

THE GUIDE
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action travel
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& gear

The Best Adventure Travel Destinations in Asia

ACTION

Asia

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to kill**
**The Sea Canoe
scandal**

**Towers
of power**
**Australia's great
rock walls**

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**Action sports events
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**Treasure
trails**
**Wreck hunting
in the Philippines**

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THE PHILIPPINES
ADVENTURE TRAVEL

mounted cars. Their hosts were not taking any chances with their safety.

Allen commented, "During the two hours it took for our equipment and supplies to be unloaded, we became the centre of attention, and the talk of the town. This gave us some uneasy thoughts, as local bandits would have undoubtedly heard of our arrival and could have staged a high profile exchange with government forces."

But despite such apprehension, they were soon enmeshed on another, much smaller patrol boat, and on their way to the wreck site itself.

Next morning was the real moment of truth: the team was at last ready to dive on the wreck again and see if there had been any further disturbance. Homan decided to divide the team into working groups of four, each group including an archaeologist and a cameraman to systematically document everything that would happen through the course of the excavation. Says Homan of the epic moment before the dive: "For any diver that I've ever met, there's nothing gets the heart pumping like diving on a historical wreck. I knew this one was potentially one of the most significant archaeological finds in the Philippines, and at last we were ready to start excavation. Between us we all had a lot of experience in this business, but it was impossible not to get excited."

They were in for a major shock. When they descended the line they found that, despite the fact that the navy had been maintaining a 24hrs a day guard on the site, it had not only re-visited by looters, it had been thoroughly stripped. Where Homan had previously seen a few small craters indicating pots removed from the sea bed, there were now big craters — and ten times as many. There was also a chaotic profusion of porcelain shards and debris from pots that had been broken in the excavation process. "Heart wrenching," was Homan's simple comment. It was also obvious from the extent of the damage that the looters had spent a considerable amount of time on the site.

The hand of fate

"For the first few minutes of the dive I was swimming around the site in a daze," says Stuart Allen. "But gradually I began to focus on what remained and how we could salvage it. Scattered all over the sea bed, along with the broken pottery, were ship timbers, surprisingly well preserved after 500 years. Then I discovered a key artifact: a traditional Filipino cooking stove, still identifiable despite age and encrustations. Brian (Homan) was right. The vessel was a

No hiding place (top): Brian Homan tries to find a moment of peace amid the growing frustration, disappointment and bitterness of the excavation attempts. The work itself (right and far right) was difficult, physically demanding — and yielded few rewards

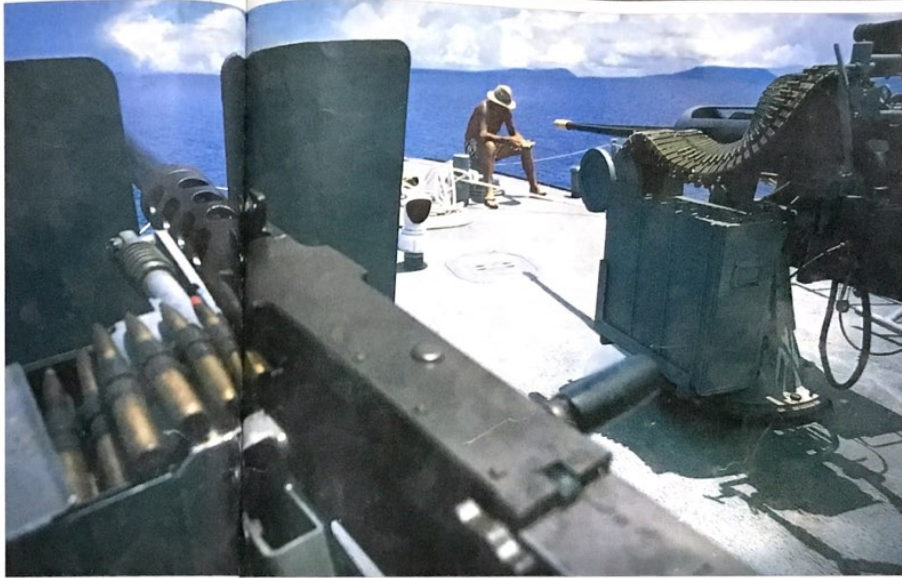
"Jolo has a long and well documented history as a slave-trading centre. Might they not have picked up another valuable cargo: human beings?"

National Museum, the excavation team commenced a slow, complicated trip from Subic Bay to Manila and then to Zamboanga. They arrived in Zamboanga on October 1, spent a day getting final provisions, then boarded the vessel provided for them by the navy — which turned out to be the Quezon, a 120m corvette, complete with 6m guns.

As Stuart Allen commented, "It was good news as well as bad. It was reassuring that the navy thought so much of our safety that we were assigned one of the biggest vessels in the fleet — but definitely unnerving that we might need it."

