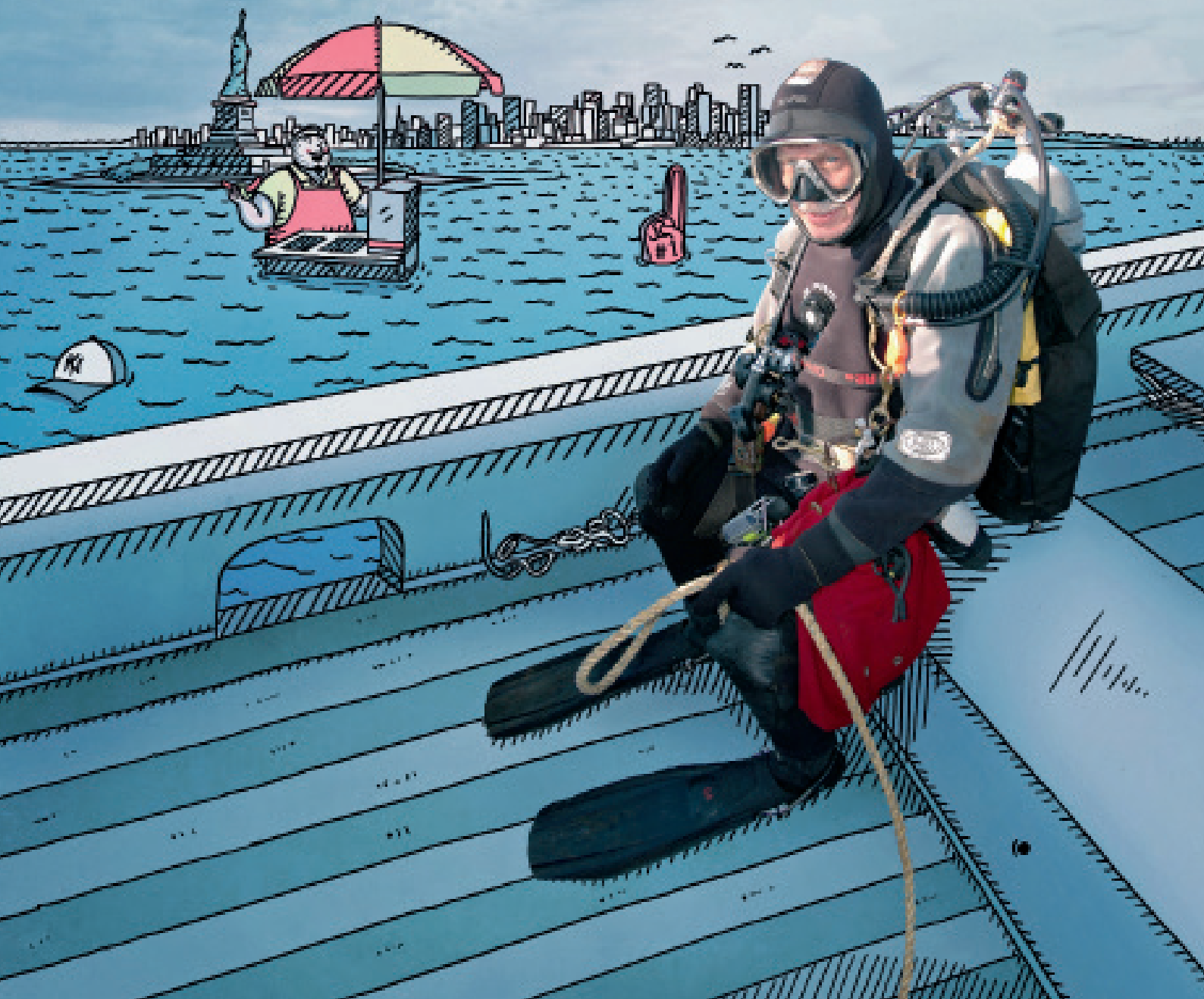


# Diving the 'A' train

Exploring sunken New York subway carriages off the coast of New Jersey is a surprisingly nostalgic experience, as **Gene Peterson** discovers

