

Unique Dive Site

Yonaguni Jima

Japan is home to some excellent cool water diving in winter—currents, 21°C water, and rocky—but it is so worth the journey



Dive boat of Sou Wes Dive Centre

—Lured by stories of schooling hammerhead sharks and a lost city submerged below the surface, Farhat Jah headed out on the long journey to Japan's westernmost island.

The sun rose on a small outcrop of rock in the Pacific Ocean. The sea was calm, but a steady roll of small waves slid up to the coast and then petered out on a seemingly invisible reef. The sun was warm but muted at this hour. A fishing boat motored slowly out of the tiny harbour and headed for the horizon. I looked out over the balcony and saw a cow chewing on grass in the garden. It was January and at 7:45 in the morning, the sun had just risen on Yonaguni Jima—Japan's forgotten isle.

Text and photos by Farhat Jah

Yonaguni rose up out of the ocean floor. This was no coral atoll, it was a solid rock. One small town, two very small villages and two sheltered harbours made up the human addition to the island. It was cold, 16°C, and a gentle wind blew at all times

over the rocks. The atmosphere was quite bucolic.

We were 60 miles from Taiwan, 1,800 miles from Tokyo and yet, due to the similarity in vegetation, I felt as though I was in Micronesia. Sugar cane and tropical scrub covered most of the land, while fields and the airstrip took up what remained.

Rocky cliffs dominated the coast, punctuated by the most idyllic, white, sandy beaches with clearly visible coral bommies sitting in the shallow water. Best of all, not a person was to be seen anywhere.

We arrived in an old and greasy Canadian-made DASH 8 turboprop. After a low flight over





LEFT TO RIGHT: One of two tiny harbours on Yonaguni Island; Serene landscape and rugged rocks of Yonaguni coast; Lionfish on Yonaguni reef



water, the aircraft circled the island before lining up on the new runway. Passengers were treated to a view of the waves crashing relentlessly on the black cliffs. Winds gusting over the rock, made for an interesting landing.

We had come here to look for schooling hammerhead sharks and to see the ruins at Iseki Point. The whole expedition rested upon two people: Douglas Bennett, a 42-year-old ex-U.S. Marine who runs Reef Encounters 300 miles away on Okinawa; and Kihatchiro Aratake, the 65-year-old owner of Sou Wes Dive Centre and director of the Yonaguni Tourism Association.

We loaded up a rusty Toyota minibus and trundle along the road to one of the two tiny harbours. The dive master carried some of the kit down. Rather than watch

him, we pitched in and carried extra tanks, BDC's and general bits. I was getting the impression that the Japanese way of doing dive things is a little different to the western world. I needed to borrow a BCD and was given an old Sea Quest that had not been made for 15 years and was a size or two too small. Regardless, it went on, and I could just get the clips done up—perfect. I smiled to myself at the thought of what some less flexible diver might have thought.

Diving

Kihatchiro piloted his own boat. Stricken with polio, he dropped his crutches and nimbly disappeared up into the bridge of a 50ft metal hard boat made in Taiwan. We put our own kit together. This is Japanese style diving. It's a bit like a British dive club

renting a boat but with no one who can speak English.

At Iseki Point, Doug briefed us: "Move away from the boat as soon as you can go down and move away." He gave me the choice of a backward roll down two metres or a giant stride. Like a fool I choose the giant stride, the precarious jump into the water was done avoiding the three ladders that hung off the stern. Cisca had short legs and cleared hers by six inches. I needed a camera. Unfamiliar with the system I wondered what to do when Doug came to my rescue.

"I'll take it," he said. And when I took a giant stride in, he merely rolled in backwards and took the pressure of the water on his back. "I could have done that," I muttered, as we submerged below the surface.





Divers explore the upper terrace at Iseki Point (above), at 30ft (right)



