

# Race for Ruins

Malaysia's eastern waters are littered with the wrecks of ancient ships. Who will get their treasures?



BY LORIEN HOLLAND

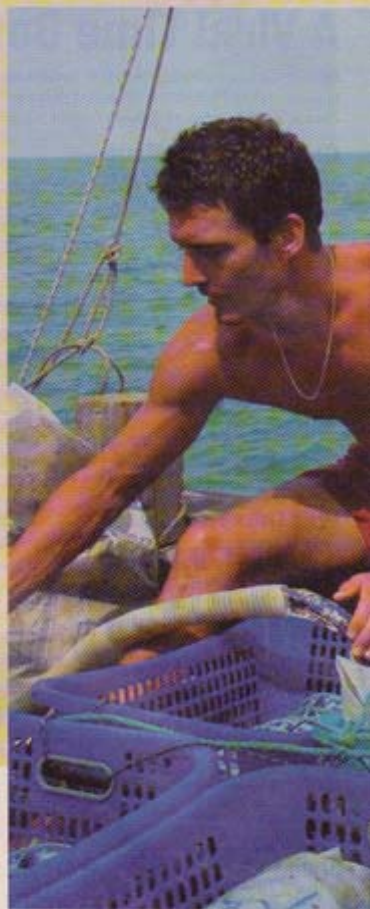
**S**TEN SJOSTRAND IS OBSESSED with wrecks. For the past nine years, the Swedish marine engineer has been scouring the waters off Malaysia's east coast for the wreckage of ancient trading ships. So far, he has uncovered seven vessels, ranging in age from the 14th-century Turiang to the Desaru, which dates to around 1830. He has not only hauled up valuable treasures but also has helped fuel a rising regional interest in just what is resting on Southeast Asia's seabeds.

Sjostrand and his team located the wreck of the Turiang—which appears to be of Chinese origin—in 43 meters of water, more than 100 nautical miles off the Malaysian coast. Although trawling nets had seriously damaged the deck, great stacks of ceramics from China, Thailand and Vietnam lay below. The cargoes were packed separately, indicating that the vessel had made several ports of call to fill its hold. And the fact that the wreck dates from the mid-14th century provides strong evidence that Southeast Asian kilns were al-

ready operating and competing with Chinese kilns before the Ming Emperor Hongwu banned private trade outside China in 1371.

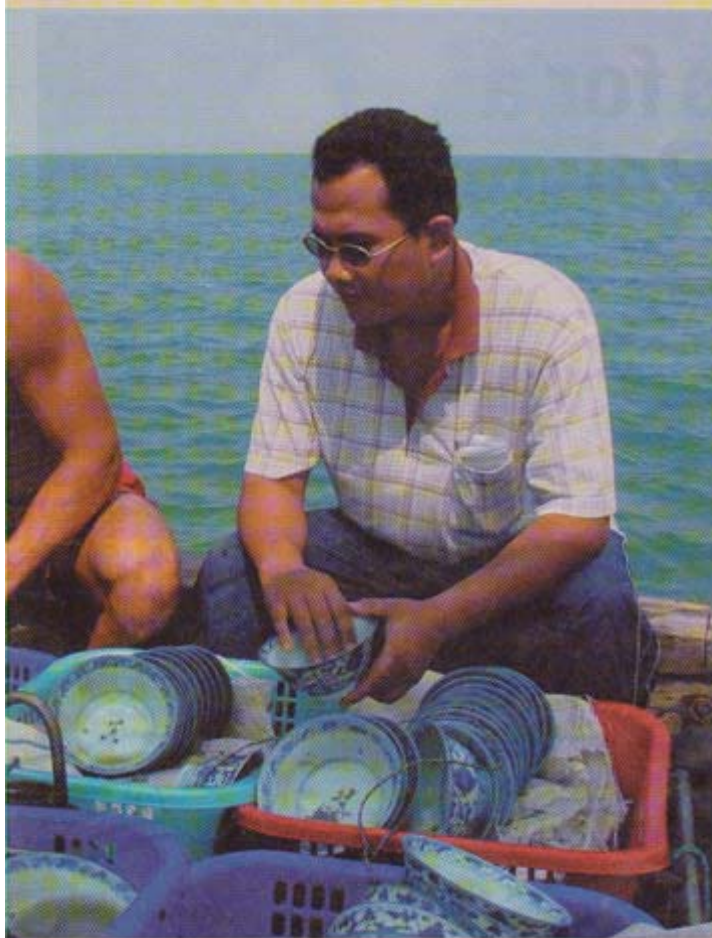
There is plenty more down there. Vessels from China, Java and India plied their trade on the region's monsoon winds from as early as the 10th century. They carried everything from bowls and flatware to spices and salted fish. Already more than 30 ships have been excavated in the region, and there may be many more still undiscovered. The wrecks have proved invaluable in filling historical gaps, with each one providing a concrete glimpse of a specific moment in time. Indeed, Sjostrand's seven wrecks provide strong evidence that regional trade—as opposed to the great trade routes documented in Chinese and Arabic records—was an important business. The cargoes of the regional traders show that Southeast Asians preferred traditional pale green ceramics and were far less interested in the blue and white china that was all the rage in Europe from the 16th century on.

