



# Diving on the Wreck of the *France*

BY PIERPAOLO MONTALI, NAUI 44674 / PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARIO SPAGNOLETTI



IT WAS A NEAR BLIZZARD ON THE FRIDAY THAT WE DROVE TO HAUTE-SAVOIE, FRANCE, TO DIVE ON THE WRECK OF THE STEAMSHIP *FRANCE* IN LAKE ANNECY. STARTING FROM TURIN, ITALY, IN JANUARY 2009 IN WHAT WOULD SOON BE CALLED A "SNOW STORM OF THE CENTURY," MY FOUR DIVE BUDDIES AND I HEADED FOR THE FRÉJUS TUNNEL IN OUR FULLY-LOADED NINE-PASSENGER VAN.

Philippe of the Savoie Dive Club would be waiting for us at Bourget-du-Lac near Lake Annecy. It was snowing heavily as we drove up the motorway, and we were moving very slowly amidst all the trucks on the road.

We wondered if we would ever get there, especially when in front of the Fréjus Tunnel we saw heavy trucks lined up all over the road maneuvering to pass each other at the tunnel entrance. Finally, we entered the tunnel and proceeded slowly at a safe distance from the truck in front.



Finally we reached the exit into France, and it looked like a normal day. Although it was cold, there was no snow at all, and our travel on the French side continued as if nothing had been happening. The Alps were truly dividing the weather disturbance.

We were running an hour and a half late; we had forgotten Philippe's mobile number, and no one had it on their phone. It recalled the days before we all had cell phones, when appointments were made well in advance and couldn't be changed at the last minute. We hoped that Philippe would remain waiting for us.

When we arrived, Philippe was still there. He had reloaded the small boat onto his truck and was talking to his friend, who wanted to get on the water with us. Thankfully, neither had left and both were understanding of our delay. We got ready and transferred our equipment, while Philippe re-launched his boat and readied it. It was about noon when we left the tiny dock and motored ten minutes under a leaden sky. We arrived directly over the wreck, and quickly anchored to the marker buoy.

My mind began to scroll through the stories and images I had gathered of the life story of the steamship *France* and her sinking off the Imperial Palace hotel.

#### THE PASSENGER STEAMSHIP *FRANCE*

The *France* was a paddlewheel passenger ship. She was built in Zurich by Escher Wyss & Cie., fitted out by the boatyard of La Puya, and launched on May 13, 1909, by the Compagnia dei Vapori del Lago.

She was 47 meters long by 12 wide and equipped with a 350-horsepower steam engine with paddle wheels on either side. Able to carry up to 700 passengers, she was capable of speeds up to 14 knots. The *France* had a large saloon for relaxing, another for smoking, and two additional cozy indoor rooms. At that time, Annecy was opening to a large volume of tourism—even many guests from the United States of America, who enjoyed evening moonlight boat trips along the edges of the lake. Stopping at each port, the *France* made the grand tour around the lake in about two hours fifteen minutes.

During the day the boat performed a second role of local common transport, ferrying food and animals across the lake on Tuesdays, which was market day, serving as a messaging service, or loaded with bicycles for Sunday trips along the banks.

The "Big Lake," as it is called in the town of Annecy, is 14 kilometers (8 miles) long and three kilometers (2 miles) at its widest point. Its surface area is 27 square kilometers (10.5 sq. miles), and



its maximum depth is 82 meters (270 feet). Lake Annecy is in a unique setting of mountains all around, allowing excellent leisure boat trips with grand vistas for those who could afford a holiday in the Haute-Savoie.

As a utilitarian tourist attraction, the *France* became a sort of floating town monument to the people of Annecy, inseparable from the social fabric, enough so that even the gigantic consumption: 20,000 liters (5300 gallons) of water and a ton of fuel oil every trip around the lake was easy to accept!

In 1940, the war and its shortages limited the boat's use. For a time in March 1944 it was even turned into a floating jail after a mass arrest by the military.

