

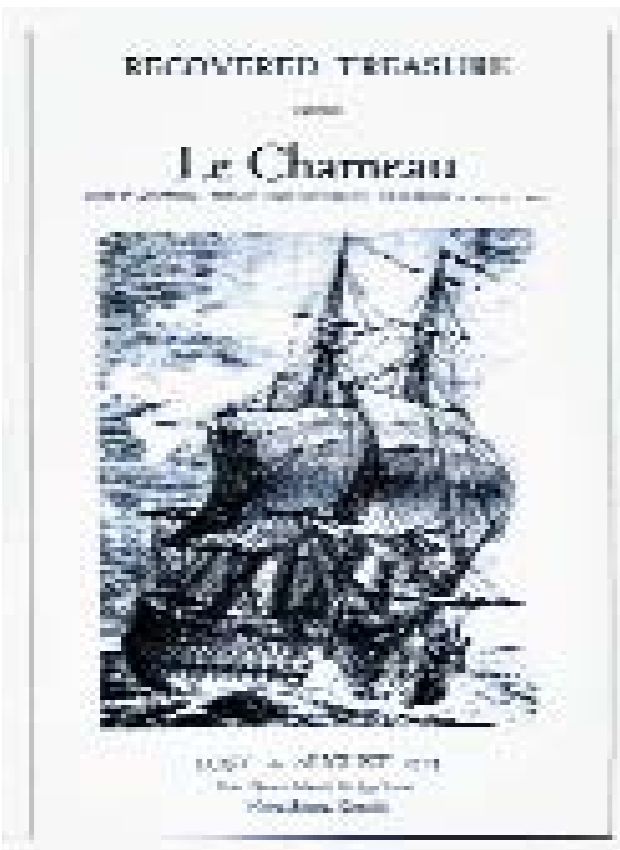
Replicas of coins from the Chameau



: ROLAND HANEWALD

The “Nervous Wrecks” grace the name of a Sydney diving club, specializing, as you might have guessed, in wreck diving. But hold it... “Hey!” someone in the know is apt to shout now. “There is no such thing as a diving club by that name in Sydney!”

Nervous Wrecks



Quite correct. There are no Nervous Wrecks (not that type) in Sydney, New South Wales. They are in Sydney, Nova Scotia, located on Canada’s Atlantic seacoast. A bit more nippy than DownUnder? You bet – sometimes there are even icebergs floating around! The *Titanic* went down not very far from this place.

Specifically, Canada’s Sydney is the main urban centre on Cape Breton Island, which is separated by a narrow channel from Nova Scotia but politically part of the province bearing that name. It’s a town of some 26,000 souls, with no particular sights to see except a handsome waterfront and beautiful landscapes farther afield. Sydney had seen better days before its coal mining and steel industries closed down quite recently, and has now been turned into a cruise-liner destination, mainly for Americans who want to boast back home that they had been in Sydney, minus the opera house of course. At first glance, the surroundings hardly look like the right venue for a diver’s paradise. Summers are short, and ice sometimes covers the inlets protruding deeply into the island until as late as April – nothing that would tempt an Aussie diver to do his thing there. (Oddly enough, though, according to the locals one young chap travels there every year from Down Under to engage in ice diving – will masochists never die?) Yet what makes the place so special and an exciting playground for

wreck divers is the fact that from the late 15th century on much of the North America-bound shipping out of Europe or heading back there had to squeeze past those rugged and reef-studded shores, and mostly in weather conditions that were, putting it mildly, inclement for much of the year. Fog, for one thing, claimed innumerable victims before the days of radar and GPS, and even today yet. For this reason the waters around Cape Breton and Nova Scotia are peppered with wrecks, and some have made diving on them truly worthwhile...