Illustrations **Johan Thörnqvist**



W

hen I was a kid, I used to ride the New York subway with my Uncle Howard, a Brooklyn police inspector who lived in Garden City. For me, it was a thrill to take the rails to his precinct, on occasion making excursions to visit the city's glittering downtown department stores, museums and art galleries. He was so at ease with the transit system, yet I was puzzled by its complexity and spaghetti network of coloured lines and routes. The daily trek to work and bustle of city life that New Yorkers sustain is still foreign to this South Jersey native. Unfamiliar with the lingo, I remain confused by the system's terminology; the distinctions between metro, uptown, downtown, express and local are lost on me.

But here, just south of the Big Apple, a few miles off the New Jersey coast in the Shark River Reef, a little piece of the New York transit system has taken on a new life deep below the Atlantic. Since 2003, disused subway carriages have been dumped into the ocean to create artificial reefs for divers, attracting a stunning array of marine life.

Hovering over the reef, I watch the light glinting on the water as Captain Al Pyatak barks out commands across the deck of the *Sea Lion*: "Drop the hook!"; "Take up the slack!"; "Nail it!" "Okay, drop the ladder, we're in!"

As soon as we're tethered to the wreckage below, we get the thumbs up to dive, splashing into the water and descending the umbilical line to the bottom, the sound of Darth Vader breathing in my ears. Beneath me, in a graceful hypnotic movement, bottle-green seaweed sways back and forth over the box-shaped hulks that litter the white sand below. Here, the ghosts of a million stories – my own included – echo to the surface from the New York subway cars embedded in the sea floor.

As I slip down the descent line, I focus on a lone carriage below. How strange to see it magnified underwater, out of context, assailed by flashbacks of the old subway cars of my youth rattling through a subterranean New York. My diving partner, Captain Al, and I have been drawn here in search of answers to some lingering questions. He is looking for a new diving attraction for his customers, and I just want to experience this unlikely sub aqua subway. We're wondering how the carriages are faring underwater.

