

WORLD NEWS

Race to save Med's last great treasure

Unexplored for decades, Albania's waters are filled with artefacts. Efforts are under way to chart them before looters descend

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Vlore, Albania

From the research vessel Hercules, Albania's Jurassic coastline dipped as the swell heaved, pitching the boat from side to side in the piercingly bright sunlight.

We were here on a mission that combines Albania's recent isolationist past with its ancient history: to save one of Europe's last secret underwater treasure troves before it is plundered.

"It's incredible what's down there," said Mateusz Polakowski, 29, an underwater archaeologist at Southampton University. "We don't even know about a tiny fraction of it."

He is part of a team of archaeologists and technicians working feverishly to map out Albania's underwater riches, preserved because the country was ruled for four decades by a murderous dictator.

Enver Hoxha, whose communist forces seized power in 1945, ran Albania as a hermit kingdom, the most repressive and ideologically driven regime in Europe. It was the North Korea of its day. Its coastline is less than two miles from the beaches of Corfu, but it might as well have been on the moon.

When scuba-diving equipment came into use elsewhere after the Second World War, the Albanian regime banned it as a weapon of bourgeois insurrection, which unreliable elements might use to escape to the nearby Greek island.

Hoxha, a hardline Stalinist, held a ruthless grip on Albania until his death in 1985, turning it into a devout outpost of ideological purity and killing or detaining an estimated 100,000 people.

It emerged from the experience as one of the poorest countries in Europe. Thanks to the diving ban, however, the waters off its coast are an archaeological time capsule, unrivalled across the Adriatic and the Mediterranean.

Underwater heritage experts hope Albania will avoid the fate of Greece and Italy, whose historical riches have been pillaged by treasure-hunting divers. Further north in the Adriatic, in the seas off the former Yugoslavia, armies of looters have used scuba apparatus to plunder artefacts from beneath the waves.

Albania's remain largely untouched but its government – the country has been a parliamentary democracy since 1992 – has committed few resources of its own to protect this heritage.

Working with scuba divers and remotely controlled underwater vehicles, the archaeologists on the Hercules are scrambling to document the treasures on the sea bed before they are lost – and are handing all the information they find to the Albanian government.

Last week, The Sunday Times joined them. The team's task is enormous. For as long as civilisation has existed, these waters have lain at the crossroads of Europe – a route vital in war and trade.

In the Bay of Vlore, on Albania's southern coast, where the Hercules was last week searching for shipwrecks, the waters ran red when Caesar clashed with Pompey's forces during the Great Roman Civil War of the 1st century BC.

When the Ottoman Empire was threatening Italy during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, its fleet gathered in the

ALAMY



Amphora are among the artefacts being uncovered below the waters off Albania, where shipwrecks from thousands of years ago have lain undisturbed. For every discovery, there are weeks of searching



bay. Jews expelled from Spain during the late Middle Ages escaped to Vlore via Italy. All have left their imprints on the sea bed.

"We're trying to find this little guy," said Polakowski. Leaning back in his chair, he pointed at a map of the sea floor, marked with a green line showing the location of a wreck from about the 1st century BC. "We can identify the age by the type of amphoras it carries. This one would have been carrying things like olive oil or wine."

This search of Albania's waters has been going on unheralded for the past decade. Each summer, the Hercules has trawled the waters of Albania with its five-man crew. It is funded by RPM Nautical Foundation, a Florida-based non-profit organisation headed by James Goold, a lawyer with the firm Covington & Burling.

Using a remotely operated underwater vehicle equipped with cameras, its target last week was an ancient shipwreck that sank, along with its cargo of amphoras, about 2,000 years ago.

"There it is!" said Polakowski, pointing at the screen as a faint, dark shape appeared through the deep blue, beamed from 90ft below the surface. After a few seconds, a pile of amphoras came into view. Beneath them, the timbers of a ship could still lie intact.

"Seeing that many amphoras, that clearly, intact and on the bottom is really

nice," Polakowski said. "Somewhere other than Albania, anywhere in the Mediterranean at free-diving or scuba depth, it's likely that others have been there before and disturbed it in some way."

A day's sail away from this shipwreck lies Butrint, which, according to the Roman poet Virgil, was founded by refugees from ancient Troy, who escaped the sacking of their city more than 3,000 years ago.

In the modern era, the Albanian coast was an important supply line during both

world wars. The wrecks of U-boats and warships litter the bottom of the ocean. In the Bay of Vlore alone, there are 10 wartime shipwrecks, including the Regina Margherita, the flagship of the Italian navy, which sank in 1916 with the loss of nearly 700 lives.

Nearby is the wreck of an Italian hospital ship attacked by the British in 1941. Three nuns died, but one important passenger to survive was Edda Ciano, eldest daughter of the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, who was picked up from the sea after the ship sank.

For every discovery, there are weeks of fruitless searching. The bottom of the sea is, archaeologists say, far less thoroughly explored than the surface of the moon, and conditions are about as hospitable.

"It's like looking under the ocean with a flashlight," said Polakowski. "It's so vast. We've still only surveyed less than 1% of the area. You can swim a site 10 times and you can still be 10 metres off a shipwreck and miss it."

To track down historical underwater sites, the team speak to fishermen. Shipwrecks make astounding artificial reefs and locals often have tales of snagging amphoras in their nets in fertile fishing spots.

"It's not like we're discovering it for the first time. The communities know where they are," said Polakowski as the Hercules passed a cave that locals know as a medieval pirates' nest. "We're just mapping it and bringing it to the attention of the authorities."

When the team does discover something, its co-ordinates are kept secret.

Scuba diving is technically still not permitted, but three years ago the Albanian council of ministers allowed recreational diving in defined areas along the coast.

Now treasure-hunters from Italy and Austria have been seen in Albanian waters, as well as enterprising locals equipped with scuba equipment and a desire to make fast cash.

"In the communist period, nobody was allowed to come and visit the waters. They'd shoot you right away," said Auron Tare, chairman of the Unesco scientific committee on water heritage, who advises the Albanian government on underwater archaeology. "Now some people think that anything in the ocean is fair game – take it home."

For the archaeologists, the value of the artefacts lies in the historical snapshot they present, rather than in the rubies and gold they might carry. By looking at them, they can unearth the secrets of the deep.

Their greatest resentment is reserved for professional treasure-hunting companies with multimillion-dollar equipment. "The treasure-hunters, they see themselves as Captain Jack Sparrow, as adventurers," said Polakowski, as the remote-operated vehicle was drawn back onto the deck after a day's work.

"But that's all they have going for them. They say: you invest in our boat, we'll find a shipwreck with gold and you'll be able to sell it off. But the reality is it's the least cost-effective scheme ever. You just get wrapped up in legal fees. It's high-risk and literally no reward."

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