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The *Nasim II* shipwreck of Giannutri Island: Italy's *Thistlegorm*

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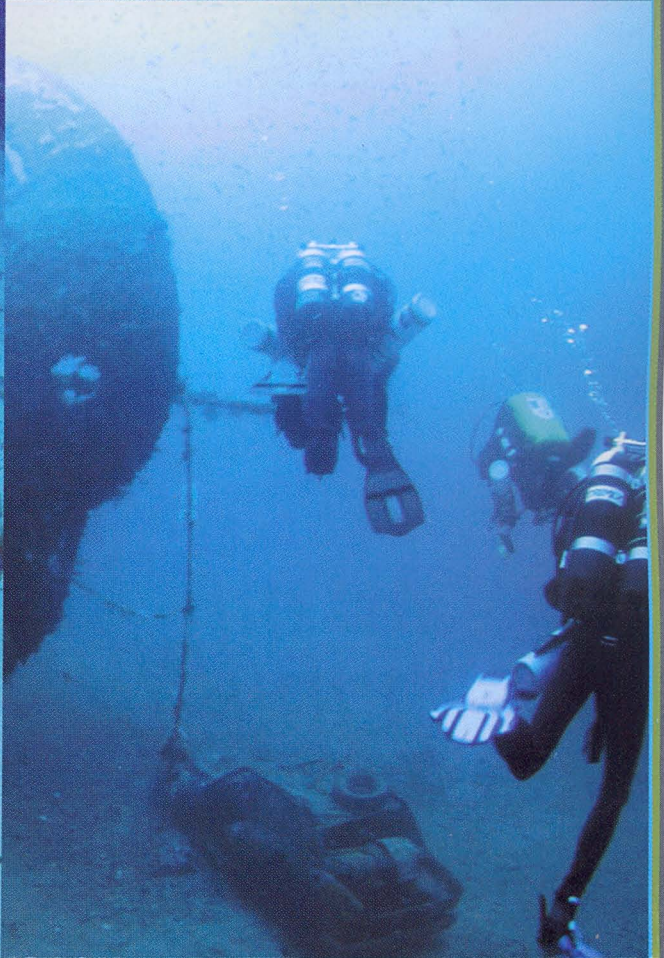
The *Nasim II* had a destiny similar to that of the *Thistlegorm*, the British freighter sunk by the Germans in 1941 in the Red Sea and discovered in the early 1950s by Jacques Cousteau. Relatively shallow and located in the Ras Mohamed resort area, the *Thistlegorm* is now visited annually by hundreds of divers from all over the world and is famous for her cargo of motorcycles, trucks, and two steam locomotives. The *Nasim II* had a cargo of automobiles but, on the other hand, is a deep wreck and a technical dive.

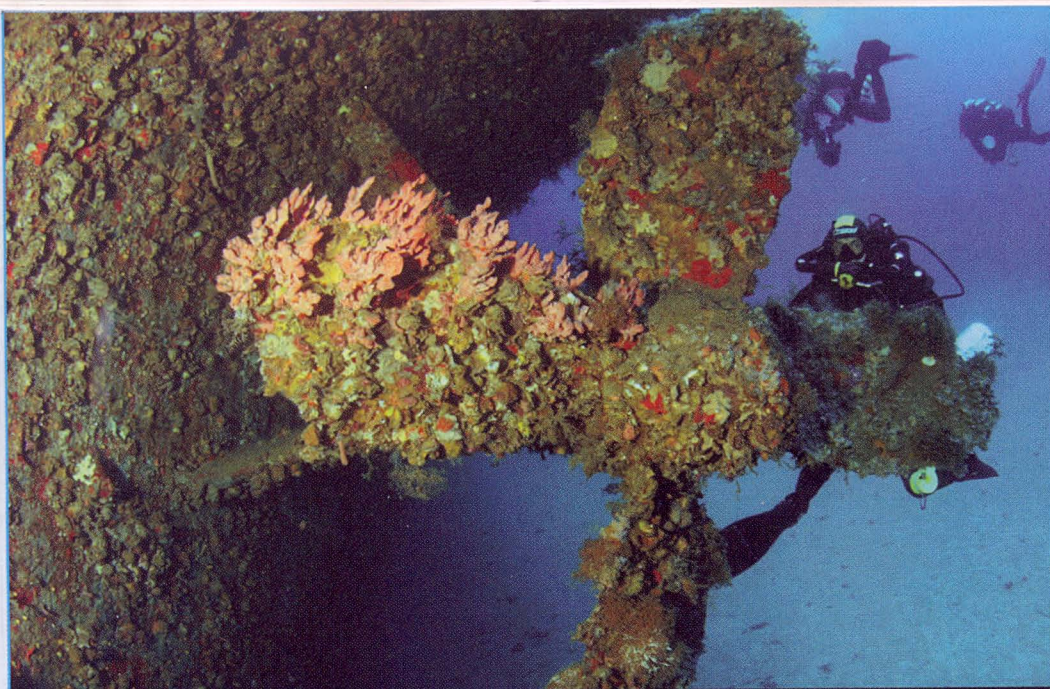
Giannutri, where our *Nasim II* lies, is the southernmost island in the Tuscany archipelago of Italy. It is located between the Argentario Peninsula and the Tyrrhenian Sea towards the island of Sardinia. The island is three kilometers long and about a half kilometer wide, with a total area of 2.3 square kilometers.