A day later they were in the port of Jolo. From there, it seems, their plans started going awry. First came a further blunt reminder of the precarious state of security in the area: waiting for them at the pier was the security detachment of Governor Hap Manib Estino, which consisted of over 30 heavily armed marines, "Humvees" and ar-

THE ANDAMANS
ADVENTURE TRAVEL DESTINATIONS





Every little piece tells a story. Danny Mathews (left), Stuart Allen and Trevor Ross (right) examine and puzzle over some of the small artifacts recovered from the wreck. Museum archaeologists were surprised by some of the finds, and are still speculating on the significance of them Philippine *balinghai*."

The divers surfaced, and an informal team meeting was convened. The excavation and mapping of the site would continue, and hopefully deeper in the sand would be more artifacts that would reveal the secrets of the wreck. The next task was to clear the site of shards, debris and old ships timbers, and although that task was carried out diligently it was depressingly obvious from the porcelain remnants that this boat had indeed contained remarkable and truly unique pottery artifacts.

Next morning, determined to put the major disappointment of the looting behind them and turn the project into a success, the team resumed their underwater work with renewed vigour. Then came another totally unexpected setback. Divers Gregg Roberts and Danny Mathews were down at 35m cleaning up shards, and Kevin Hamdorf was filming the proceedings. Suddenly, just before the dive was due to end, there was an enormous bang: the O-ring on Roberts' tank had blown, and precious air was blasting out into the water at an alarming rate. Within seconds his tank was empty. Even on a shallow dive, this type of incident can be critical, but at 35m it's seriously life threatening. Roberts kept his cool, swam over to Hamdorf, indicated the problem, and started using Hamdorf's "octopus" rig (an extra breathing apparatus connected to his tank.) But Hamdorf himself was low on air: he had barely enough to complete a decompression stop and make it to the surface. The two of them wouldn't be able to make it on his tank, and with the nearest hyperbaric chamber several days travel away forgoing the decompression stop was out of the question. Roberts quickly realized he had just one other option: **Danny**

Mathews, not too far away on the other side of the site, was wearing a Navy Seal rig with twin tanks joined by a manifold, and he would almost certainly have enough air. Gregg banged on Hamdorf's tank to attract Mathews' attention, then lunged across to the safety of the twin tanks — only to find that Mathews' Seal rig didn't have an "octopus". Fortunately Mathews is, in fact, an ex-Seal. Both men kept their cool, and using a "buddy breathing" technique to share the air supply, safely completed the ascent, including a decompression stop.

It had been a close call, and immediately there was an intense debate about safety procedures, bottom time and the condition of the equipment. When the matter was resolved, work resumed on the clearing, albeit more cautiously.

Digging into bitter dirt

When the clearing was complete it was time to start mapping and excavating what remained of the wreck. The site was first divided into a grid using "datum lines" — clearly visible nylon cords that are placed at right angles to each other and stretched tight to create a pattern of squares on the bottom. The squares are systematically excavated one at a time, and the datum lines used as references to determine and record the exact location of every artifact that's found. The excavation is slow, careful, painstaking work. Because of the fragility of the porcelain, and the potential significance of even the smallest item, sediment must be removed with maximum care. The most effective way is to brush it gently away by hand, or fan the water with a flat object or by hand, so that the top layer lifts up into the water. The major prob-

lem is the clouds of sediment which then billow up and obscure visibility. As a result, and to solve this problem, one of the most important excavation tools is an "airlift". This is a simple device much like an underwater vacuum cleaner. The airlift operator gently brushes over an area suspected to contain artifacts, and as the sediment rises vacuums it up before it obscures his vision. It's simple, but it's highly effective, and the airlift is now a standard tool on virtually all marine archaeology sites.

As soon as the serious excavation began, artifacts were discovered. First was an impressive earthenware jar with unusual Islamic design flourishes. Then came several white porcelain tea cups, obviously of Chinese origin. Once their positions had been logged, each piece was carried to the surface where the Museum team swung into action, placing everything in styrofoam chests filled with salt water and commencing the long, slow restoration process. Next came a major breakthrough: some hull timbers that had been buried deep in the sand were uncovered — nothing spectacular in themselves, but enough to give a clear indication of the direction the hull was pointing, and to reconfirm again its Philippine origins. Also during this dive one of the team using a metal detector discovered a cluster of Ming dynasty Chinese coins. This immediately caused much discussion among the team. There seemed little doubt about the date and origin of the vessel, but it had always been assumed that trade at that time was purely barter: Chinese porcelain, silks and pig iron were traded for pearls, birds nests and tropical timber, but here were literally hundreds of Chinese coins, clearly from the Ming dynasty, being

The way it was. By carefully logging every small item that was recovered, Homan's team was able to recreate their positioning and that of the hull

