

Ancient wreck hunt in once forbidden sea

SARANDA, Albania: Once Europe's most forbidding coast, this sparkling stretch of the Ionian Sea is slowly revealing lost treasures that date back 2,500 years and shipwrecks from ancient times.

Over the past two summers, a research ship carrying U.S. and Albanian experts has combed the waters off southern Albania inch by inch, using scanning equipment and submersible robots to seek ancient wrecks. In what organizers say is the first archaeological survey of Albania's seabed, at least five sites were located, which could fill in blanks on ancient shipbuilding techniques.

The project would not have been even imaginable just 18 years ago, when the small Balkan country was still ruled by Communists who banned contact with the outside world. The brutal regime pockmarked the countryside with more than 700,000 bunkers, against a foreign invasion that never came. Instead, the Communists were toppled after a student-led revolt in

1990, which opened Albania to the world.

"Albania is a tremendous untapped (archaeological) resource," said U.S. archaeologist Jeffrey G. Royal from the Key West, Florida-based RPM Nautical Foundation, a nonprofit group leading the underwater survey. "With what we've discovered until now we may say that Albania is on a par with Italy and Greece."

The latest expedition has revealed traces of four sunken Greek ships dating from the 6th to the 3rd centuries B.C., while another three suspected sites have still to be verified. In comparison, the 2007 season netted signs of just one ancient wreck.

During ancient times, Albania stood on an important trade route, receiving traffic from Greece, Italy, north Africa and the western Mediterranean. That history shows in what Albanian mission coordinator Auron Tare called "a real underwater treasure trove" discovered during the six-week season that ended in August 2008.

A 20-inch-long (50-centimeter-long) pottery jar, or amphora, used to transport wine and olive oil, and a smaller

version found 260 feet (78 meters) deep were probably made in the southern Greek city of Corinth, in the 6th or early 5th centuries B.C. Both were recovered from a merchant ship that sank 1.8 miles (three kilometers) off shore. Albanian archaeologist Adrian Anastasi said if the 6th century B.C. dating is confirmed, it would be only the fifth of its kind found in the world.

Other highlights included a 4th century B.C. amphora and roof tiles, a north African jar from the 1st to 3rd centuries A.D. and a Roman stone ship's anchor of the 2nd-1st century B.C. The team, operating off the southern port city of Saranda, also located more than 20 unknown 20th-century shipwrecks.

Anastasi said what was unique in the 2008 season was the discovery of the fired clay tiles, which appeared to be part of an entire sunken shipload.

"A wreck with a whole shipload of tiles has never been found before," Anastasi said. "The number of tiles and the way they were lying clearly shows the ship is below them."

Anastasi said he had unearthed the same type of large tiles — which meas-

ure 29 by 20 inches (73 by 52 centimeters) — during excavations on land at the ruins of ancient cities in western Albania. He said the ship seemed to have been loaded on the nearby Greek island of Corfu and possibly foundered on its way to a Corinthian colony in Albania.

To protect the wrecks from looting, the team is keeping their precise sites secret.

"I'd say if all the material we discovered was excavated you would need a new museum to put it in," said mission leader George Robb. "We've scanned only 84 square miles (217 square kilometers) until now."

Over the next five years, RPM and the Texas-based Institute of Nautical Archaeology plan to scan the whole 220-mile (354-kilometer) shore from the southern border with Greece to Montenegro in the north. Each day of work costs an estimated \$25,000, covered by RPM funds.

Once the scanning project is finished, RPM and the INA will discuss the prospect of properly excavating the wrecks using robot submarines and divers, Tare said.

Divers plunder Greece's sunken treasure troves

Government move to boost tourism backfires as looters descend on antiquities

For centuries they have lain forgotten and untouched in the murky depths of the Mediterranean. But the sunken glories of Greece are now threatened by modern treasure hunters, who are targeting their riches since the lifting of a ban on coastal scuba-diving.

At risk, say archaeologists, is an unseen part of the country's cultural patrimony, comprising thousands of shipwrecks dating from Classical, Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine and early modern times and their priceless cargoes of coins, ingots, weapons and gold.

"Greek waters are some of the richest in antiquities in the world," said the marine archaeologist Katerina Dellaporta. "Thanks to very stringent controls over underwater exploration shipwrecks have been extremely well preserved."

Until recently divers were allowed access to just 620 miles of the country's 12,000 mile coastline, but in an attempt to boost tourism, the

conservative government opened the country's entire coastal waters to underwater exploration in 2003.

Since then, looting has proliferated, say archaeologists.

Treasure hunters, encouraged by scuba-diving websites from America to Australia, are homing in on the "archaeological sea parks" armed with hi-tech scanners, cameras and nets.

One US-based diving company offers on its website an exhaustive list of "underwater treasures" which have been discovered by scuba divers, including sculptures, jewellery, warrior helmets, Phoenician beads, vases, and a variety of personal items reflecting life in the region in ancient times, from oil lamps to medical sup-



A Greek amphora, part of a long-lost cargo. Photograph: Jeffrey L Rotman/Corbis

plies. "Man has been sailing the Greek seas for more than 9,000 years," it says. "This means that ships have been sinking for over 9,000 years - ideal for treasure hunters."

It offers a fleet of 400 yachts, some with crews, and "customised" diving packages for everyone from beginners to experienced divers as the "best way to discover Greece".

Marine archaeologists, who have appealed to Greece's highest administrative court to reverse the relaxation of the law, also point to the surge in blogging by divers boasting of their finds.

Last summer, one police raid intercepted two trucks crammed with ancient artefacts discovered in a wreck off the island of Kalymnos.

But with growing numbers of would-be looters posing as

tourists on yachts, Greece appears ill-equipped to tackle the problem.

Unlike Italy, which has units of specially trained divers and helicopters to chase underwater thieves, Greece has an art squad that is under-funded and, with just 20 members, woefully understaffed.

The sheer scale of the problem is also an issue: an estimated 6,000 wrecks are believed to dot the Greek seas, with most of them in the Mediterranean, where entire submerged cities are thought to exist.

"The future of archaeology is in the water - on land most riches have been discovered - but in the sea there are thousands of sunken ships with cargoes that have yet to be found," said Harry Tzalas, a marine archaeologist who has discovered numerous treasures off the coast of Alexandria in Egypt.

"Each time an artefact is removed from the sea its value in terms of information and context is automatically lost, a tragedy for archaeologists."