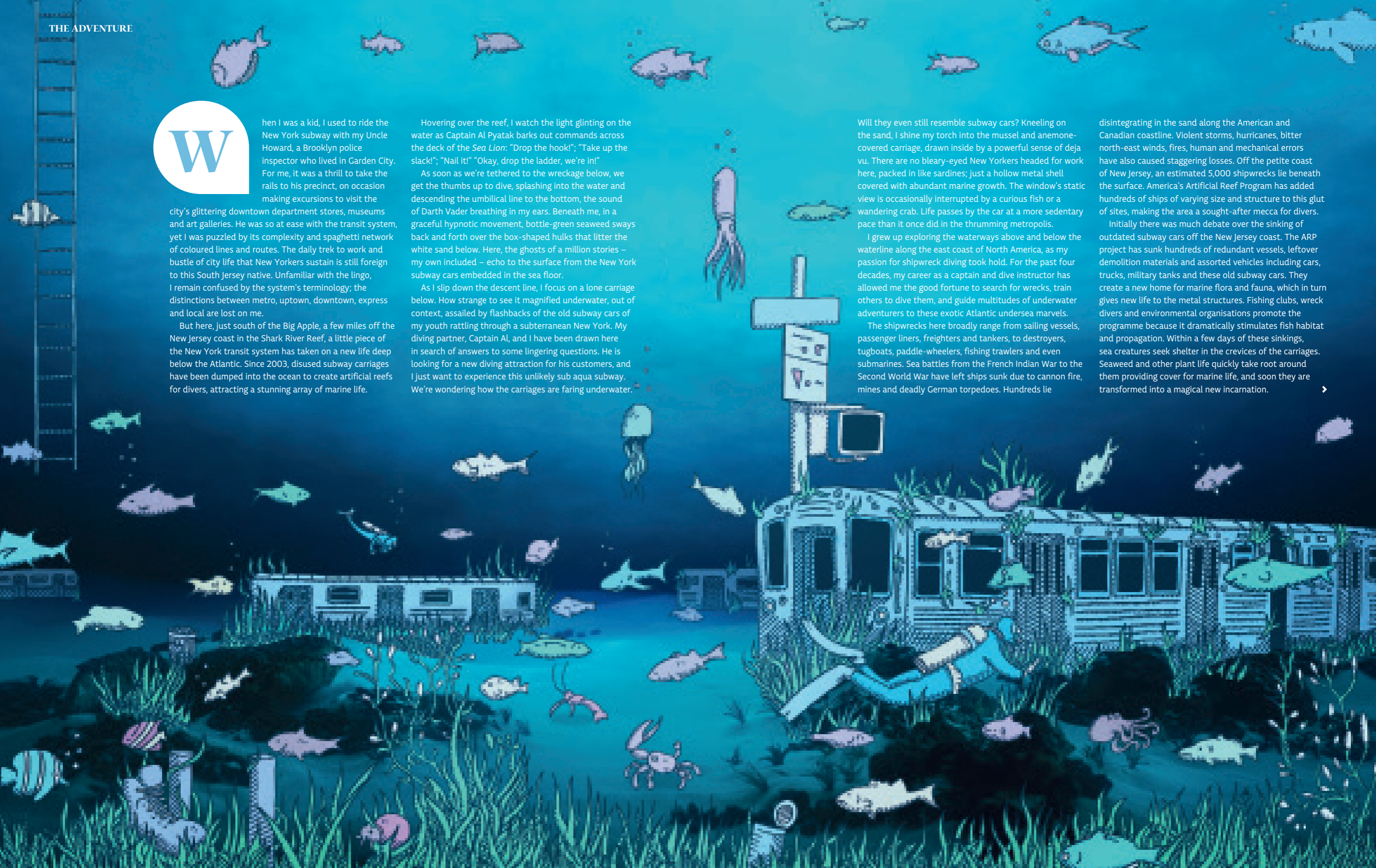
Will they even still resemble subway cars? Kneeling on the sand, I shine my torch into the mussel and anemone-covered carriage, drawn inside by a powerful sense of déjà vu. There are no bleary-eyed New Yorkers headed for work here, packed in like sardines; just a hollow metal shell covered with abundant marine growth. The window's static view is occasionally interrupted by a curious fish or a wandering crab. Life passes by the car at a more sedentary pace than it once did in the thrumming metropolis.

I grew up exploring the waterways above and below the waterline along the east coast of North America, as my passion for shipwreck diving took hold. For the past four decades, my career as a captain and dive instructor has allowed me the good fortune to search for wrecks, train others to dive them, and guide multitudes of underwater adventurers to these exotic Atlantic undersea marvels.

The shipwrecks here broadly range from sailing vessels, passenger liners, freighters and tankers, to destroyers, tugboats, paddle-wheelers, fishing trawlers and even submarines. Sea battles from the French Indian War to the Second World War have left ships sunk due to cannon fire, mines and deadly German torpedoes. Hundreds lie

disintegrating in the sand along the American and Canadian coastline. Violent storms, hurricanes, bitter north-east winds, fires, human and mechanical errors have also caused staggering losses. Off the petite coast of New Jersey, an estimated 5,000 shipwrecks lie beneath the surface. America's Artificial Reef Program has added hundreds of ships of varying size and structure to this glut of sites, making the area a sought-after mecca for divers.