But marine archeologists may be running out of time. The advances in sonar



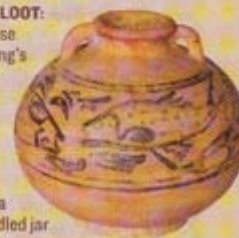
technology that have helped people like Sjostrand—who shares both his treasures and his knowledge with the Malaysian government—find the wrecks mean looters also have easier access. At the same time, commercial fishing in the region—especially with dragnets that scrape the ocean floor—has intensified. The nets shave off the top of the wrecks, scattering their precious cargo and destroying the masts or protruding hulls that would help divers locate them. "Someone or something else will get to the wrecks if action isn't taken soon," says John Guy, curator of the Indian and Southeast Asian Department of London's Victoria and Albert Museum. "The result is that the pace of wreck recovery has increased dramatically, and at the same time there is an urgency that wasn't there in the past."

Pulling treasures up from the depths is



#### COLLECTING THE LOOT:

(From left) a Chinese ship from the Turiang's era, members of Sjostrand's team sort through ceramics pulled from the Desaru, a Malaysian diver at the wreckage site, a salvaged ring-handled jar from Thailand



no easy feat. Visibility at the wreck sites is often near zero because of high winds, and each year there are only two short periods when conditions in the South China Sea allow for deep-water diving. Merely locating the ships is a difficult task. Sjostrand—who developed a taste for ceramics more than 20 years ago while working as a commercial marine engineer in Singapore—started searching in the early 1990s. He decided on a 10-mile-by-250-mile corridor down peninsular Malaysia's east coast, in what was once one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. During the first two years, all he found were rubbish and oil pipes. Still, he had enough savings and determination to push ahead. It helped that local fishermen were often able to point out areas where they had found broken ceramics in their nets. Eventually, he got lucky. "Once you

decide to do something, then you don't stop before you've finished," Sjostrand says.

To whom do the artifacts belong? Malaysia's national museum gets first pick, since most of the wrecks are in Malaysian waters. The museum gets 30 percent of the haul, while Sjostrand keeps 70 percent—an arrangement both sides seem happy with. Sjostrand is training museum staff in marine archeology, and has helped them set up an excellent exhibition at the national museum that showcases cargoes from a total of 10 shipwrecks dating back to the Turiang. "Malaysia is at the crossroads of maritime trade in this region, but our government doesn't have that much money to spend on underwater archeology," says Adi Taha, director-general of the Department of Museums & Antiquities in Malaysia. Working with people like Sjostrand is the

only way to get artifacts to the surface. "Some might say this is commercialization, but I say it is commissioning," says Taha.

For his part, Sjostrand funds his underwater archeology by selling to museums and private collectors a significant proportion of the plates, jars, bowls, teapots and spoons brought to the surface. Though he retains a large collection of ceramics bought from dealers over the past two decades, the pieces recovered from the wrecks are his favorites. "For me there is far more value in a piece when you know exactly where it comes from, and you can piece together its history."

The best may be yet to come. In 1511, a Portuguese ship, the *Flor de la Mar*, sank in the Strait of Malacca along with its booty looted from the rich Sultanate of Malacca. An Indonesian salvage team spent several million dollars trying to locate the wreck in the early 1990s, and predicted the discovery of several billion dollars' worth of gold, precious stones and other artifacts. They found little and eventually ended the search. But the *Flor de la Mar* is still out there somewhere, waiting to be salvaged. Unless looters get there first. ■