



Treasures of the Nanhai

The real treasures buried under the sea aren't pieces of eight, but pieces of history, time capsules providing fascinating insights into who and what we were, as *Chloe Ching* discovers

"Do you know why you're here today?" asked Sten Sjostrand a tad mischievously. At first I thought he was referring to the "Treasures of the Nanhai" Heritage Night and Dinner Auction at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre which we are both attending - he as the star, I as humble journalist. But no, he meant me as the Straits' born Chinese he had ascertained I was. "These," he said, pointing to the blue and white porcelains, the green glazed celadons, and the other precious antiques on display, "these are why your Nyonya ancestors came to Malacca centuries ago. And why you're here!" he laughed heartily from that thin Swedish frame.

Malacca. Turn the calendar back, not just a few hundred years, to the origins of the Portuguese and Dutch traders to Malaya. "Where it all began," but further back, one thousand years, and even earlier. Already by the 8th and 9th centuries, Malacca was a major trading and supply port due to its strategic position along the so-called "Maritime Silk Road." Arab and Indian traders from the west, Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese traders from the east and north. It was these latter routes which have fueled Sjostrand's interest – or rather, passion – for the past three decades, when he first founded Nantai Marine Archaeology Sdn Bhd (INMA), a Malaysia-based marine salvage and excavation company.

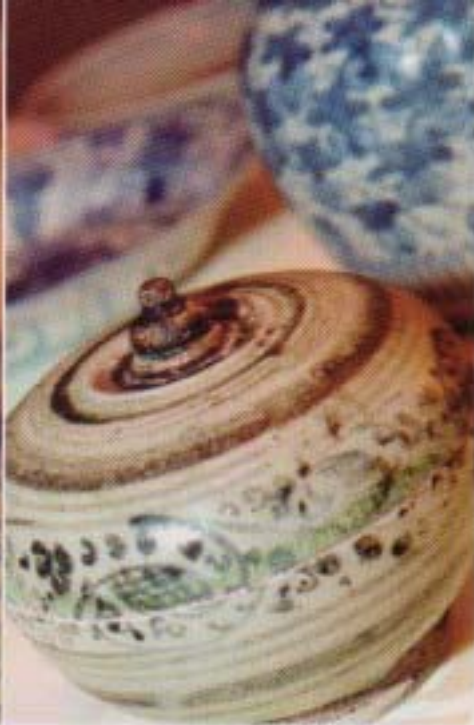
"The main driver of this maritime trade was weather," he explains. "The northeast monsoon from December through March sent ships down the South China Sea and the Malay archipelago, while the southwest monsoon from July to September brought prevailing winds for the return journey."

Of course, not all ships made it even halfway. The Sulu archipelago in the southern Philippines and the South China Sea off the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia became the watery graveyard of many a vessel laden with spices, ceramics, metals, food and other cargoes. Even as shipbuilding and technology continued to improve over the ages, they were still flimsy when battered by the storms and mountainous seas that so often bring a ship and its crew to grief. So it was with at least nine vessels that sank in the South China Sea, known to the Chinese as "Nantai."

At the dinner-and-auction Sjostrand gives me a tour of the exhibition, and waxes enthusiastic as he describes the rich trove of celadon, blue and white porcelain, and other artifacts up for auction later this evening. He not only knows the provenance of each piece, but fills me in on the finer points of Chinese porcelain production, from the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as their Thai and Vietnamese counterparts. "These are Northern Song dynasty celadons, circa 14th century. And these are celadonware recovered from the Tuniang site, from Sukhothai and Sisatchanalai, two important manufacturing sites in Thailand. Not as detailed as the Chinese celadon, but..." his voice trails off, obviously adoring every piece. One doesn't need trained eyes to appreciate the exquisite beauty of the brown-glazed kendi, qingbai ewers, bronze gongs, lacquer boxes, and the numerous ceramic dishes, plates, cups, and teapots.



Photo: Swedish author Sten Gustafson



He compares the process leading up to and subsequent to the find as very similar to detective work. "It's not all it's cracked up to be," he chuckles. "Just like in the movies, they glorify the policeman and the private eye. In reality, it's a lot of detective work—research, investigating, more investigating and more research." "Processing" the wreck site is also difficult and often dangerous work. There's the ever-present ocean to contend with, the tides, currents, rough weather, the depth, seeming storms of seabed sand kicked up, plus all the many mechanical and other equipment failures that can - and do - happen. Adding to the list of occupational hazards is the ever-present threat of pirates and looters.