Initially there was much debate over the sinking of outdated subway cars off the New Jersey coast. The ARP project has sunk hundreds of redundant vessels, leftover demolition materials and assorted vehicles including cars, trucks, military tanks and these old subway cars. They create a new home for marine flora and fauna, which in turn gives new life to the metal structures. Fishing clubs, wreck divers and environmental organisations promote the programme because it dramatically stimulates fish habitat and propagation. Within a few days of these sinkings, sea creatures seek shelter in the crevices of the carriages. Seaweed and other plant life quickly take root around them providing cover for marine life, and soon they are transformed into a magical new incarnation. ▶



Locals and environmentalists were initially concerned whether the old subway cars would last long enough to be worthy of the expense required to clean and sink the bulk. Eco groups were additionally troubled over the hazardous asbestos lining the frame walls. The parlay went back and forth while other states plundered the abundance of cars, dumping them on their own sites. When the final approval was determined in 2003, 250 subway cars were designated to sink in the artificial reefs off New Jersey.

The concerns over rapid deterioration and asbestos were dismissed. The theoretical threat of asbestos creating airborne carcinogens dissolved in the immersion of salt water. Soon after the dumping, the benefit redeemed all possible negatives: marine life flourished and within a few years the proliferation of the habitat maintained a continuous regeneration of species.

The abandoned cars are located in 20 to 30 metres of water on the northern New Jersey artificial reef, about 14 miles east of Point Pleasant. Diving off the New Jersey coast is not a mild, tropical water excursion (like the “bath-tub” diving experience of the Caribbean, for example), but the

fact that the subway cars lie in relatively shallow water means it’s a suitable dive for novices, providing they have an attentive guide.

At first, to me, it looks like a mundane prospect. A group of subway cars dumped on the ocean floor seems like a pitiful choice considering the vast number of outstanding historic wrecks that decorate the coastline. But I soon realise that my experiences have spoiled me and narrowed my focus. Humongous destroyers and tankers scattered over thousands of metres of sand may be visually stimulating to one diver, but pretty overwhelming and sinister to others; each diver seeks different things in an underwater experience.

Once down there I am shocked at how powerfully these old cars take me back to my childhood, riding with my

**“The subway has become a fully fledged ecosystem, home to countless varieties of thriving marine life”**

beloved uncle who showed me the big city. It stimulates a desire to go back and ride the subway again to rekindle the past. I realise there are probably thousands of New Yorkers who would jump at the chance to relive their subway memories in this utterly surreal way. It is an extraordinary, discombobulating experience.

The subway cars now rest on the sea floor, illuminated only by the thin daylight and the dive lights of curious humans. Sea bass, tautog and flounder patrol the labyrinth of broken-down cars. Where once disgruntled New Yorkers hung from straps nose-to-arnpit, lobster and crabs are now tucked in the dark crevices. Occasionally they reach out to grab a dangling mussel or unwary fish that passes too close. This natural drama continues daily, fuelling the life cycle of the new reef. The subway has now become a fully fledged ecosystem, serving as a home to countless varieties of flourishing marine life. The rhythm of the rails has been silenced by the depth of the ocean.

[njwreckdivers.com](http://njwreckdivers.com)

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## Three more artificial reefs to dive

### ALGARVE, PORTUGAL

Two metre-long conger eels, super-sized squid, electric rays, red sea scorpions, wrasse fish and octopuses are just some of the technicoloured creatures you can enjoy over a range of scuttled ex-Portuguese navy ships, three kilometres off the coast of the Algarve. [oceanrevival.org](http://oceanrevival.org)

