

It was late 1864 when Lieutenant John Braine of the Southern Navy and several Confederate soldiers and sailors disguised themselves as civilian passengers and quietly boarded the Northern mail steamer Roanoke, anchored in Cuba's Havana

Secrets of

By Andrea Milam

harbor. In a bold attempt to turn the tables for the Confederacy, which by this point wasn't faring well in the U.S. Civil War, they waited for the ship to depart for New York before revealing their true identities and taking over the ship. The Confederates diverted the ship to Bermuda, using the last of the ship's coal to steam toward the island's east end. The ship was denied access to the harbor by Bermuda's governor, citing the island's neutrality in the Civil War, so in a final act of desperation, Braine saw to it that all passengers were removed to other boats and he scuttled the ship to prevent it from falling back under Northern control. Now, more than 150 years later, the wreck of the Roanoke beckons to Bermudian divers,

who have been hunting for her remains for close to five years. "We have yet to find her remains, but in four dives we've uncovered more than 16 anchors from ships dating back to the 16th century, because the area where the Roanoke was anchored was historically a popular anchorage spot for ships waiting for the right wind to enter the harbor," says Mark

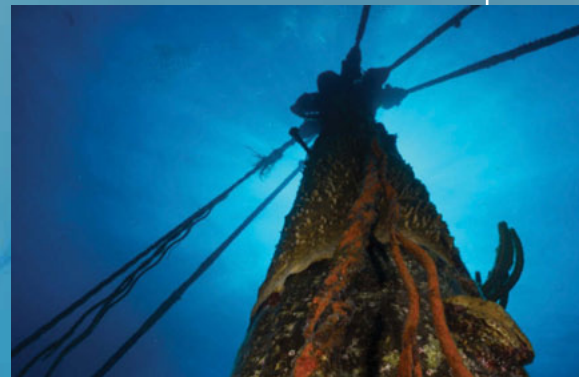
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Diel of Dive Bermuda. "It's quite spectacular; it's like a graveyard in this area."

Beyond bragging rights and the reward of tremendous pride for locating such an elusive yet important wreck, Mark and the divers who join him in their spare time to search for the Roanoke are itching to catalogue the items that were left behind as the seamen evacuated the ship prior to it being scuttled.

"We'd love to excavate her and see what was on board when she went down," Mark says. "They couldn't have cleared the boat of everything. I'm quite sure she went down with a considerable amount of material. We want to eventually have the Roanoke as a historic wreck that we can dive on with guests to the island."



The Deep

Mark and his colleagues have liaised with Custodian of Historic Wrecks Dr. Philippe Rouja, who's cautioned divers to leave what they find in the sea, as parts of the ship and artifacts will surely rust and deteriorate if brought to the surface.

"If we bring anything up, we'd have to do so with very, very careful preservation techniques," Mark says.

Though some might dismiss searching for treasure as a fool's errand, diving for lost shipwrecks off Bermuda's shores has proven to be fruitful in recent years. The Mary-Celestia, a well-known dive site, revealed additional treasures including wine and perfume when a series of 2011 winter storms

moved six feet of sand off the wreck. The discovery serves as an example of the ocean floor revealing valuable caches that have been lost for more than a century.

Visitors to the island who are experienced divers are welcome to join Mark and his team on the search, he says. If you'd rather dive with certain reward, Bermuda has much to offer. The island's mid-Atlantic location and fringing reefs have led to the demise of hundreds of ships over the past several centuries. The Mary-Celestia is one such site that's open to divers, and she continues to offer up broken bottles and cutlery to those who plunge the 55 feet to see her. The Montana, a 19th-century paddle steamer, and

the Constellation, a four-masted wooden sailing ship, are popular dive sites, the latter having served as inspiration for "Jaws" author Peter Benchley's novel, "The Deep." The L'Herminie, a 60-gun French warship, is Bermuda's largest wooden wreck, and though most of the wood has rotted away, the metal cannons still litter the sea floor.

Whether you opt for the thrill of hunting for the lost Roanoke or you decide to explore centuries-old history by diving one of Bermuda's many well-known shipwrecks, Mark and his team at Dive Bermuda are happy to be your guide. Bermuda's wrecks, both lost and found, offer a captivating curiosity that begs to be discovered.