Nasim II wasn't an old ship when she went down. Built in 1959 at the Brooke Marine Ltd. shipyards in Lowestoft, UK, she was launched with the name of ELK or perhaps LIYN. She was powered by two strong, six-cylinder, Swiss-built diesel engines that developed 900 horsepower each, and could cruise at 14 knots with a full load. In the course of her 17-year career, she changed owners and names more than once. In fact, there is confusion whether she is properly the *Nasim II* or another ship built about the same time, the *Nasim*. But among those who dive her, she is known as *Nasim II*. At the time of her sinking, she was flying a Panamanian flag.

She left Livorno harbor bound for Alexandria on February 11, 1976, loaded with 50 automobiles on the deck (12 Fiats, 35 Peugeots and 3 Mercedes) plus 16 trailers and 3 trucks in her hold. That night, with calm seas, a gentle Sirocco wind from the southeast, and perfect visibility, the ship was proceeding slowly along the Piombino canal. But when she arrived in front of the Argentario peninsula, the wind suddenly shifted to the southwest, became dangerously strong and violent, and she ran into a sudden wall of rain that reduced the visibility almost to zero.

Foto di Mario Spagnoletti





The "Libeccio," as that heavy southwest wind is known in the Mediterranean, is much feared because it can create a tempest and high seas in a matter of minutes. Its forces can be very disruptive because they are so sudden.

At 4:30 a.m. on February 12, the ship, which should have passed safely to the east of Giannutri island, was pushed by the wind and the seas and struck land at Punta Pennello, outside the Cala Maestra harbour. The impact tore a gap into her bow, and she immediately began to fill with water.

The captain, perhaps in a desperate attempt to save his boat, tried to steer towards the shallows that he knew existed in front of Cala Maestra and run the *Nasim* aground and prevent her sinking, but he was too close to veer. The sea combined forces with the inertia of the ship's way and pitched the ship to port, and the first of the cars on

deck slid overboard. On the bottom the *Nasim*'s bow is now pointed north rather than south towards Africa, evidence that the captain must have tried to turn her towards the shallows.

Only 15 minutes after sending an SOS, the ship sank into a sandy hole at a maximum depth of 60 meters (195 feet),

right in front of Cala Maestra. The debris of cars falling overboard was scattered from a depth of about 35 meters (115 feet) to the full depth of the *Nasim*.

Mr. C. Morbidelli, one of the few inhabitants of the island who helped rescue the survivors, remembers the operations, including the saving the 17 crewmembers who survived. He tells that the ship first hit the rocky coast with its front part, in effect shredding the ship's steel bow. The damage is easily seen by divers today.

