S

cated in a snug circle in the stern of the
dive boat, we five Westerners all bow cer-
emoniously to our respected divemaster,
Kanai-san, who, gracefully kneeling on the
Astroturf deck, has bowed to us, and who
now returns our bows, so that we feel inclined to bow
to her once again: Ah so! Done bowing, we're all ears
for the dive briefing—though I still find it difficult to
tear my eyes away from the hundred-foot-tall cliffs that
soar above the pitching boat. You'd be hard-pressed to
imagine a more dramatic dive site. Here at the south-
ernmost tip of Japan's Yonaguni Island, where the
East China Sea surges and gnaws, powerful currents
have undermined the massive mudstone cape so that it
broods over the foam like a giant face. Think Skull
Island. Think Kong.

This would be a cool dive if there were noth-
ing down below but rock spurs and fish—very cool,
indeed, if its sapphire waters were populated by a
swirl of breeding hammerhead sharks, which is what
Kihachiro Aratake, a local dive operator, was hoping to
find when he first scouted the spot in 1985. What he
found instead gave him goose bumps of awe. He had
back-rolled practically on top of an enormous pyramidal

Mystery meets history
and mythology meets
gology at Japan's
cnigmatic underwater
monument, where
divers have to answer
one question:
“Do you believe?”

Secrets
of
Yonaguni

BY BUCKY McMHAON

Divers swim over the main
terrace of the underwater
monument at Yonaguni.

SCUBA DIVING JULY 2006

50
structure that began quite near the surface, and then plunged, by
distinct, terraced stages, to a depth of about 100 feet. Immediately
apparent was the hand of man—of many men!—in the uncanny
regularity of the level terraces, in the perfect right angles of the steps
that climbed to the top of the temple-like monolith. At the base of the
structure there seemed to be a cobbled road that looped around it,
and beyond the road a stacked-stone wall like the first line of defense
in a fortress complex. Aratake was convinced that he had chanced
upon the remnants of a lost civilization. He named the site Iseki—or
“Ruins”—Point. As Aratake sought advice from experts, word
spread of an underwater discovery in remote Yonaguni, potentially
many millennia old, an Atlantis of the East.

In subsequent dives, new features were revealed—an arched
entranceway, twin obelisks, a turtle carving. These and other features
of the Yonaguni “Monument” (as it is now locally known) Kanai has
sketched for us on her erasable slate, pretty much previewing the
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A life-sized statue of a humpback whale, made entirely of recycled tires treads and other cleverly employed leftovers, greets you at the Zamami harbor like a kind of lighthearted ambassador for the Kerama Islands. Located 20 miles southwest of Okinawa—a 40-minute excursion by high-speed, air-conditioned ferry—Zamami is the most (not very) populous of the Keramas, a cluster of 22 islands, with the 770-acre islets dotting the East China Sea. Near the erast humpie is a bronze shrine erected in honor of Marilyn, the celebrity dog of the Keramas whose canine true love nightly swims across the channel in response to her Howled Avowals.

The whole place seems imagined by Japanese animation master Miyazaki, and the sense of whimsy only increases under water with dive sites that are generally shallow, super-clear and bustling with color. Somehow, despite their proximity to Okinawa, and an obvious wealth of white-sand beaches, the Keramas have said no to every big-time developer. The happy results are a thriving traditional culture, family-run dive operations and pristine marine life. A typical Kerama dive is a slow kick around a truly massive coral head, dizzyingly animated with blue-green chromis, purple queen anemones, leaf scorpionfish, and many other eye-popping oddities of the macro realm. You’ll think you’ve been spirited away.

The middle. Me, I’m a skeptic. For starters, I wonder what the monument is doing down there in the water instead of up on top of the cliff, which is where I would build my zigzag. I would then hear a story courting that cliff top, all from Katsuki-san, who compared the YUP (Yonaguni Underwater Pyramid) to the giant Buddha of Afghanistan, carved into the rock face from forms suggested by nature—a pretty good theory. But for the moment I’m still under the spell of a highly qualified fellow skeptic, Boston University geologist Robert Schoch.

