

# International Centre for Archaeology Underwater

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## The SS Moltke and the Magnetic Island Shipwreck Trail

### Magnetic Island - Paradise in a Small Package

Magnetic Island, located just outside of the port in Townsville, Queensland has recently become a modern mecca for backpackers and real estate developers. While the island remains about 50% covered by national park land (AIMS 2005), it is quickly becoming a popular tourist destination in Northern Queensland. Among these visiting tourists is the SCUBA diving public who support two local dive shops on the island.

There are over 20 known shipwrecks around the island, which have been integrated into a shipwreck trail which circles the island created by Vivian Moran at the Maritime Museum of Townsville (Picture 1). The trail guides

visitors on a historical tour of the island's rich maritime landscape utilizing land based display boards in each of the bays.

Some of these wrecks are located in the intertidal zone suitable for snorkelling (*George Rennie*), some have created artificial islands (*City of Adelaide*) and some are completely submerged but have difficult to access via beach entry for diving (*Platypus*). Of



Picture 1: The shore display describing the SS Moltke - part of the magnetic Island Shipwreck Trail

all the wrecks on the island, the *SS Moltke* has earned the title of most-dived wreck both due to its accessibility and interesting history.

### History of the *SS Moltke*

The *Moltke's* life from 1870, the year it was built in Hamburg, Germany, to 1890 when it arrived in Townsville, Queensland has been obscured by history. But, upon its arrival in Townsville, the barque was described as being 'beautiful, spotlessly clean and expensively furnished' (Moran 2005).

Shortly after leaving Townsville for Rockhampton to deliver supplies in 1891, the



Picture 2: The *Moltke* in the early 1900's  
(Porter 1983)

*Moltke* ran aground and was quickly abandoned by its owner and arranged for salvage right to be sold at auction. The wreck and cargo brought 210 pounds when it was sold (Doyle 1994). To everyone's dismay, the new owner of the *Moltke* patched the hull and towed it back to Townsville where it returned to service. In 1895, the *Moltke* ran aground once again, this time in the Ross River in

Townsville.

A dentist on Magnetic Island, a Dr. McCabe, purchased the *Moltke* in 1911 to be used as a breakwater. After towing the ship to Geoffrey bay, he hired an 'explosives expert' named William Bright to set explosives on the barque and scuttle it for use as a breakwater in the bay (Barnes 1997). Rumour has it that Mr Bight and Dr McCabe consumed a good deal of alcohol before setting the charges, and while inebriated, prematurely blew a hole in the side of the *Moltke* (Moran 2005). And so, the *Moltke* found its final resting place nowhere near its planned destination.



Picture 3: The *Moltke* in the early 1920's  
(Barnes 1997)

During WWII, the wreck was used by the U.S. Air Force to practice bombing runs. Supposedly, a Beaufort bomber failed to clear the masts on one of these practice runs which caused considerable damage to both parties (Hughes and Lomax 1989; Kaitira 2005).

### The Moltke in 2005

Over time, the Moltke has broken down, both due to human interactions and natural processes, becoming more of a reef than a ship, a process most likely



Picture 4: The Moltke site in 2005 marked by a pylon.

accelerated by the nearby car ferry ramp, which is utilized every hour on most days. The ship is now completely submerged, its location marked by a single wooden pylon at the stern. A mooring buoy is also attached to the bow, allowing for easy access to the site from a boat.

Most divers today though, including students from pleasure divers, a PADI 5-Star training centre, access the site by swimming out from the car ferry ramp, or climbing down the rocks that form the foundation of the car ferry queue. This entry is not for the timid, and adds a modest level of necessary skill to the dive. Bardon Kaitira (2005), an instructor at Pleasure Divers, told ICAU in an interview that on a typical dive on the Moltke, 'when the tide is running off, the current pulls you straight into the shipping channel'. Kaitira was concerned that inexperienced divers may attempt to dive the wreck without first consulting a local shop. He



Picture 5: The entry to dive the Moltke is not for beginners.

also advised ICUA that while they do take basic open-water students on the dive, they reserve it for the final dive of the course.

The wreck has been the subject of a number of dive master projects on the island, as people continue to research the strange history of this barque. And as the Moltke continues to break down, and the underwater environment continues to grow around the ship, physically is disappearing. But in the minds of many local Magnetic Islander's and visiting SCUBA tourists, the wreck's history lives on.

*Bradley L. Garrett is a maritime archaeologist, co-founder of the International Centre for Archaeology Underwater ([www.archaeologyunderwater.com](http://www.archaeologyunderwater.com)) and a PADI Master Scuba Diver. This project was supported by a PADI Project Aware mini-grant. Special thanks go out to Vivian Moran at the Maritime Museum of Townsville, Pleasure Divers, Joanne Marston and Project Aware, and Coleman Doyle at the Museum of Tropical Queensland for the efforts in assisting with the project.*

AIMS

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