

An in-depth look
Madhumathy conducts
research on historical
shipwrecks

▪ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Pirate OF THE PACIFIC

From investigating shipwrecks to swimming alongside gigantic turtles, Madhumathy Chandrasekaran, a maritime archaeologist from India, narrates her underwater experiences

:: REJI VARGHESE

When Madhumathy Chandrasekaran first started swimming lessons at the age of four, little did she realise that her love for water would lead her onto a path-breaking career: she says she is India's first female maritime archaeologist. Currently a scuba diving instructor at Bond Water Sports in Kovalam, Kerala, 24-year-old Madhumathy has also dived in the waters of Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Cambodia and Australia among others.

She tells *MetroPlus* about her life, career, and future plans.

Tell us about your early influences and love for the sea.

● I was born and raised in Chennai. I started taking swimming lessons when I was very young and my parents always told me how difficult it was to get me to come out of the water. Being an absolute water baby, it was not surprising that I was mesmerised by large bodies of water.

How did you embark on this career?

● I have always been fascinated by history, which, combined with my love for the sea, made maritime archaeology a great career choice for me. I joined a Masters programme in Maritime Archaeology at Flinders University, Australia. The faculty was amazing and I was

hooked from day one.

What exactly is Maritime Archaeology?

● Maritime Archaeology or 'MARCH' is basically conducting archaeology underwater or on anything marine related.

Take lighthouses for example: even though they are not submerged, conducting research on them is considered part of maritime archaeology. My field of interest is nautical archaeology, within which I conduct research on historical shipwrecks.

What was it like being part of the team that discovered South Australia's oldest shipwreck?

SEA TRUTHS

Maritime Archaeology is a discipline within archaeology that specifically studies human interaction with the sea, lakes and rivers through the study of associated physical remains, be they vessels, shore-side facilities, port-related structures, cargoes, human remains or submerged landscapes.

Madhumathy is currently a Master Scuba Diving Instructor.

She was awarded the Elite Instructor award by PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) in 2017.

She is the first recipient of the MaP fund, Australia, which is dedicated to the advancement of maritime and underwater archaeology and the protection and investigation of underwater cultural heritage in the Asia and Pacific regions, in particular in Australia and the ASEAN countries.

She has done Maritime Archaeology field work in Sri Lanka, Australia and Vietnam and an internship at the Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington DC.

● I was amongst three Masters MARCH students from Flinders who were chosen as volunteers for the search for South Australia's oldest shipwreck. It was a privilege to work with the team which consisted of some veteran maritime archaeologists and divers.

Initially, it was difficult to find the shipwreck because of bad weather conditions. But luckily, on the fifth day, one of the team members encountered a hard metal object which when brought to the surface, turned out to be a copper bolt that was used to attach wooden planks together for the ship.

It was hard work and we were diving in cold water with strong currents. It was one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had.

What are your plans for the future?

● My goal is to pursue MARCH in India. I want to focus my research here because there is so much to be explored in this country.

Since I am also a scuba instructor, I would like to reach out to archaeologists in Indian universities and get them to train in scuba diving, which would enable them to do archaeological projects underwater.

Tell us about your love for scuba diving.

● I first came to know about it from SB Aravind, who started Temple Adventures, a dive centre in Puducherry. Right from my first dive, I realised that this was something I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I went on to complete my first professional diving course, Divemaster, in 2014 when I was 19.

In 2015, I got a job in the Cook Islands, near Fiji, where I also did my instructor course. At that time, I was India's youngest female scuba instructor.

Do you have any interesting underwater incidents to share?

● I was diving in the Cook Islands when I spotted a big, gorgeous sea turtle, and he was very shy in the beginning. He started to warm up to me and during my last dive, made eye contact with me for a long time and we were happily swimming side by side. I was in love.