After the war, the vessel resumed her tourism work on the lake, but times had changed. Technologically outdated, the steamer soon proved less of an attraction for a large flow of well-to-do regulars, who now preferred their sightseeing trips by car. And so, in 1962, the Compagnia dei Battelli a Vapore on Lake Annecy announced the boat's decommissioning. But the *France* had entered the collective hearts of the townspeople, and there immediately arose a popular protest that culminated in the formation of a Committee for Defense of the *France*. The city administration was urged to turn the old boat into a floating restaurant or a sort of pier. Although it

refused to pay the costs necessary, the city did promise that if a buyer could be found, the boat would not be sent to the scrapyards and broken up.

A public subscription was launched, but in the end it was Jean Bruel, owner of the Bateaux-Mouches in Paris, who purchased the *France* and became the lucky new owner. Over the next year, the *France* was restored and reconditioned, and at the end she had received the gift of a second youth in a rather modern style: both of the cabins now with a shower, plus a pool-table deck and wicker deck chairs.

In 1965, the old paddle-wheeler lost her certificate of navigation and was slated to become a permanently anchored showpiece offshore. Her owner, however, had other ideas and organized a totally illegal cruise of one last lap of the lake. Calling back into service for the occasion several people who had been crewmembers and personnel of the old Compagnia dei Vapori del Lago, the final voyage took place on May 27, 1965.

Then the *France* returned to its role as a stationary venue for gala banquets, receptions, evenings of theater workshops, and other meetings, as if to renew the splendor of Annecy and the lights of an earlier time, moving only to pivot around her anchorage.



Then on Saturday, March 13, 1971, the inhabitants of the city awoke to find the *France* had literally disappeared from the lake, leaving only a few scraps and a partially inflated small raft on the surface. The police came, and the director of navigation of the lake arrived with divers. It remained unclear why the *France* had sunk. Some spoke of sabotage, others of structural failure due to cold and old structures that were never fully and completely restored, and still others of water entering through a leak below the waterline. Different hypotheses were highly imaginative, but no one ever succeeded in clarifying the real cause of the sinking of *France*.

#### OUR DIVE

Anchored on the wreck, the voices of my fellow divers recalled me from my reverie on the past and brought me back to the present. Time to dive.

At last we were descending into darkness. The lake water is clear but dark and our only reference for the descent was the anchor line, which we kept close at hand. The cold was more intense and biting (about 6° C / 43° F, where it will remain until April).

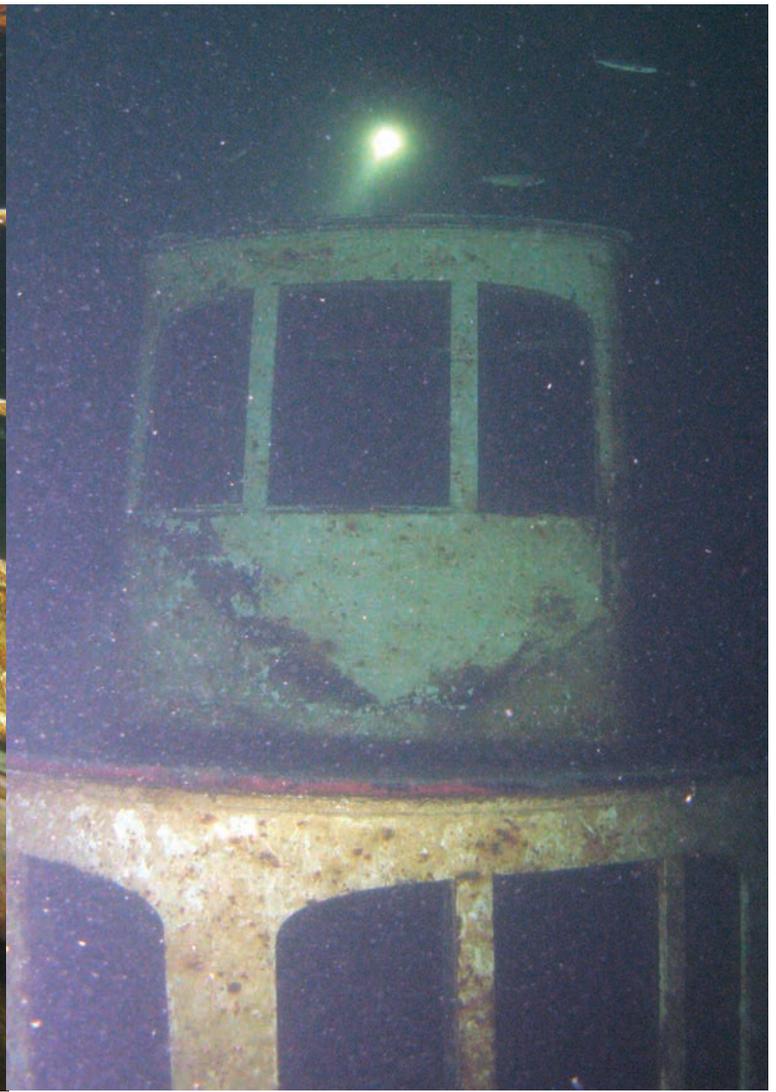
Four of us were diving open circuit; I was diving closed. Because one of the divers was only in a semi-dry suit, we had to be careful