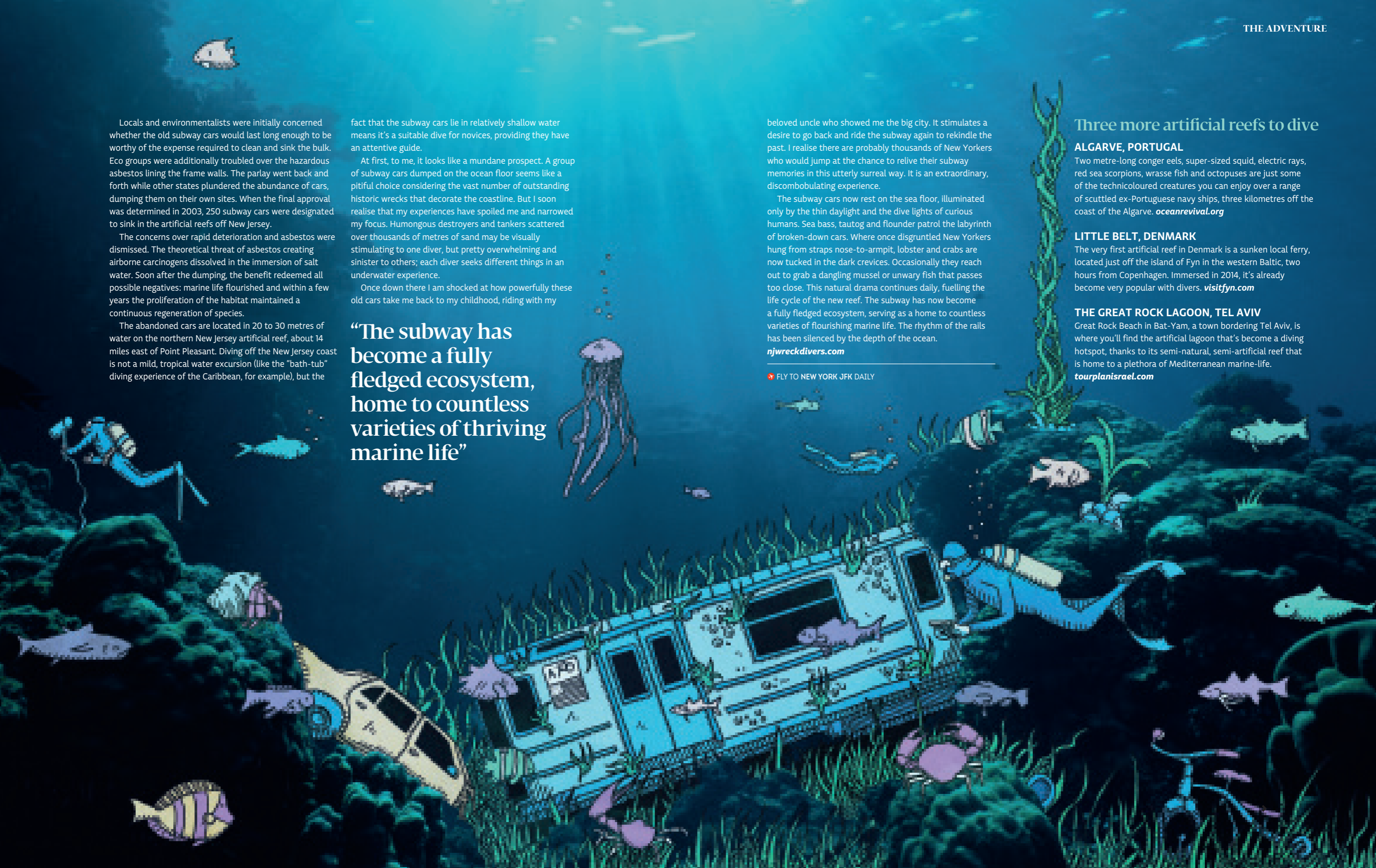
### LITTLE BELT, DENMARK

The very first artificial reef in Denmark is a sunken local ferry, located just off the island of Fyn in the western Baltic, two hours from Copenhagen. Immersed in 2014, it’s already become very popular with divers. [visitfyn.com](http://visitfyn.com)

### THE GREAT ROCK LAGOON, TEL AVIV

Great Rock Beach in Bat-Yam, a town bordering Tel Aviv, is where you’ll find the artificial lagoon that’s become a diving hotspot, thanks to its semi-natural, semi-artificial reef that is home to a plethora of Mediterranean marine-life.

