

"RETURN TO TITANIC"  
Q & A WITH DR. ROBERT BALLARD

1. What is it like personally for you returning to the R.M.S. *Titanic*? Have you always planned on returning?

I have very mixed feelings about returning to *Titanic*. My discovery of *Titanic* in 1985 was a very stressful time in my life, from both a personal and professional standpoint. Long friendships with many of my French colleagues were destroyed by subsequent disagreements over the *Titanic* and a parting of ways as France went on to begin its extensive salvage operation at the site after promising not to. My life was altered forever, both in a good way and in a bad way.

After our discovery, countless new programs were produced by IMAX, James Cameron, and others as if we never existed, as if the shipwreck *Titanic* had never been discovered. I had to stand on the sidelines and watch it all unfold as tourists dove to the site, some even getting married on its bow. It was exactly what I had hoped would not happen. I wanted *Titanic* to be respected like the *Arizona* in Pearl Harbor and not as some sideshow at the county fair.

In many ways, I wanted to put the *Titanic* in my rearview mirror and never look back. So I ran away from it, since there was little I could do. I embarked on new and exciting expeditions, which helped to lessen the role the *Titanic* played in my life. My subsequent accomplishments included the discovery of the *Bismarck*, *Yorktown*, PT-109, ancient shipwrecks in the Black Sea and the first manned exploration of the mid-ocean ridge. Despite all this, I am still introduced as "the man who discovered the *Titanic*" as my primary claim to fame.

That is not all bad, since people will let me in the door and listen to my point of view. But the message I deliver is not about the *Titanic*; it is about the need for more ocean exploration and the need to motivate young people to study more science in school. I explain that the ocean is the greatest museum on Earth and you don't need to bring things up from the bottom to appreciate them when the use of "telepresence" can take you there in-situ. It is the actual site that is more important than the artifacts. In fact, taking things from an historic site diminishes it for future generations. And that is why I want to go back.

For years, I simply wanted to sneak back to *Titanic* and pay her a quiet visit. In some ways, I wanted to apologize to the *Titanic* and its lost souls for finding them and for launching the circus that followed. But sneaking back to the *Titanic* was as naïve an idea as thinking people would leave her alone and treat her like the *Arizona* following our discovery.

On a personal level, my reason for going back to the *Titanic* is to clearly demonstrate that anyone in the world can visit her now via modern technology. We can all experience the feeling of being there and hear the ground speak to us. I want to remind people that the *Titanic* is sacred. I want to determine once and for all to what extent Mother Nature and the salvagers are contributing to her deterioration.

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More importantly, I want to show that just as the *Arizona* will always be in Pearl Harbor, the graves of World War II service men will always be on the shores of Normandy and the remains of the bloodiest battle in the U.S. Civil War will always be in Gettysburg, so too will the *Titanic* always rest at the bottom of the ocean.

## 2. Why are people of all ages, including kids, fascinated with the ship?

It is because *Titanic* has something to offer all ages. Everyone can relate to someone's story from the ship: the heroic Molly Brown, who takes over her lifeboat to rescue whoever she can; or Mrs. Strauss, who gets out of the lifeboat to stand by her man and die; or the boy who has just turned 17 and refuses to get into a lifeboat because his is no longer a boy and chooses to die like a man.

Hopefully my story is one that continues to inspire - a scientist who comes out of nowhere with the most amazing technology of the time to find the *Titanic*. Then he returns with a tiny robot called *JJ* to descend her grand staircase and broadcast pictures for the entire world to see.

To men, *Titanic* was this giant marvel of engineering technology - the largest moving object of its time.

To women, it was the Edwardian Era - the age of elegance, the age of innocence before the horrors of the war to end all wars, a floating palace of the rich and powerful. These were the stars of the time dying on a world stage.

To children, it's the stuff of legend - heroes, villains and above all adventure.

To all, it was a morality play directly from Hollywood. Mankind, in all its hubris, designs an unsinkable ship that goes down on its maiden voyage. Where the captain evokes the British ideal and instructs the crew to stand at their station and die while the band plays on even as the owner sneaks into one of the few lifeboats and gets away. Where women and children go first, unless you are third class, and where a rescue ship stands by and does nothing. It was truly a tragedy worthy of Shakespeare himself.

## 3. Why will the documenting of this expedition make great family viewing?

Because the expedition has noble purposes that parents would want to have their children watch and learn. I am returning after almost 20 years of watching the ensuing circus that followed what is called my greatest discovery. I come with even more amazing technology than I had before to see what has happened to the *Titanic* since finding her. And I am returning to the site to show the world a better future for *Titanic* than the one she has suffered. I want to talk to the next generation about the possibilities the future holds for them and for *Titanic*. I want to prove that their priorities should not be the plundering of the pyramids of the deep, but instead its long-term care and appreciation.