The first underwater dive exploration had to be postponed until the end of May 1976. At that time the divers found the ship to be positioned on her side and one Fiat 132, one Peugeot and one Mercedes easily reached. One diver freed one the spare tires, which squirted dangerously to the surface. Others took away car seats, doors, and whatever else they were able to take from the cars. At the time, the name of the ship's owner, "Neptunia," was visible; it has now



corroded away and disappeared. Over the years, the ship and her cargo have been extensively plundered.

Our Dive

For us, it was a long one-day trip from Torino in the Piemonte region where we live up to Porto Sant'Ercole near Grosseto in Tuscany (almost 600 km/370 miles). Arriving at the diving center, we loaded our gear on board a small boat. It was an 11-mile boat ride to reach the wreck, and we are eager to document it.

Arriving at Cala Maestra, we immediately found the signal buoy fixed at the dive site. The dive was to begin from the top of the wall about 100 meters in front of shore—on the slope where the first cars slid off the boat. In fact, someone has named the place the “garage” because of the many vehicles in the sand.

The great visibility of the sea near Giannutri, which is favored by only slight human presence and a total

absence of polluting sources, allows a diver to already see the ship's shape near the bottom of the slope, at approximately another 30 meters below the cars in the “garage.” The sea's turquoise water is so transparent and provided such an intense light that our photographer usually used no flash. The risk was more often over-exposure.

We dove with three open circuit systems and one closed circuit rebreather (mine). Our rigs would allow a tour throughout the area, starting from the wall and covering the whole structure of the wreck, with the time to observe all the details. Our group has been diving together for many years, and we are used to the details of diving a mission. Before the dive we carefully checked all of our equipment to solve even the smallest problems and together reviewed the dive plan, all our decompression and emergency procedures, and communications signals.

Underwater, the atmosphere was surreal because of the vision of things that usually are full of life: cars right side up and upside down sitting on a clean granular and sandy bottom.

After the “garage” and the first cars and after having checked the overall scenery, we moved downslope to the ship, first reaching the huge keel. The view was magnificent, lying on her side with her bow positioned towards north of the island and cars scattered around in the debris field. It's mainly the cars that are photographed by all divers who have the luck to dive here.

Doubling the bow is probably the best scene of the entire dive. The complete shape of the ship can be seen, with her marine-wood bridge still well preserved (although unsafe now), the big foremast still positioned in place, and even the poop deck visible. In front of the hatches of the forward hold and on the sand bottom are more cars, now largely torn apart by the plunderers and souvenir hunters.

To penetrate the wreck nowadays is dangerous. There are evident signs of a structural decay and environmental

corrosion, and future divers of the site are advised not to enter the wreck. Also, being a cargo vessel and not a cruise boat, the passageways among the cabins are very narrow. The only large, easily accessible room is the control room, which is populated by lobsters.

Proceeding towards the stern, we found the loading cranes as well as opened hatches that led to the holds and the crew cabins. The emblematic part of the ship and, probably of the entire dive, is the big propeller at the stern with its long shaft extending into the hull. Our photographer had the divers who wanted to have the best “iconic” photograph rest on it for their portrait.

All too soon, we reached the end of our planned 30-minute dive time and our cylinders were getting near their gas limit. We turned to swim back the same way we came—towards our signal buoy and our slow, safe decompression.

Ascending the wall that we had swum down during our descent, we noticed some small caves that we would like to explore during one of our next dive trips to this location. But now we had to move on to our first decompression stop. Hanging on our buoy line, we recalled the fantastic images of the *Nasim II*, and the long drive to get here was more than worth it. Mario, our team photographer, began to check his shots in his camera's display while we looked on. The fishes swam freely around us in this clear sky-blue water, brightened by the summer sun.

Back on the boat, we headed towards port. It became a long trip because our boat's engine chose to break down completely and refused to be fixed. Gladly accepting a tow from a passing boat, we arrived at the diving center after three hours. We changed, loaded our car, and at last arrived home after dark—happy to have made the trip and enjoyed this beautiful dive.

Our dive team on the Nasim II: Gherardo Biolla, Giorgio Graglia, Mario Spagnoletti (our photographer), and Pierpaolo Montali (diving a CCR).