



Terrestrial treasures may be a bit thin on the ground in Malaysia, but marine excavations provide opportunities for real collectors as well as museum curators. However, as LUCIEN DE GUISE discovers, offshore exploration has never been plain sailing



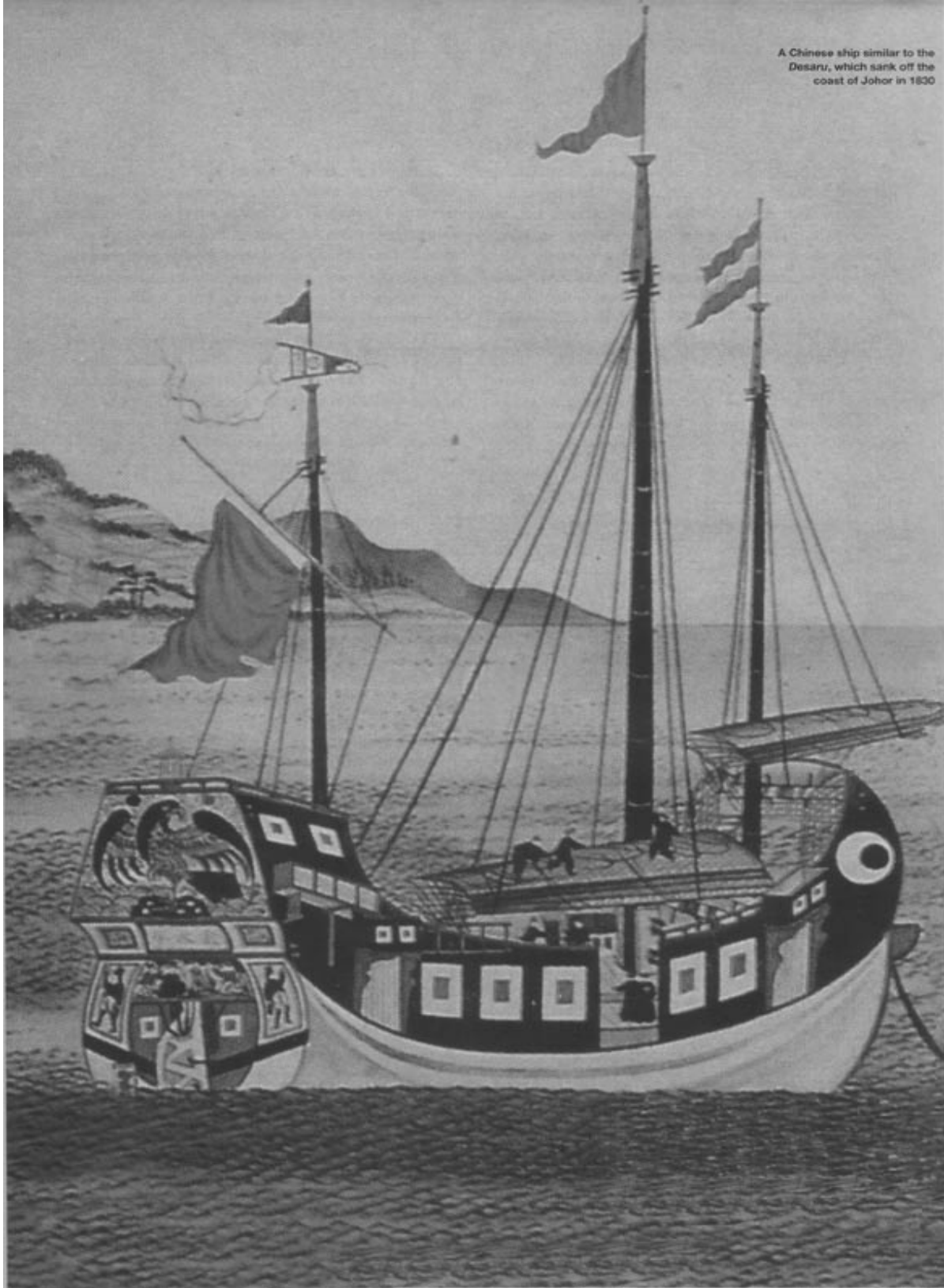
above **Philip Chee**, general manager of Renaissance Melaka Hotel, and ceramics enthusiast