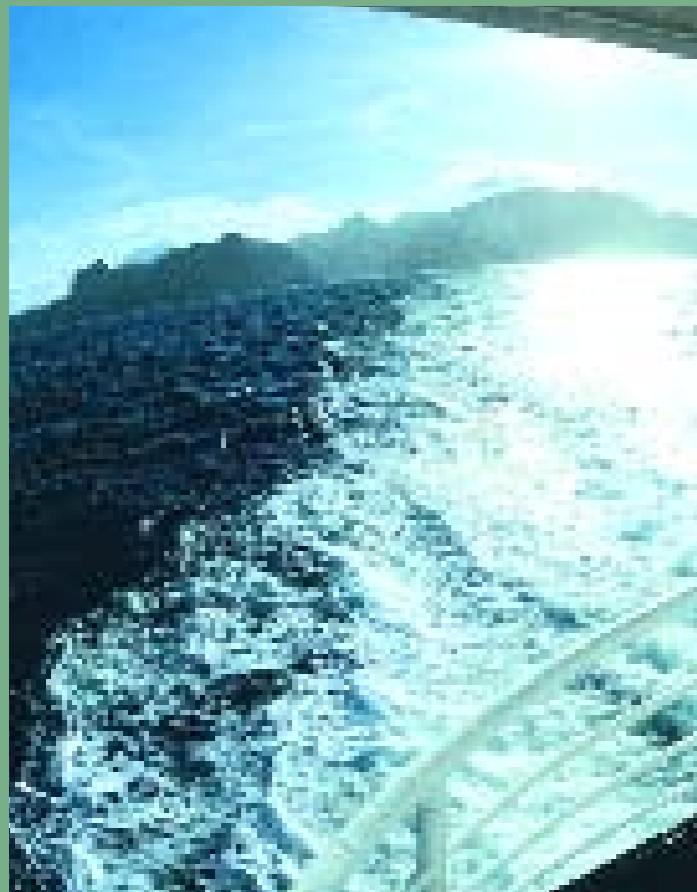
A treasure in gold and silver, believed to be the richest ever recovered in Canadian coastal waters...

The first recorded shipwreck took place in 1597, when the British galleon “Chancewell” went on the rocks in the island’s northeast and became a total loss. This vessel became the first link in an endless chain that was to follow, climaxing in the foundering of the French pay ship “Le Chameau” in 1725, an event that would hoist Cape Breton into unprecedented international headlines over two centuries later. Scuba diving had not yet been in vogue for long then, so when a young man named Alex Storm did some underwater forays along the forbidding coast in 1961, he was rather regarded as an oddball. Who would get a kick out of diving in such cold and turbid waters?

Alex and his buddies certainly did. In the course of their subsequent operations,

ABOVE: No treasure, but interesting salvage articles nevertheless
BELOW: Cannons salvaged from one of the many “classic” wrecks