of him chilling. We planned for his dive to be twenty-two minutes, with thirty minutes for the rest of the team.

On the bottom it was complete darkness, and good lights were essential. Given the depth and the temperatures that were to be encountered, we were using trimix, even though the locals make the dive safely on air—though with very much shorter bottom times.

The *France* rests upright on a silty bottom 42 meters (138 feet) down. We began our inspection with a circumnavigation of the wreck over the external structures. The classic ship's wheel has long since been removed, but most of the structures on deck and the railings are substantially intact and shone brightly in our dive lights. On the starboard side, there is still the sign with the name "France" in a beautiful decoration in a fan. (The one on the port side has been removed.) Amazingly, the portholes are largely still in their housings and many have their glass intact.

The hull has been marked up by dozens of "authors" with their silly, useless graffiti scraped into the aggressively growing encrusting algae. Aft there is a break in the wooden deck and at the stern the hull of the big boat plunges into the mud.



The interior should be entered only by experienced and equipped divers. From the entrance hallway one can reach the engine room and the pool table—after passing the almost perfectly intact toilets, looking as if they could still be used.

It is very important for open circuit divers to pay attention the environment because exhaled bubbles can knock down a rain of organic debris from the ceiling, greatly reducing visibility.

The card room below is blocked by the collapse of the ceiling due to structural failure of the hull after the sinking.

From the lower deck, a central staircase leads to the upper deck, where there is another room, now empty. There is a small room with a sort of couch, and a postal cabinet containing several messages can still be seen.

The *France* is one of the most beautiful shipwrecks in Europe; very similar to the *Jura*, though much more modern. The boat evokes scenes from the Belle Époque and the early twentieth century, although the general reconditioning in the 1960s resulted in some inappropriate renovations and modernizations.

Our dives and visit to the *France* more than repaid the fatigues of the journey and the cold.

Sincere thanks to Philippe and the Savoie Dive Club at Chambéry for his expertise and his patience.

#### IT'S GOOD TO KNOW THAT:

From November to February diving is marked by presence of numerous char, a freshwater fish with a fusiform body similar to salmon or trout to which it is related. Char are found in all the Alpine lakes, mainly at depths of 30 to 70 meters (100-230 feet). Their size varies from 30 to 50 cm (12-20 inches), and their color is variable depending on weather and habitat.

In summer the wreck of the *France* is frequently overrun by local divers, and access can be difficult, making for a more complex dive and problems just gaining a place. If possible, you should use the permanently fixed surface buoy to avoid repeated anchoring, which can damage the boat and its bridges and deck, as often happens when divers are making fast and frequent visits.

Without a doubt, better and longer diving is possible for those trained in mixed gas diving. A trimix blend for the specific depth is indicated; open and closed circuit divers will each have to determine their own specific blend or diluent.