A naval architect by training, Sjostrand left Sweden 30 years ago and moved to Southeast Asia. And for half that time he and his team of underwater explorers at NMA have searched the length and breadth of the Nanhai to discover its seabed secrets. Nine shipwrecks, nine sites. Nine time capsules. Each named by the team, usually by geographic proximity, as none of the actual names of the ships is known.

The first was Tanjong Simpang (circa AD 960; all historical dates which follow are approximate), discovered by Sjostrand in 1985. Thereafter followed Tunang (1370), Nanyang (1380), Longquan (1400), Royal Nanhai (1460), Xuande (1540), Singtai (1550), Wanli (1620) and Desaru (1840).

"These sites truly are time capsules," he enthused. "For much of the historical period in question, we have scant written records or other firsthand accounts as to the nature of maritime trade, the evolution and expansion of ceramic manufacturing, and many other mysteries. When we discover a wreck then, it's finding a preserved piece of history, frozen in time."

He tries to give me some idea about that moment when, after a likely site has been identified, he makes the initial dive to locate the wreck and discover what the actual contents are. "The adrenaline races: the heart pounds, and you feel a combination of anticipation, excitement, apprehension, and...pure joy."

Sjostrand speaks from hard-earned experience. After discovering his latest wreck, the Wanli, in 2003, the until-then bountiful and generous Nanhai, in what might be construed a wicked irony, took Sjostrand's ship *Cadenza* herself to the bottom, in a storm off the east coast of Malaysia the following year, which caused the vessel to sink in just five minutes - he and his crew were able to abandon ship just in time, and all were later rescued.

That put a halt to his maritime activities, at least temporarily. At 61, he considers himself in semi-retirement, and spends most of his time at his home in Kuala Rompin, Pahang, with his wife Lod. However, he is passing on his maritime archeological skills to a new generation of Malaysian divers and students. And his passion for history and discovery as well.



But at the Heritage Night and Dinner Auction, the spotlight is clearly on Sjostrand, and the over 500 guests gathered, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to buy a piece of history. The "Treasures of the Nanhai" sponsored in part by Hilton Kuala Lumpur, includes 15 selected items from the nine shipwrecks going under the hammer. These include a minimum opening bid of RM1,200 for a water pot recovered from the Desaru shipwreck, to the rare brown glazed kendi recovered from the Tanjung Simpang site (said to be the oldest shipwreck found in Malaysia), with a starting open bid of RM14,000, and a late Ming dynasty gourd bottle decorated with pomegranate-shaped panels depicting various auspicious motifs discovered from the Wanli shipwreck, with a starting bid of RM19,000. The bidding is intense, and prices for all items rise quickly.

The auction and accompanying symposium, as well as the "Treasures of the Nanhai" Exhibition and Sale held in September were all under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage Malaysia and the Department of Museums and Antiquities. "The agreement we have with the Malaysian authorities is such that we give 30% of the items found to the government, while we keep the remaining 70% of all recovered antique pottery and porcelain, which we are allowed to sell, in part to cover our expenses to finance future operations," he said. Sjostrand adds that his relationship with the Department is based on a genuine passion for maritime archaeology and Asia's ceramic developments.

And while Sjostrand's artifacts are exhibited in museums throughout the world, from London to Los Angeles, from Stockholm to Shanghai, he has donated a significant portion of his items to the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur and the Pekan Museum in Pahang. And he always gives Malaysians the first option to buy his shipwreck treasures, as it was in the Nanhai waters where they were retrieved. This was one of the reasons the auction of the "Treasures of the Nanhai" was held in Kuala Lumpur. It was considered a first-ever showcase of maritime archaeology and history of ceramic trade in the South China Sea.

Is he content to just teach these days, or is he keen on taking up the search once more? "Once it's in your blood, it's there for good," he smiles. "So many wrecks are still to be discovered. I will never stop looking." I should have known. After all, history does have a habit of repeating itself.

