

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

Secrets 与那国島 of Yonaguni

BY BUCKY MCMAHON

*Mystery meets history
and mythology meets
geology at Japan's
enigmatic underwater
monument, where
divers face to answer
one question:
"Do you believe?"*

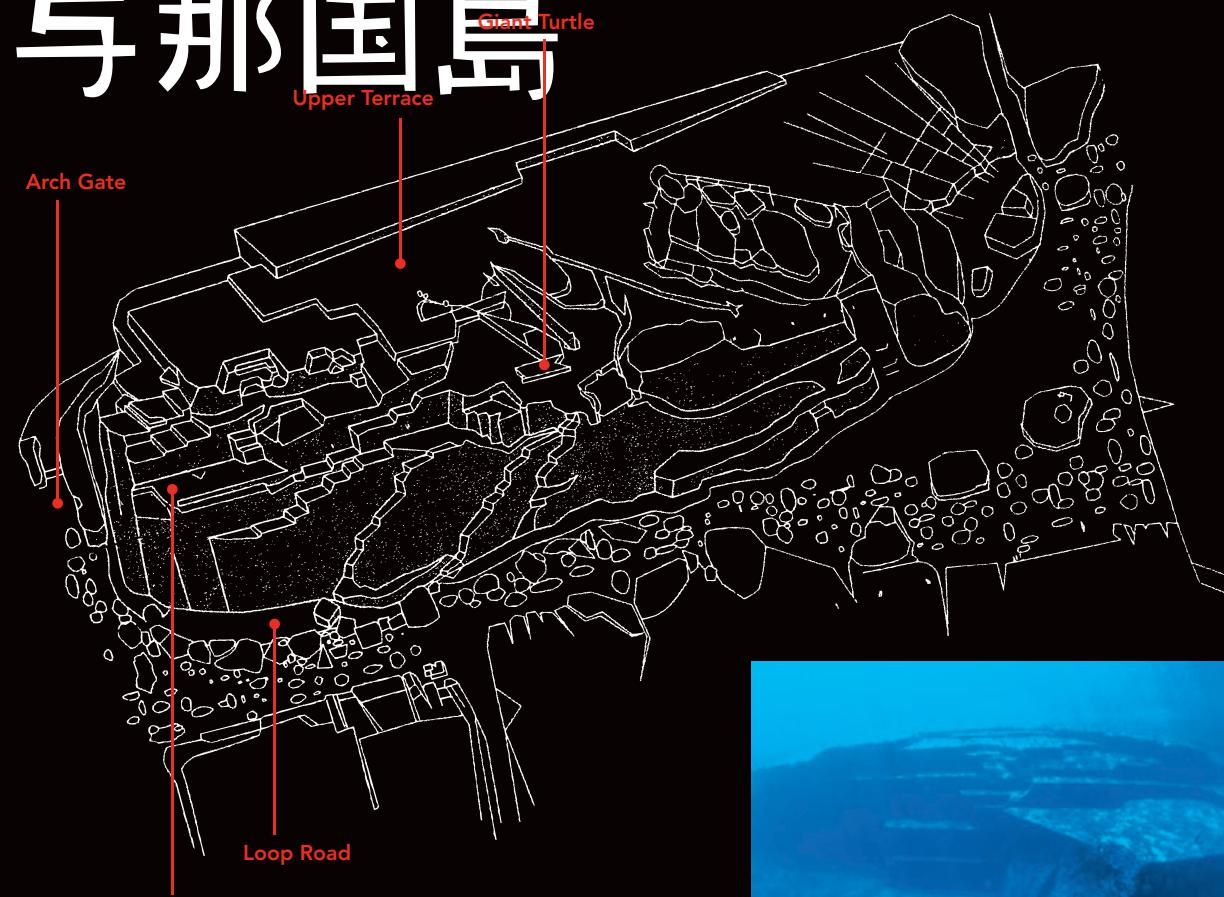
Seated in a snug circle in the stern of the dive boat, we five Westerners all bow ceremoniously to our respected divemaster, Kanai-san, who, gracefully kneeling on the Astroturf deck, has bowed to us, and who now returns our bows, so that we feel inclined to bow to her once again: Ah so! Done bowing, 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 southernmost 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 out over the foam like a giant face. Think Skull Island. Think Kong.