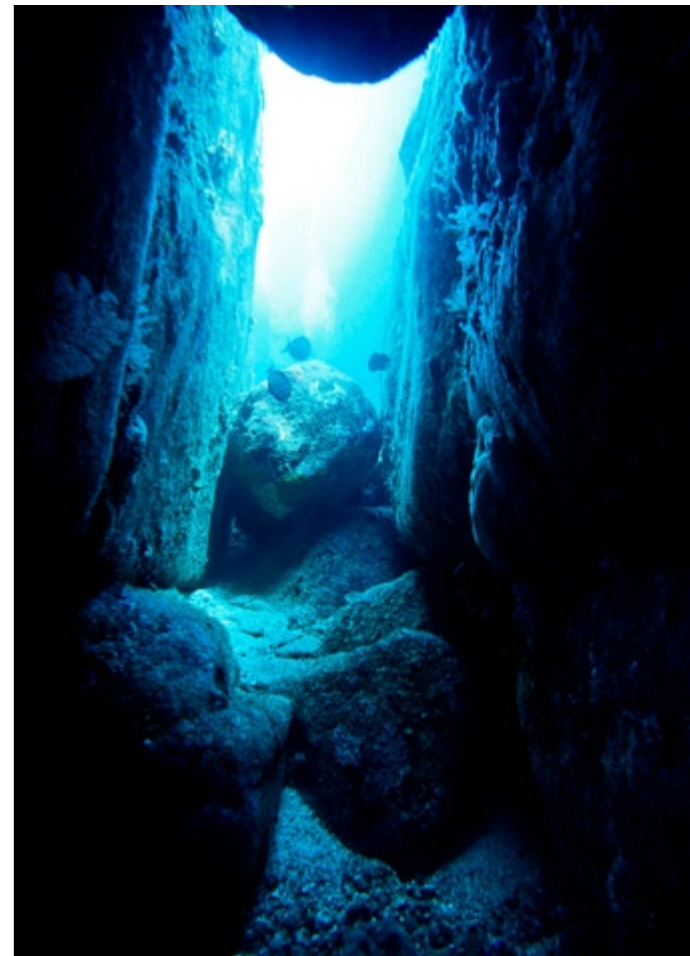
The cool 23°C water seeped slowly into the wetsuit. Doug handed me my Olympus OMD. It's as small as my G12 housing and actually lighter. I clipped it

on, and we started to descend. Cisca's Suunto dive computer turned on and then died. Needless to say, she was not overly happy, but

she's old school and always dives with her Momentum dive watch. She grimaced at me, as she twisted the bezel round and double checked her air and depth gauge. Day one of diving in Japan, and we really were back in the early 1990s!

The other divemaster, Takashi San, took off with his Japanese client, a quiet but delightful vet from Nagoya. Doug let him go and took us slowly forward along a rock wall towards a swim through. But this was no ordinary swim through; it consisted of blocks of stone placed here in an arch. We went through these and popped out into what looked like a street.

The rock was smooth and barely covered with algae. It differed from every other part of this island and had steps. I was bewildered, trying to take in a scene similar to the Mayan pyramids,



THIS PAGE: Scenes from Yonaguni diving



Detail of the steps of the Upper Terrace

Yonaguni



Angelfish off Yonaguni Jima

but underwater. I twisted around and looked at the walls, steps and cut terraces.

A group of small fish sat on an anemone and a big angel fish came up to us, said hello and wandered off. We came to a dead end, turned around and went around a corner at 67ft.

The current picked up, exactly as Doug said it would, and I flew along. I wanted to descend, but Doug motioned to me urgently to come up and round to him. I did as instructed. Just then, we were all caught in a surge of sea and sped down the wall together! Had I carried on, I wouldn't have made it back. We ended up on what the

divers call the Upper Terrace—the top of the man-made structures.

The carved steps gave a dramatic backdrop to the entire scene, but soon enough, our air was running low and it was time to surface. As my hand broke the surface, the cool January wind met it, and I momentarily contemplated staying under the surface. But surface we had to do and moments later, we were sitting in the comfortable “wet cabin” of the vessel.

A healthy wind blew over the sea making for a chop. Takashi produced some gorgeous spiced green tea, and we all sipped away at this, while Kihachiro motored slowly to the middle of the sea.