[tourplanisrael.com](http://tourplanisrael.com)



## FR Le métro sous-marin

Gene Peterson plonge dans un récif artificiel créé avec d'anciens wagons de métro new-yorkais

Lorsque j'étais gamin, je prenais le métro à New-York avec mon Oncle Howard, un inspecteur de police de Brooklyn qui vivait à Garden City. Pour moi, les trajets souterrains vers son poste de police, les grands magasins, les musées et les galeries d'art étaient autant d'aventures. Cependant, peu familier avec le jargon et la complexité des lignes, le système de transport new-yorkais demeurait un vrai mystère. Les distinctions entre métro, le haut et le bas de la ville et les lignes express et locales demeurent très confuses dans mon esprit.

À quelques kilomètres de la côte du New Jersey, dans le récif de Shark River, un petit bout de ce système de transport new-yorkais a été dérobé à la grande ville et adapté à un nouvel environnement, au plus profond de l'Atlantique. Sous mes pieds, les algues ondoient d'avant en arrière sur les épaves rectangulaires gisant sur le sable. Un million d'histoires, dont la mienne, se font écho à la vue de ces wagons de métro posés au fond de la mer.

Agenouillé sur le sable, je dirige ma lampe de poche vers l'intérieur du wagon couvert de moules et d'anémones. Un profond sentiment de déjà vu m'attire à l'intérieur. Pas de citadins en route pour le travail, l'œil hagard, serrés comme des sardines. Juste une carcasse métallique qui épouse la vie marine. La vue statique de la fenêtre est parfois interrompue par un poisson curieux ou un crabe en goguette. La vie côtoie le wagon à un rythme bien plus sédentaire que jadis, dans la métropole bouillonnante.

On estime que 5 000 épaves gisent sous la surface au large du New Jersey. L'Artificial Reef Program y a ajouté des centaines de navires, tanks, vieilles locomotives et wagons de métro, faisant du site un lieu prisé des plongeurs. Les wagons abandonnés se trouvent à 30 mètres sous la surface, sur le récif septentrional artificiel du New Jersey, à l'est de Point Pleasant. Plonger au large de cette côte n'est pas une promenade de santé dans une mer tropicale. Toutefois, l'eau est relativement profonde et convient donc bien aux plongeurs novices, à condition d'être accompagnés d'un guide attentif.

Les daurades, les tautogs et les limandes sillonnent le labyrinthe de wagons à l'abandon. Les méduses flottent à proximité, les anguilles s'enroulent derrière les vieux sièges, et la carlingue est couverte de coraux. Là où des New-Yorkais grognons s'agrippaient aux poignées, le nez dans les aisselles de leur voisin, les homards et les crabes se nichent à présent dans de sombres crevasses. Parfois, ils sortent pour attraper une moule ou un poisson imprudent qui vient à passer par là. Ce ballet naturel est sans fin, alimentant la vie dans ce nouveau récif. Le métro est à présent devenu un écosystème à part entière, qui accueille d'innombrables variétés d'espèces marines en plein essor. Le rythme des roues sur les rails s'est tu dans les profondeurs de l'océan. [njwreckdivers.com](http://njwreckdivers.com)

## NL De onderzeese metro

Gene Peterson gaat duiken in een kunstmatig rif dat aangelegd is met oude metrostellen van New York

Als kind reed ik regelmatig met de metro van New York, samen met mijn oom Howard, een politie-inspecteur van Brooklyn die in Garden City woonde. Ik vond het heerlijk om naar zijn district te sporen en uitstapjes te maken naar de grootwarenhuizen, musea en kunstgalerieën van de stad. Maar de termen en de complexe routekaarten van de metro van New York vond ik erg ingewikkeld. Tot op heden ken ik nog altijd het verschil niet tussen metro, uptown, downtown, express en local.

Hier, op een paar kilometer uit de kust van New Jersey, in het rif van Shark River, heeft de stad een stukje van zijn vervoersysteem afgegeven. Het wordt nu gebruikt in een nieuwe omgeving, diep in de Atlantische Oceaan. Onder mij wuift het zeewier op de rechthoekige rompen die over het witte zand op de

bodem verspreid liggen. Hier sturen de geesten van miljoenen verhalen, ook die van mij, hun echo vanuit de metrostellen van New York op de zeebodem naar het wateroppervlak.