This would be a cool dive if there were nothing 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



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Left, Tachigami Rock protrudes sharply out of Yonaguni's southern coastline. The Japanese regard such rocks as sacred objects. Above, Professor Kimura's map of the main monument. Right, the main terrace.

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 entire dive in her chirpy, rapid-fire Japanese—translated for us *gaijin* by Lisa Slater, an adventurous 32-year-old Brit whose love of the language, culture, and especially the diving in the Ryukyu Archipelago (Okinawa and points south) led her to start a one-woman travel company, Open Coast. It's a thorough briefing, keeping Lisa plenty busy, including how we will enter—giant striding after the count of three—and how we will come up—together, forming a pod at the surface, everyone holding on to each other. They are very conscientious divers, the Japanese.

“Let's go diving!” Kanai says at last, in English. “*Hai!*” We finish gearing up and fin-slap to the transom, all of us brimming with anticipation about what looms below, visible only as shifting patches of darkness in the bright blue. “*Ichi, ni, san...*!”

We congregate on the bottom at about 60 feet in a world of giant stones. OK? Kanai signals. OK. OK? OK. OK? We're all OK. This then is “The Arch.” Kanai has sketched it again on her slate, and gestures charmingly—part geisha, part Vanna White—toward the stacked stones. It's a crude arch at best, the five stacked stones impressively large but not seeming carved at all. Yet kicking through the narrow passage I feel a chill, like entering a gloomy tomb. Beyond rise the “Twin Towers,” the marched obelisks. These do appear shaped—and very exactly at that. Two perfect rectangles, more than 20 feet tall, they seem aligned, like the megaliths of Stonehenge, for some astrological purpose. In fact, the foremost expert on the Yonaguni Monument, Professor Masaaki Kimura of the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa, believes the four-inch gap between the obelisks may have channeled a shaft of sunlight signaling the autumn equinox.

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Next we view “The Chapel,” a platform on which is incised—or eroded—a dubious cross. Then we turn a corner and behold—with surprise, despite the briefing, and a measure of the same awe Kihachiro Aratake must have felt—the main monument itself. It is an awesome sight: so massive, the stone so dark against the sea, the edges so uncannily carved. You immediately think of Maya temples, the ziggurats of Sumer. It makes you dream of deep, deep time. And yet, like an optical illusion, the closer you get to it the more it changes. What seemed from a distance so apart from its surroundings seems from up close more of a piece, though certainly the most extreme geological expression of Yonaguni's bedrock stones. Kneeling on a terrace, sighting along a wall, I see the perfect edges blur. I touch the dense Brillo-like surface of encrusting sponges and algae and wonder: Is it this growth that creates the illusion from afar of perfection, of artificially shaped edges? At the same time, the growth so obscures the face of the stone that any evidence of human craft would be difficult to find.

We spend a good 20 minutes kicking around the ruins, enjoying ideal conditions (the current can be wicked). I loiter at the monument's summit, admiring the play of sunlight through crashing waves above “The Turtle.” The mythology of Japan, according to Kimura, features magical guiding turtles, but this “carving” is a stretch. Could be anything, I'm thinking. On the other hand, if you were going to display a sacred loggerhead, this altar on the summit terrace would

be just the place. Nearby is a cavity in the rock, maybe 20 feet deep and somewhat rounded like a well. Professor Kimura calls this a *tida* hole—*tida* being the sun, and the hole the place from which it rises and disappears. *Tida* holes are features of other *gusuku*—which are palaces, fortresses and sacred sites all rolled into one—found in Japan. Another charming myth of the distant past.

