

Anyone with information on the ships on this stamp?



## Venezuela's First Artificial Reef.

### GRAN ROQUE (tug)

Venezuela # e-f (2004) Bs 500,00

**1976 - Republic of Venezuela, La Guaira, Venezuela; Nuovi Cantieri Apuania S.p.A., Marina di Carrara, Venezuela; Gt. 350, nt. 98, dwt. 467; 31,5m x 6,35m x 3,58 (draught); 2 Stocrk-Werkspoor Diesel 4SA each 8Cy, two propellers, 11,5 kn.**

The 98-foot **GRAN ROQUE**, delivered in September 1976, was built at Venezuela's state-owned shipyards to serve domestic ports. But a lack of maintenance finally crippled the vessel for good in 2003. She was abandoned alongside the dock at Puerto Cabello, where she became a haven for the homeless and filled with trash and graffiti.

It was here that Cesar Navas' a scuba diving instructor, found her and took over the task of cleaning her up before sending her to the bottom of Guabina Bay to become the first Venezuelan artificial reef for scuba divers. Navas predicted it would only take a few years to turn the **GRAN ROQUE** from a heap of scrap metal into a marine experiment - a haven for sea life and coral formations and an amusement park for divers.

"In three years it will be teeming with fish and coral," said Navas, who convinced Venezuelan authorities that the ship would be better off lying 98-feet under water.

"Instead of dying as a rat-infested piece of junk, we are turning it into a beautiful artificial reef which will shelter sea life and also will be a divers' playground," he said as he prepared to sink the boat in the waters off Aragua state, about 110 miles west of Caracas.

Navas said he wanted to give "a decent send-off" to a ship that had a mostly peaceful life except for one moment

of glory in 1976, when its crew rescued tourists whose hydrofoil collided with a sperm whale off Margarita Island.

**GRAN ROQUE** went to the bottom in September 2003, with a powerful boom as 44 pounds (20 kg) of explosives placed by a specialist Army diver team ripped open its rusted hull. In less than a minute, the ship sank to the bottom of the bay, part of the Henri Pittier National Park.

Navas, owner of an environmentally friendly hostel for divers near Guabina, hopes the reef will attract much needed tourist dollars for the impoverished region, whose income has been diminished by the sharp economic recession in the world's No. 5 oil exporter.

The president of Canada's Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia, Tex Enemark, said that the ship will likely attract vacationing divers. (Cont. page 50)