Lots of nudibranchs can be found at Yonaguni

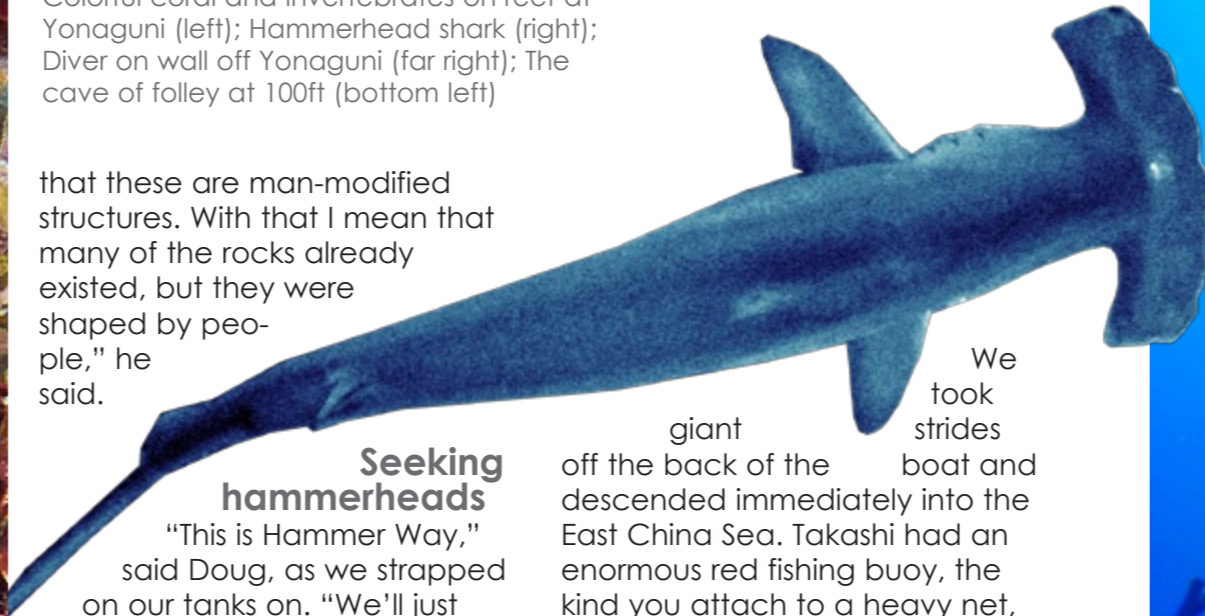


Colorful coral and invertebrates on reef at Yonaguni (left); Hammerhead shark (right); Diver on wall off Yonaguni (far right); The cave of folley at 100ft (bottom left)

that these are man-modified structures. With that I mean that many of the rocks already existed, but they were shaped by people," he said.

Seeking hammerheads

"This is Hammer Way," said Doug, as we strapped on our tanks on. "We'll just cruise around in the currents and see if we can find some hammerheads. We may not, so get ready for 40 minutes of blue."



We took strides off the back of the boat and descended immediately into the East China Sea. Takashi had an enormous red fishing buoy, the kind you attach to a heavy net, which he dragged behind him on a reel of thick rope.

I looked everywhere and could see nothing but blue. In order to



Yonaguni



"Are you sure these sites are real?" I asked Doug, as the tea slid down and warmed my insides. "Some people say that this is natural," he explains laconically,

"but you saw where there were piles of rock. That rock came from the other side of the island. The lines, the steps, the carving... I definitely believe



Detail of soft coral on reef at Yonaguni; Hammerhead shark (right)

avoid becoming disorientated, I alternated between looking at Takashi the vet, Doug, Cisca and the surface. We swam lazily, in a box-like search. It really was blue. I clutched OMD and

my wondered what this meeting would be like.

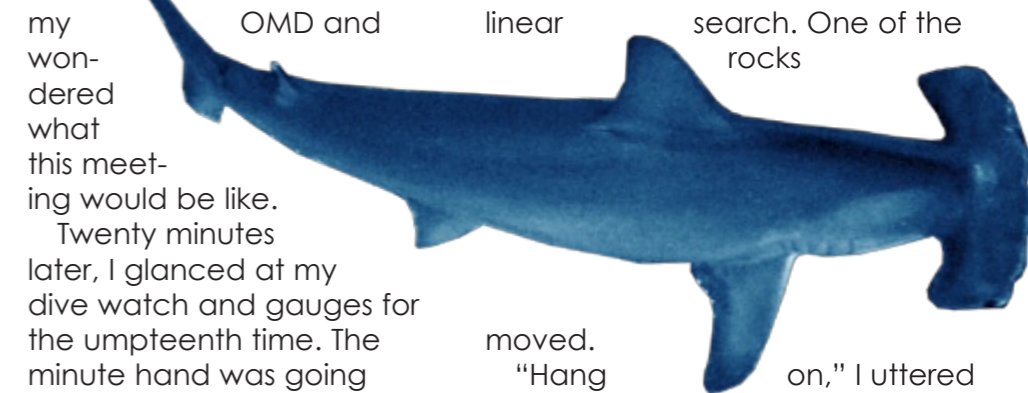
Twenty minutes later, I glanced at my dive watch and gauges for the umpteenth time. The minute hand was going around inexorably against the bezel, and my air was moving in the opposite direction with equal strength. In addition to these concerns,