top **Sten Sjostrand** - marine magnum force

left **The sea yields some surprisingly large ceramics**

A Chinese ship similar to the Desaru, which sank off the coast of Johor in 1830

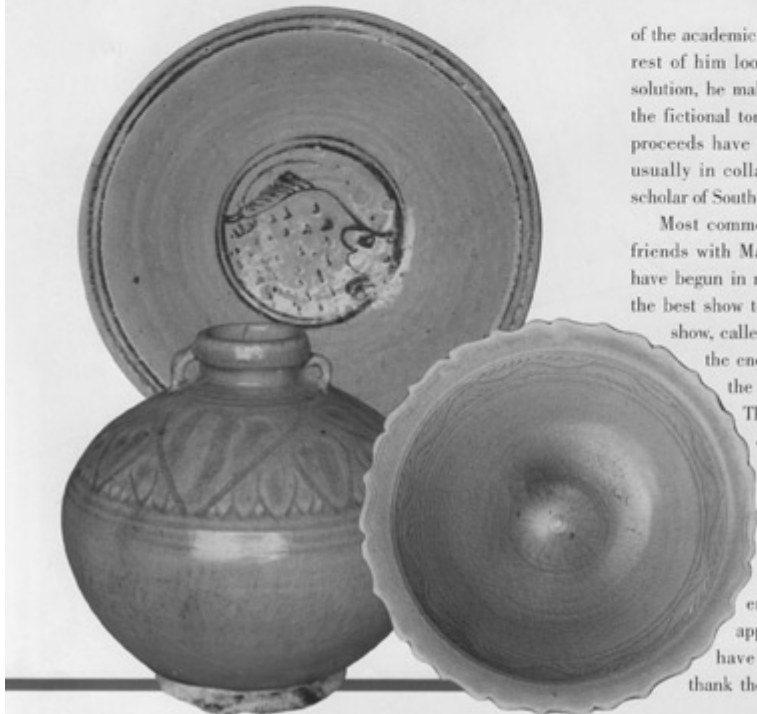


Among Malaysia's many tourist attractions, archaeological sites are hardly an irresistible magnet. Whether on land or at sea, there is little to look at. On land, there are no Borobudurs or Angkors. Cultural remains from the most benighted regions of sub-Saharan Africa merit a mention on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In Malaysia, it comes down to the natural attractions of Gunung Mulu National Park and Kinabalu Park. Despite failing to win much recognition from the United Nations, Kedah has Lembah Bujang, which is about the closest thing to a real archaeological site that you are likely to find. For the past 50 years little has happened to this fascinating relic of Malaysia's Hindu past, although it has proved to be a useful resource for courting couples.

If there is not much to marvel at, there is even less to purchase. Anyone who would like to own a bit of the nation's distant past is going to end up with a very small collection. Everything found on land ends up in Malaysia's impressive network of museums. Some of these seem to have the same sort of trouble locating their treasures as the Louvre in Paris when visitors try to find the Islamic basin in which French kings were once baptised.

The only hope for art lovers who would rather not peer through a sheet of dirty Perspex is to think maritime heritage. The man who has done the most to make Southeast Asia's heritage available to Southeast Asians is Sten Sjostrand. This expert in cargo salvage is a compromise between the washbuckling end of the spectrum and the lifeless approach

Thai Celadon and underglaze painted wares from the 14th and 15th centuries



of the academic. With fingers missing from one hand and the rest of him looking like it has been preserved in saline solution, he makes Lara Croft look very soft indeed. Unlike the fictional tomb raiders, this one sticks around after the proceeds have been divided and then writes monographs, usually in collaboration with the world's most celebrated scholar of Southeast Asian ceramics, Dr Roxanna Brown.

Most commendable of all, Sten has managed to make friends with Malaysian officialdom. The relationship may have begun in muddy waters but it has recently resulted in the best show to be held at Muzium Negara for years. The show, called Maritime Archaeology Malaysia, runs until the end of the year and gives a vivid impression of the astonishing world of underwater discovery.

The only letdown is the labelling of some of the exhibits; where "Chance Find" is not used, there is often no description at all. This is unlikely to be the fault of Sten, who must rank as the most meticulous labeller of artefacts ever to have used an aqualung.

The 58-year-old former designer and engineer of marine structures is also highly appreciative of the bureaucracy on which others have foundered. "Most profoundly, we wish to thank the Malaysian Government for their support of

right The terracotta warriors of the jar world

below Washing blue and white bowls from the Desaru



Cannon are a one-off find

the Royal Nanhai project. The Ministry of Finance for resolving initial difficulties, the Customs department for their handling of artefact issues, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism as well as the National Museum for their ongoing support and appreciation for the work." These were Sten's words after his highly successful excavation of a vessel that had lain 40 miles off the East Coast for more than 500 years.

Sten still has a good relationship with the authorities, unlike the excavator of the most contentious wreck ever to have been salvaged in Malaysian waters. The *Diana* provided the international media with some art-world fireworks, while providing collectors with a vast amount of mainly blue and white ceramics from the 19th century. The name of the *Diana's* discoverer, Dorian Ball, is seldom mentioned in the corridors of local officialdom, although it does appear on one of the descriptions at the Muzium Negara's current exhibition – incorrectly spelled.

Dorian Ball and his company, Malaysian Historical Salvors, went through lengthy litigation with the Malaysian government. Seven years after the ship was excavated, he remains a very unhappy shipmate. Much bigger smiles are to be seen on the face of the man most closely associated with gung-ho wreck recovery. Captain Mike Hatcher tends to keep his assignments in Malaysia to dry land. Last year, the finder of such classic sites as the Nanking and the Hatcher cargoes

was here to promote a sale of goods from the *Tek Sing*. Held in conjunction with Royal Selangor Pewter, an earlier version of this sale has been held in Germany. With 350,000 items on offer, it had been the biggest ever cargo auction. The pared-down local sale entailed some high prices but no controversy and very little connection with Malaysia. The *Tek Sing* was a Chinese vessel with Chinese ceramics en route to India when it was wrecked off the coast of Indonesia. Captain Hatcher is used to occasional difficulties with regional authorities, such as in 1992 when Thailand took his entire haul of ceramics.