## 4. Have you been back to the *Titanic* since 1986? Why are you returning now?

No, only in my dreams.

Why now? Why the summer of 2004? Because I now have the technology to clearly demonstrate that you can create underwater museums and visit them from the comfort of your home. We don't have to destroy this world in order to appreciate it.

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We are going back now with a group of partners who will make this expedition possible. Our scientific mission is to assess the state of the ship—why it's deteriorating so much faster than we expected—and to determine its future.

We do not truly know that it is "deteriorating so much faster than we expected." We have only heard this without seeing the data. We want a true scientific survey done of the ship by scientists.

5. **What do you hope viewers learn or take away from watching this special?**

I hope they learn that, despite all that has been done to the *Titanic* since her discovery, she is still there. Salvagers may have removed many of the jewels from the old lady while she rested in her grave, but she is still there. And if we do the right thing, she and her memory will remain.

I want viewers to know that this great lady still has many powerful messages to share with us, not only about her history before she went to her grave, but lessons learned since her death. I want the world to come and visit *Titanic* in her. And I hope it will become clear that scientists, historians and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are far better guardians of the site than those who wish to profit from her death.

6. **What do you hope will be the impact of/response to your return?**

I have been very busy since I was last on the world stage almost 20 years ago, but *Titanic* has never left my mind. I want audiences to see that my naïve idea is now within our reach if we only begin to change how we think about the pyramids of the deep. There is hope for the *Titanic* and ways to help and protect her.

7. **What technology will be used and what scientific experiments will be conducted on this mission?**

Three Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs)—*Argus*, *Hercules*, and *Little Herc* will survey the wreck. These unmanned robots, equipped with multi-million-dollar cameras and sensors, go down 3 miles on 20,000 feet of fiber optic cable. These machines are going to be our eyes on the ocean floor - they'll make the dangerous descent so we don't have to. But with their high-definition cameras, we'll get right up inside the ship as if we were there.

There will be two main experiments conducted while out at sea. NOAA scientists will use the ROVs to examine rust-colored icicles (termed "rusticles") that are growing from the steel on the ship. Scientists will examine these rust deposits and determine what allows the bacteria to thrive on the iron and form colonies of this new life form.

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8. **What do you hope to get out of the scientific experiments?**

I am as curious as any scientist would be to know what has happened to the *Titanic* in the last 20 years. I want to know what changes have occurred, which of those changes are caused by nature and which were caused by the careless actions of humans. But I am more interested in seeing if the modern technology of telepresence can touch the hearts of people in the comfort of their homes. Will they really believe they are there? Will the *Titanic* speak to them like those who actually dive to the site? Does it speak to me now, over 12,000 feet above her? Will my naive dream come true? That is why I want it to be truly "live" from the deck of the *Titanic*. "Live" makes all the difference.

9. **What do you hope to accomplish with all the information when you return?-**

A true scientist should never try to shape the answer to his question. I want to determine the true condition of *Titanic* after 20 years. We have been the only group to treat the wreck in a truly scientific way, and we can't stop now. We mapped her 20 years ago, and we are mapping her again. If she is going downhill fast, then I want to determine what we do to arrest that decline. If we can't stop the decline, what then?

10. **What is the role of the Inner Space Center at the University of Rhode Island in relation to the expedition?**

The primary Internet2 site for the expedition is the newly created Inner Space Center (ISC) at the University of Rhode Island (URI) Graduate School of Oceanography (GSO). The ISC is being built to make it possible for GSO scientists to participate in various sea-going expeditions sponsored by the Office of Naval Research and NOAA's Ocean Exploration program from their laboratories at GSO. During the course of the expedition, scientists and engineers at GSO, as well as other universities, participate in the expedition carry out their research from the ISC.

In the ISC, a series of plasma screens and other displays will replicate the science workstation aboard ship. Scientists, students and engineers at the ISC will be able to participate in two-way conversations with the various people aboard ship. They also can request any of the images they see on the composite display to be switched to a higher resolution screen for further evaluation.

11. **What training and/or credentials are required to work in the field of archaeological oceanography?**

Archaeological oceanography is being offered at URI, and it is brand new. In fact, one of our first graduate students in this program will be on the expedition, Katherine Croff. She has a 4.2 (out of 5) grade point average from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in engineering, with a strong background in math and physics. She has a master's degree in archaeology and is now entering our program to get a Ph.D. in geological oceanography. In other words, unlike students in marine archaeology who have strong backgrounds in the humanities, our students must not only have a strong background in the humanities, they also need an equally strong or stronger background in the physical sciences of math, physics and the earth sciences. We have raised the bar of achievement and are finding students like Katherine ready to meet the new challenge.