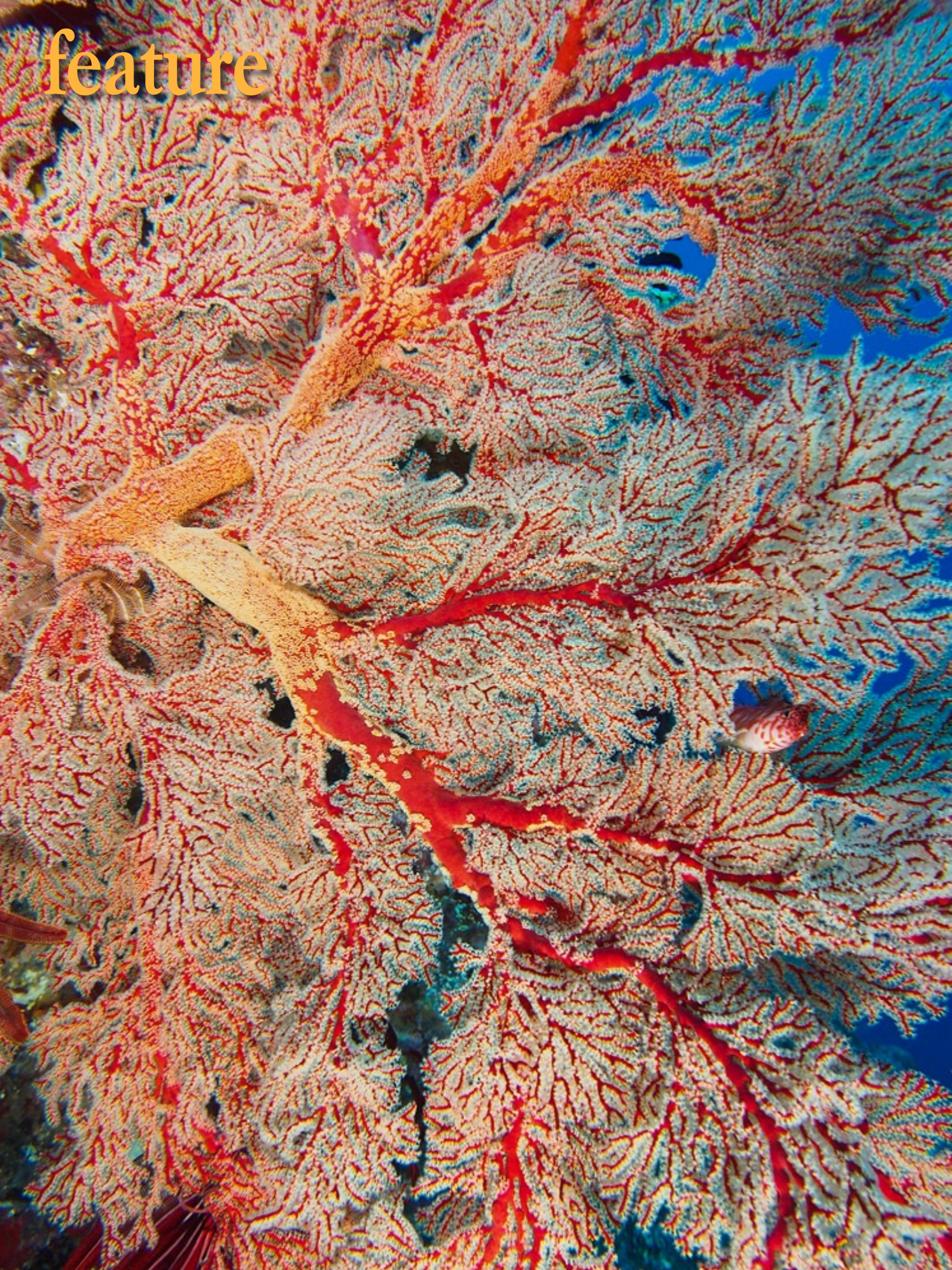
all I had seen so far was loads of blue. Just then, we saw a shape, a shadow... It was the bottom.

We had dropped to 60ft, and at 160ft, sand and rock seemed to combine. At least now I had something to look at. We followed the rocks and continued our now linear search. One of the rocks

moved. "Hang on," I uttered into my reg. "Rocks do not move."

I peered down again, released the smallest amount of air from my BCD and looked again. The





Colourful fans abound all over Yonaguni



Yonaguni

Yonaguni Jima is full of nudibraches

rock was a very slow moving and rather giant 18ft hammerhead.

I fumbled with the OMD, and swam a bit deeper. I checked my air and saw that I had enough, and dropped again. The clip on the OMD finally came undone, and I fired. Snap, snap, snap—the camera shutter fired repeatedly, as three, no, now four enormous hammerhead sharks swirled below us.