Dr. Schoch is doubly persuasive because he’s both an academic and an iconoclast whose best-known work argues for the pre-dynastic antiquity of the Great Sphinx. Another of his books, Voyage of the Pyramid Builders, credits with much greater sea-faring mobility than they are conventionally allowed. In short, pushing the clock back is a professional passion for Schoch. If the YUP were the smoking gun of the last Ice Age, probably as much as 10,000 years ago, manmade—or even somewhat altered by man—the work had to have been by prehistoric humans. In short, pushing the clock back is a professional passion for Schoch. If the YUP were the smoking gun of the last Ice Age, probably as much as 10,000 years ago, manmade—or even somewhat altered by man—the work had to have been by prehistoric humans.

As geologists, we’re used to working with rocks that have incredible regularity,” he told me. “If I want to find perfect angles, I’ll look to minerals.” Still, Schoch feels the YUP is a fantastic structure, more exciting to him, from a geological point of view, than even the Grand Canyon. But not manmade. He won’t believe it until somebody finds that smoking gun.

On my way out, the professor takes me to a workshop across the street, to look at his newly completed scale model of the monument. Ten years in the making, it is exactly, obsessively accurate. I can’t help thinking of the Richard Dreyfuss character in Close Encounters and his model of Devil’s Tower. If this true believer sees a turtle carved on the summit, who am I to say I’m not the blind one. Kimura’s parting words: “Until someone shows me proof that it’s not manmade, I will believe it is.”

On our next to last night on Yonaguni, Lisa, Lee and I go looking for evidence of the island’s antiquity in the town’s oldest bar. The proprietress, the town’s oldest bartender, swathed in purple cloth, lies a replica file cabinet and extracts a box in which, protected by bubble-wrap and swathed in purple cloths, lies a replica of the tablet. On it are carved a “+” sign, two “O’s” and a “x”. In Kimura’s opinion, this is the smoking gun.

Yet the moment of awe, and again the creeping doubt. And afterwards, shivering, the silver cup of hot barley tea—the whole experience a ritual of the tablet. On it are carved a “+” sign, two “O’s” and a “x”. In Kimura’s opinion, this is the smoking gun.

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But what about before then, in her parents’ and grandparents’ days?” Lee wants to know. “Ask her where her ancestors came from.” “Ah, the old days,” she says. “In the old days in Yonaguni there were only beautiful women and dogs. Then men came. When the men came, they killed the dogs.”

Knives! “I swear that’s what she said,” Lisa says. But it’s not entirely surprising. That day we toured the island with our dive guides, and wherever we stopped—a cave high on the cliffs, by a pinnacle of rock in the sea, or a crack in the earth—we encountered more myth than history. There were obelisks elaborately inscribed, but in a Japanese either too archaic or too arcane for any of our group to read. And there was an ancient grayed rock beside the sea, overlooking a gorgeous fringe of reef, where every tomb was a unique work of art, whether of recent vintage in flowing forms of cement, or of unknown antiquity, simple catacombs hewn into the bedrock, but so aptly carved they looked not just as if they had always been there, but as if they had always belonged. Yonaguni is a place where history shades into mystery, and stone weathers into art—or back again into rock.

Before we have to leave Yonaguni we manage to make a couple more spectacular dives—one on a deep-water wall topped with a coral garden, a paradise for several varieties of “Nemos,” as Kanai calls the anemonefish; and one at a maze of bedrock spurs, full of caves and graceful arches reminiscent of those tombs. We make it back to Iseki Point one more time, too, the Gothic cliffs above, the black stone giant below. Again the bowing. For me there’ll be the moment of awe, and again the creeping doubt. And afterwards, shivering, the silver cup of hot barley tea—the whole experience a ritual of the tablet. I’ve come to love just as it ends.