The exploration of Sten Sjostrand marks a somewhat different approach from those whose names have gone down in local legal history. Historical surveys have been his speciality, rather than sunken treasure from World War II or missing cargoes of rubber and tin. His background as a marine designer and engineer means he "loves learning about ships". He also has a keen appreciation of ceramics, having collected them for 20 years while he was working in Singapore. During his time in Malaysia he has discovered wrecks that make the *Diana* and the *Tek Sing* look distinctly immature. The *Turiang*, *Nanyang*, *Longquan*, *Royal Nanhai* and *Xuande* cover the years between the 14th and 15th centuries; his most recent find, the *Desaru*, is also the youngest, being a 19th-century vessel with many wares in common with the *Diana*.

For collectors, newer wares can be just as worthwhile as



The Bermuda Triangle of the East

those from half a millennium ago. Among the big auction-house shocks from just over a year ago were the results of the *Tek Sing* and *Hoi An* hoards. While the 19th-century *Tek Sing* raked in US\$14.5 million, the 15th-16th century *Hoi An* raised less than US\$3 million, with 60 percent unsold. As many of the latter's cargo were unique items of great historical and artistic importance, experts are still puzzled about why the *Hoi An* sank while the *Tek Sing* soared.

Unlike the most famous shipwreck sales, Sten's company Nanhai Marine Archaeology Sdn Bhd will not be selling its wares in Amsterdam, Stuttgart or any of the capitals of cargo disposal. Nor will there be an auction accompanied by a sumptuous catalogue. Instead, a catalogue of the Muzium Negara exhibition will be available, and many of the ceramics that have been recovered will be sold – in Malaysia for once. "It breaks my heart to sell them," he says. Sentimental though Sten may be, it's an expensive business. Collectors can buy with confidence, as the provenance of these works is as rigorously assured as the most serious archaeological discoveries in conjunction with the Malaysian authorities would be.

As a long-time collector, Sten's home in Sweden is filled with antiques in boxes. Lots of them. "But they tell me nothing. With these ceramics, I know exactly which part of the ship they came from," he reports. Buyers are not only assured of authenticity but also a moving disquisition on the subject from the most passionate man in the business. ■



Looming above the antique district of the town, the Renaissance Melaka Hotel – venue for the exhibition and sale by Nanhai Marine Archaeology

Buying Time

Sten Sjostrand is a man with a message. His mission to bring the glory of old ceramics to a wider audience should be achieved by means of a nationwide road show this June and July. Kuantan, Kuching, Penang and Terengganu are all on the itinerary, but the highlight of the season will undoubtedly be Malacca. Renaissance Melaka Hotel, the premier hotel in the home of Malaysian history, is an appropriate venue for a series of lectures, exhibitions, appraisals and sales. The hotel has always been a keen supporter of artistic heritage, and owners such as the Yeo family are among the town's most committed antique collectors.

The opportunity to buy shipwreck ceramics so close to home is rare. Malacca may have the greatest concentration of antique shops in Malaysia, but this means little in terms of regional artefacts. The appeal of the exhibition at Renaissance Melaka Hotel is that the objects for sale were not merely found on Malaysia's doorstep; they may well have been heading here anyway. "Although a lot of ships went through the Straits of Malacca, not all of them survived their journey," states the hotel's general manager, Philip Chee.

Much of what is being presented by Nanhai Marine Archaeology is from the *Desaru*. Unlike so many other wrecks, this one was filled with items that should appeal to local tastes. Yixing teapots will immediately strike a chord with modern tea drinkers, while blue and white Qing-dynasty tableware is becoming as sought after by society hostesses in Malaysia as it is in New York or London.

From earlier shipwreck cargoes come numerous Thai celadon items. The basic concept of these greenish/bluish wares will be familiar to any habitue of contemporary interior-design shops. The main difference is that while a production-line celadon bowl made last year might cost RM100, a 600-year-old jarlet in original condition should cost half that price – but only when sold by Nanhai Marine Archaeology. Don't expect any antique dealer to be so generous, especially not in Malacca. For high-rolling enthusiasts, there will be ceramics for sale up to RM36,000. Authenticity of everything for sale is, of course, assured.

Marine Road Shows

June 14-16: Exhibition and sale. Hyatt Regency, Kuantan

June 28-30: Exhibition and sale. Renaissance Melaka Hotel

June 28: Lecture on "Genuine and fake ceramics in Malacca". 9.15pm. In addition, the public can bring their own antiques for appraisal by Sten Sjostrand Renaissance Melaka Hotel

June 29 and June 30: Lecture on "Why are shipwreck ceramics being purchased more than other antique ceramics?" Renaissance Melaka Hotel

July 4-6: Exhibition and sale. Hilton Kuching

To be arranged: Exhibition and sales in Penang and Terengganu