One of them turned towards me and gently swam upwards. Separated from the animal by my camera, I felt no worry, until I looked over the top of the camera and saw it in its full girth. Now I felt extremely worried. I was 90ft down. But the

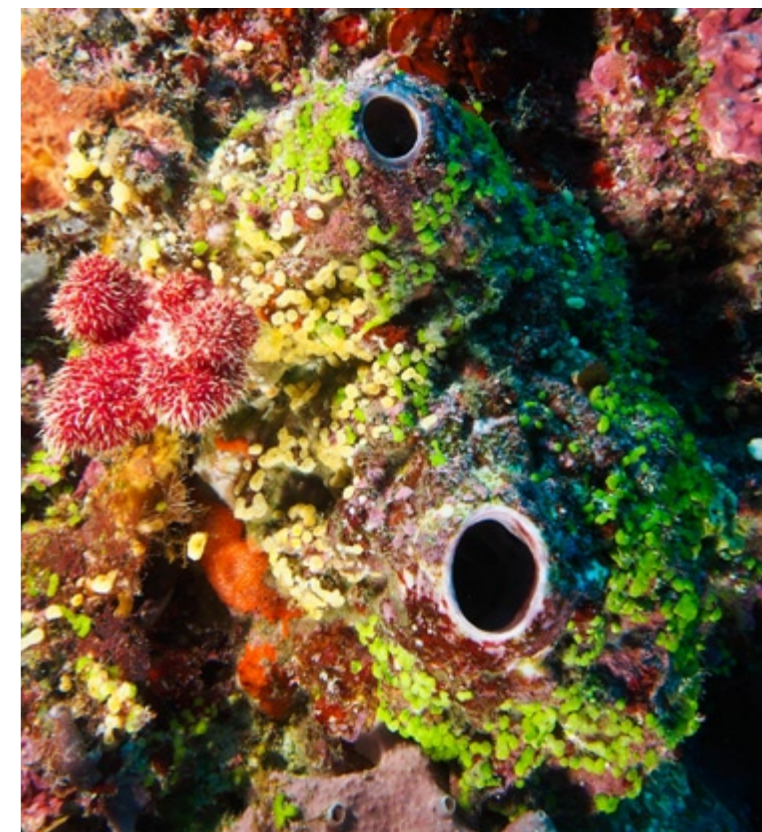
shark turned and wandered off.

I needed to make sure I maintained my depth and inflated my BCD. Doug was down with me. Cisca was even further below me, but we kept shooting. And then, after multiple circles and passes and as quietly as they had arrived, the hammerheads were gone.

Thankfully, their departure coincided with the needle on my pressure gauge getting to the red line. I sent up my surface marker buoy and climbed slowly back up the line to the surface and my safety stop.

Vibrant diving

There was more to Yonaguni than seasonal hammerhead sharks and the ruins at Iseki



Sponges and soft coral decorate reef



Yonaguni



NASA



CIA.GOV

Divers cross from one ruin to another; Yonaguni island, the lighthouse represents the westernmost point of Japan (top right)

Point. The next few days saw us diving on steep walls covered with hard coral, brittle stars and sea fans, and then, under the most enormous boulders.

Yonaguni seemed to be a rock with a pile of boulders dropped around it. We were not inundated with schools of snapper, but below the boulders, in semi caves, fat grouper and some blue fin trevally sat waiting for their food.

Yonaguni was a place to watch your dive computer; the cold, clear water was deceptive. Being under a boulder at 90ft, snapping away at the nudibranches felt like 30ft.

The diving in Yonaguni was exciting. The waves were big. The surge was powerful and felt at depth. But the water was clear, and the underwater

landscape was dramatic and colourful. The marine life was also vibrant.

Afterthoughts

On the evening before the turboprop flight to Okinawa, Kihatchiro drove us to the westernmost point (and almost the southernmost) of Japan. A lighthouse dominated the high cliffs, while a wild horse chewed at the shrubbery.

The sun sets here later than any other part of Japan. We stared out over the East China Sea. The sun was lower, and we strained our eyes to see the peaks of Taiwan. We saw a shape, but it moved—it was a large freighter in the sea lane steaming north to the home islands. The wind blew and the horse moved along the hedge. Yonaguni

Jima was truly unique, and I started to regret our impending departure. ■

Farhat Jah is an underwater photographer based in Pemba, Tanzania. He leads specialist bush walking safaris and operates a dive resort on the island of Pemba. See: www.swahilidivers.com



Yonaguni Jima has impressive walls; A two-propeller plane transports visitors to and from Yonaguni (left)

Location of Yonaguni Jima on global and regional maps