Kanai has come to fetch me, pointing up. Soon we're gathered in our companionable pod on the surface, waiting while the boat backs up to us. The wind has come up, creating a feisty chop, and it's chilly aboard when we peel out of our wetsuits. One of the crew bustles about, distributing hot barley tea in little silver cups. Ah! *Arigato!* Lisa Slater, visibly revved by the dive, can't believe how lucky our little group has been. After all, we—Shelly and Michael, a married couple, both physicians, from D.C.; and Lee, Lisa's boyfriend, a film editor in L.A.; and me, the first dive journalist from the West to visit the ruins—arrived at Yonaguni (following three superlative days of diving in the nearby Kerama Islands) in a near gale. The weather has cleared right on schedule.

“So,” Lisa asks me, beaming, “what do you think?”

For a blunt instrument some 500 feet long by 80 feet wide and eight stories tall, the Yonaguni Monument is an effective cutting tool: It seems invariably to divide its viewers into skeptics and believers. Our group splits right down

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Beyond Yonaguni,
Diving the Kerama Islands



Left: Hard and soft corals cover sloping reefs and dynamic drop-offs in the Kerama Islands. Above: Anemonefish are common on the reefs near the Yonaguni Monument.

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 sunbathed, lushly forested islets dotting the East China Sea. Near the ersatz humpie is a bronze shrine erected in honor of Marilyn, the celebrity dog of the Keramas whose canine true love nightly swam 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 bursting 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 Keramas dive is a slow kick around a truly massive coral head, dizzily animated with blue-green chromis, purple queen anthias, 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 ziggurat. I would soon hear a theory countering that objection, via e-mail from Aratake-san, who compared the YUP (Yonaguni Underwater Pyramid) to the giant Buddhas 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 our early civilizers with a much greater seafaring mobility than they are conventionally allowed. In short, pushing the clock back is a professional passion for Schoch. If the YUP were manmade—or even somewhat altered by man—the work had to have been done while much of the oceans waters were still locked up in the glaciers of the last Ice Age, probably as much as 10,000 years ago. So he came to Yonaguni in 1997 hoping to find the smoking gun of a sophisticated antediluvian enterprise. Instead, he found “a wonderful little island, and a fabulous place to dive.” But nothing that couldn't be explained, “much more parsimoniously”—as he told me in a phone interview—“by natural processes.” In fact, his hopes crumbled before

he even got in the water, as he watched a typhoon tear away at the coast and observed how the rock broke apart along horizontal bedding planes, creating those level terraces and vertical steps.

“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 the other hand, Professor Kimura can be equally convincing as he marshals his evidence: stone tools, post-holes, wedge marks on the stone, a stone tablet with incised markings recovered under a collapsed portion of the wall—to name just a small portion. Kimura's persuasiveness lies in his deep knowledge of Japanese anthropology and that people's ancient and abiding love affair with stone, whether as sacred mountains or megalithic shrines, or deftly manipulated garden sculpture. In one of his many expeditions to Yonaguni, beginning in 1992, he brought along traditional stone masons as consultants. At his Okinawa office, where his assistant serves me (and my translator) green tea on a patch of desk temporarily cleared of high stacks of papers, Professor Kimura tells me he was skeptical himself for the first five years of his research, and came around only reluctantly. It was the stone tablet that changed his mind. He opens

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are carved a “+” sign, two “O”s and a “>”. In Kimura's opinion, this is the smoking gun.

On my way out, the professor takes me to a workshop across the hall 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 that 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 barkeep, showers us with attention and serves us delicacies. Mostly, though, the missus offers us talk, her life story. “This used to be a lonely island,” she says. It's not exactly bustling now; we were the only ones on the street and it's by no means late. But point taken: Yonaguni is modern now, with some small factories, a big harbor project underway, a big hotel coming, they say. In her youth it was all rural; she was a farm girl who escaped that life by traveling to Okinawa where she worked and saved money. But she missed the island and so came back and opened this bar.

TARO GOTO

a file cabinet and extracts a box in which, protected by bubble-wrap and swathed in purple cloth, lies a replica of the tablet. On it

“But what about before then, in her parents' and grandparents' day?” 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.”

What?!

“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—at 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 graveyard 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 I've come to love just as it ends.

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