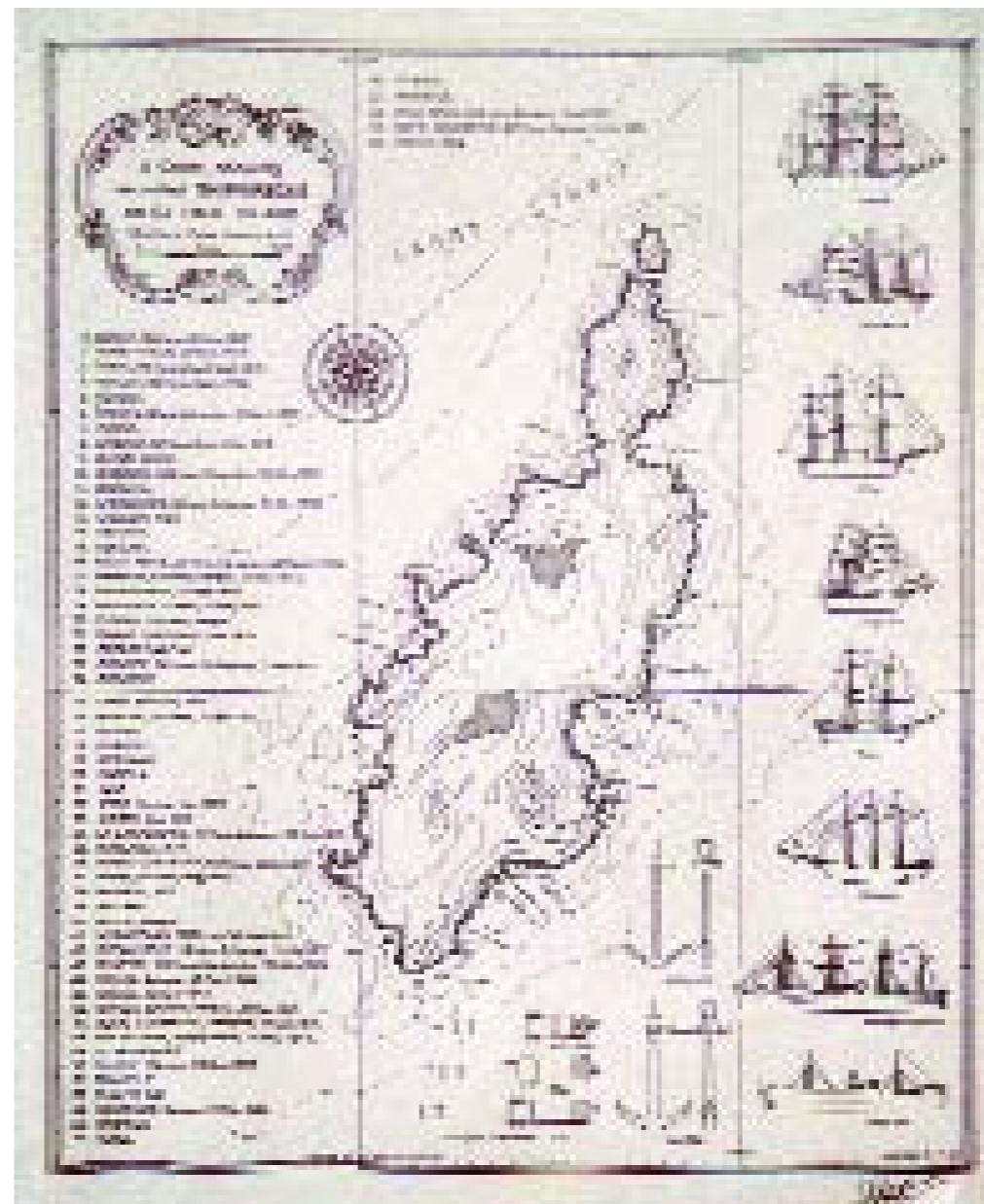


Who would get a kick out of diving in such cold and turbid waters?

the threesome salvaged goodies valued at 700,000 Canadian dollars from the wreck, to which a reef named Chameau Rock practically served as a signpost. The Cape Breton Post of 5 April 1966 reported, "A treasure in gold and silver, believed to be the richest ever recovered in Canadian coastal waters, has been taken from an 18th century French pay ship by three Cape Breton skindivers operating out of Louisbourg. The 'fairy tale' adventure had been cloaked in secrecy for eight months by the three dedicated men who overcame almost incredible difficulties to bring the fortune to the surface..."

The coup, which made the salvors comfortably well off, directed the attention of local divers to the many other wrecks in the area, some reputed with treasure, albeit of lesser proportions than that of the "Chameau", and, with scuba diving making more and more inroads all over the world, some lively activity soon developed. Sydney's "Nervous Wrecks" eventually constituted themselves and explored the region for more sites. Up to present the club has assembled an impressive list of findings and displays on its premises quite a few interesting artefacts, which will certainly inspire newcomers to participate in exploration tours. Each summer outings are regularly made to a number of locations, which include the "HMS Fever-sham", another classic wreck also worked on with some success by Alex, the "Madge of Wildfire" and the "Leonidas" off Scatarie Island, a marine graveyard of large proportions, or to St. Paul north of Cape Breton, a little islet apparently straight of Robert Louis Stevenson's tales and having claimed at least 60 ships – the vestiges of those wrecks are more or less piled upon each other there. Periodically the Nervous Wrecks also follow invitations by their colleagues in adjacent Halifax, visiting the "British Freedom", "Clair Lilly" and "Holda-dover" off the Nova Scotia coast. Since 1991 ten ships have been intentionally sunk in Canadian coastal waters to serve as dive sites. One of those is the destroyer "HMCS Saguenay", which was scuttled off Lunenburg Harbour, Nova Scotia, in 1994, and is particularly popular with underwater explorers,

Top to bottom: A rough and forbidding shore: Cape Breton Island from afar; Some Nervous Wrecks heading out for Scatarie Island on a rare sunny day; A placid day on the coast, but the Atlantic surf is always there. Facing page: Impressive array of bottles recovered around Cape Breton Island; The coasts of the islet of St. Paul are studded with wrecks; Welcome to Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada!



attracting hundreds of divers every year. Would anyone in Australia care to join this hardy crowd? The natives are friendly and speak (almost) the same language. But be prepared for a bit of rough going. Just a few flipper kicks below the surface the water temperature is not likely to exceed a chilly 5° C, calling for an extra-thick neoprene suit, and visibilities commonly hover around five metres, with darkness beyond. In spite of the cold water, marine growth on the wrecks is abundant, and thick kelp forests are sometimes a nuisance. (Less of a bother are seals which occasionally show up to watch the divers). Then, sudden gales or fogs pop out of nowhere, which is considered absolutely normal. But didn't Alex Storm and his mates readily brave all those perils? They did and, oh, were they rewarded ever so richly!

The waters around Cape Breton and Nova Scotia are peppered with wrecks, and some have made diving on them truly worthwhile...



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