ship. An advanced certification and experience with all the above are a must. The following specialty courses from an accredited training agency are also recommended: Wreck, Deep and Peak Performance Buoyancy. All areas of the ship are accessible to recreational divers, though technical training, such as advanced nitrox, decompression diving and a dual-tank setup will allow greater depth of exploration on each dive inside the ship.

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another soon-to-be-legendary ship, the *Calypso* — moored up to her and made the first-ever scuba-fueled explorations of her decks. Today, the *Thistlegorm* draws tens of thousands each year.

I make one final check of the conditions. Out here at the mouth of the Gulf of Suez, current and surface chop are common, and today has both. So I giant-stride off the stern with an empty BC and make a beeline down the guide rope to the shelter of the *Thistlegorm's* hull.

Descending over the blast zone — where German bombs detonated munitions holds near the stern — I can see both sections of the 415-foot-long ship: The front half sits mostly intact, upright at the shallower end of the sloping seafloor, while the stern, twisted 90 degrees, rests on its port side in about 95 feet of water. As I approach the opening in the hull, I glide over the tracks of a pair of Mark II Bren Carrier tanks, upside-down in the pile of munitions.

Unlike a passenger ship, with an interior full of winding passageways and cabins, the *Thistlegorm* features wide-open cargo holds and no shortage of vertical exit points. Slipping inside the wreck at Hold 3 feels a bit like walking into a war museum where shafts of sunlight illuminate the displays through skylights in the roof. I find myself surrounded by piles of hand grenades and anti-tank mines scattered in a state of disarray pretty much as they fell after the ship touched down on the seafloor. It's an impressive collection, but I know the most striking is ahead of me in the forward compartments.

The *Thistlegorm's* first and second holds overflow with a payload of large war material. My gaze extends across row after row of Bedford trucks, intact down to the tires and packed in the belly of the ship like sardines. And each truck bed is loaded to capacity with BSA motorcycles. Stacked along walls sit crates of medical supplies, Enfield

rifles and endless boxes of ammunition. The gravity of this cargo hits me like a wave. It's a drop in the bucket of what was required to keep that massive Allied war machine moving, but people's lives depended on this stuff — they never got it, and good people died trying to deliver it.

My time is running short, and I make my way shallower by traversing through the upper holds and spend a few brief moments exploring the rail cars, davits and a torpedo on the upper deck before finning to my guideline. My bottom time is maxed out, so I make a slow ascent and take an extra-long safety stop.

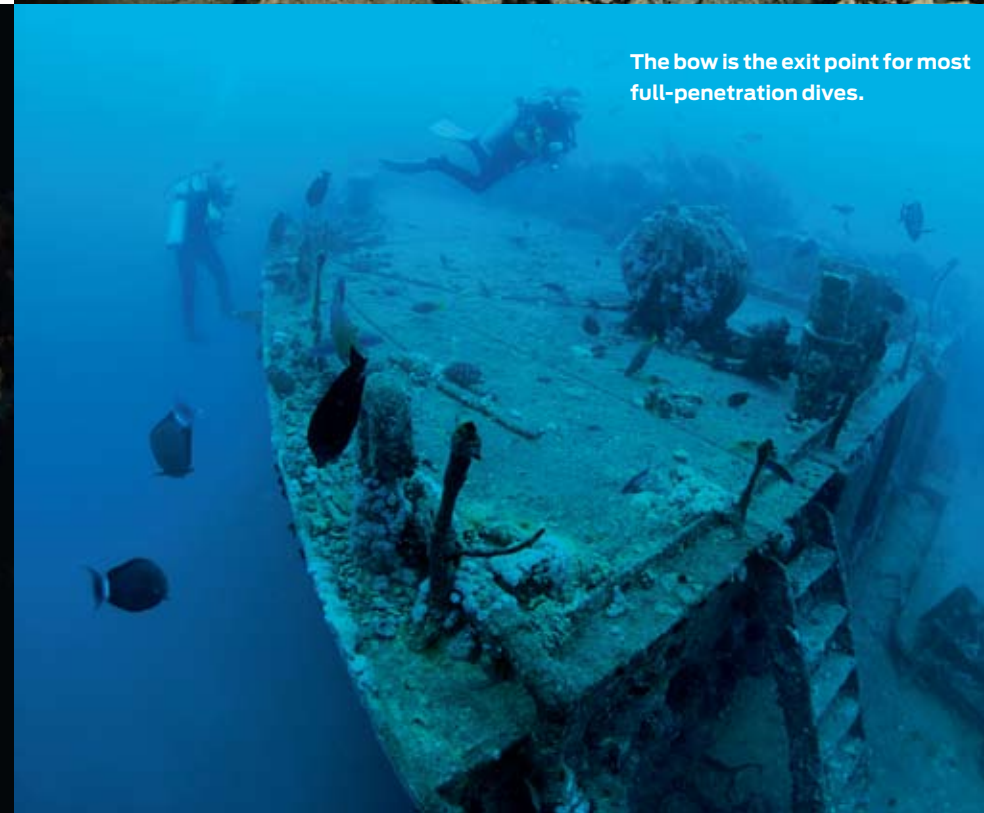
When I climb back on board, the boat has fallen quiet once again. It seems like we all need a moment to digest the experience. But before we can think too long, the cook swings up from the galley, cracking jokes through a smile as thick as his accent and ushering us inside for a hearty meal before we move on to drift the walls of Ras Mohammed. **SD**



Bedford trucks are found deep inside the *Thistlegorm's* holds.



Military trucks and supplies went down with the ship when it was bombed by Germans in 1941 en route to Suez.



The bow is the exit point for most full-penetration dives.

## Need to Know

**Getting There** The *Thistlegorm* can be dived from day boats or live-aboard "safari" boats departing from either Sharm el Sheikh, on Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, or Hurghada, on the Egyptian mainland. Both resort towns have their own international airport accessible via connections in Cairo, as well as many European hubs. **When to Go** The Red Sea's desert coastline sees very little rain, and there's almost no freshwater runoff, making for great visibility and diving conditions year-round, but conditions do vary by season. Summer — May to October — brings water temps in the mid-80s, along with scorching topside weather; winter — November to April — boasts more-comfortable air temps, but the water can drop to 70 degrees or lower.

**Operators** Both Sharm el Sheikh and Hurghada have a huge variety of day-boat and live-aboard operators. A comprehensive list can be found at [touregypt.net](http://touregypt.net). Top operators include Camel Dive Club ([cameldive.com](http://cameldive.com)), Red Sea Diving College ([redsea-college.com](http://redsea-college.com)), Emperor Divers ([emperordivers.com](http://emperordivers.com)) and Liquid World Scuba ([liquidworldscuba.com](http://liquidworldscuba.com)), where John Kean — longtime *Thistlegorm* diving expert and author of the only book about the wreck — offers personalized tours for \$150.

**Price Tag** Emperor Divers offers a five-day package including accommodations at the Bay View Hotel in Sharm el Sheikh ([bayviewsharm.com](http://bayviewsharm.com)), diving and airport transfers for about \$550. You can also download a certificate from its website good for one day of free diving. **Can't Miss**

**Topside Adventures** Definitely set aside time during your trip to visit Cairo, where you can check out the incredible historical collection at the Egyptian Museum, the pyramids at Giza and join a multiday cruise down the Nile to visit the temples at Luxor and Aswan.