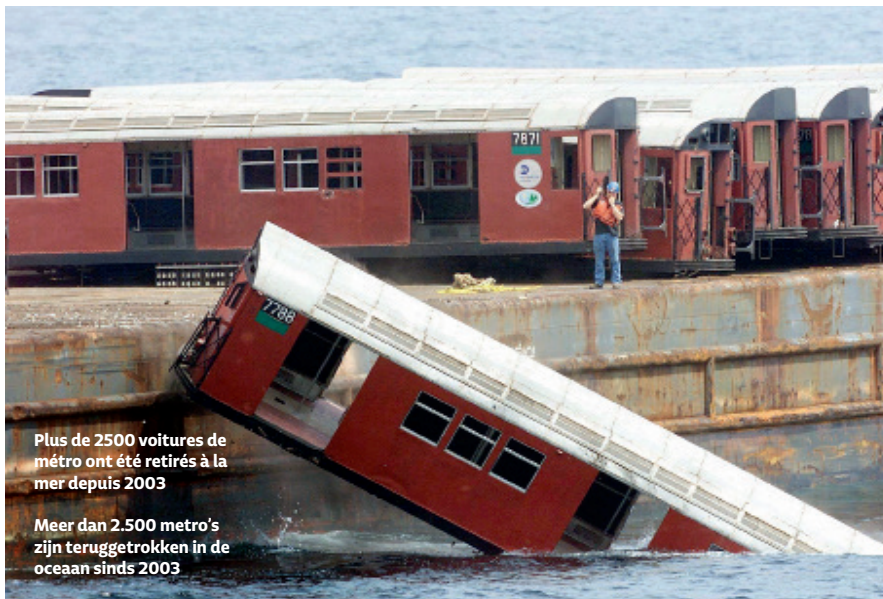
Knielend in het zand richt ik mijn zaklamp op de wagon, die bedekt is met mossels en anemonen. Ik heb een sterk gevoel van déjà vu. Hier zitten geen New Yorkse pendelaars voor zich uit te staren, op elkaar gepakt als sardienen in een blik. Dit is gewoon een leeg metalen omhulsel vol zeeleven. Het uitzicht uit het venster verandert niet, op een

nieuwsgierige vis of een dolende krab na. Het leven is hier heel wat minder hectisch dan vroeger in de drukke grootstad.

Langs de kust van New Jersey liggen ongeveer 5000 scheepswrakken op de bodem. Met het Artificial Reef Program werden daar honderden schepen, tanks, oude locomotieven en metrostellen aan toegevoegd, een trekpleister voor duikers. De verlaten wagons liggen in 30 m diep zeewater op het kunstmatige rif in het noorden van New Jersey, ten oosten van Point Pleasant. Een duik vanaf de kust van New Jersey is zeker geen excursie in aangenaam tropisch water, maar omdat het water hier redelijk ondiep is, kunnen ook beginners hier duiken met een gids.

Zeebaars, donkere Amerikaanse zeevis en bot doorkruisen het labirynth van kapotte wagons. Kwallen drijven langs, palingen liggen opgerold onder de oude zitjes en koralen bedekken het interieur. Waar ooit mopperende New Yorkers tegen elkaar plakten, zitten nu kreeften en krabben knus in de donkere hoeken en gaten. Af en toe grijpen ze een bengelende mossel of een vis die nietsvermoedend langszwemt. Dit boeiende natuurverhaal speelt zich elke dag af en stimuleert de kringloop van het nieuwe rif. De metro is een ecosysteem geworden, een nieuwe thuis voor talloze soorten zeeleven. De diepe oceaan heeft het denderende ritme van de sporen voorgoed het zwijgen opgelegd.

[njwreckdivers.com](http://njwreckdivers.com)



Plus de 2500 voitures de métro ont été retirés à la mer depuis 2003

Meer dan 2.500 metro's zijn teruggetrokken in de oceaan sinds 2003