

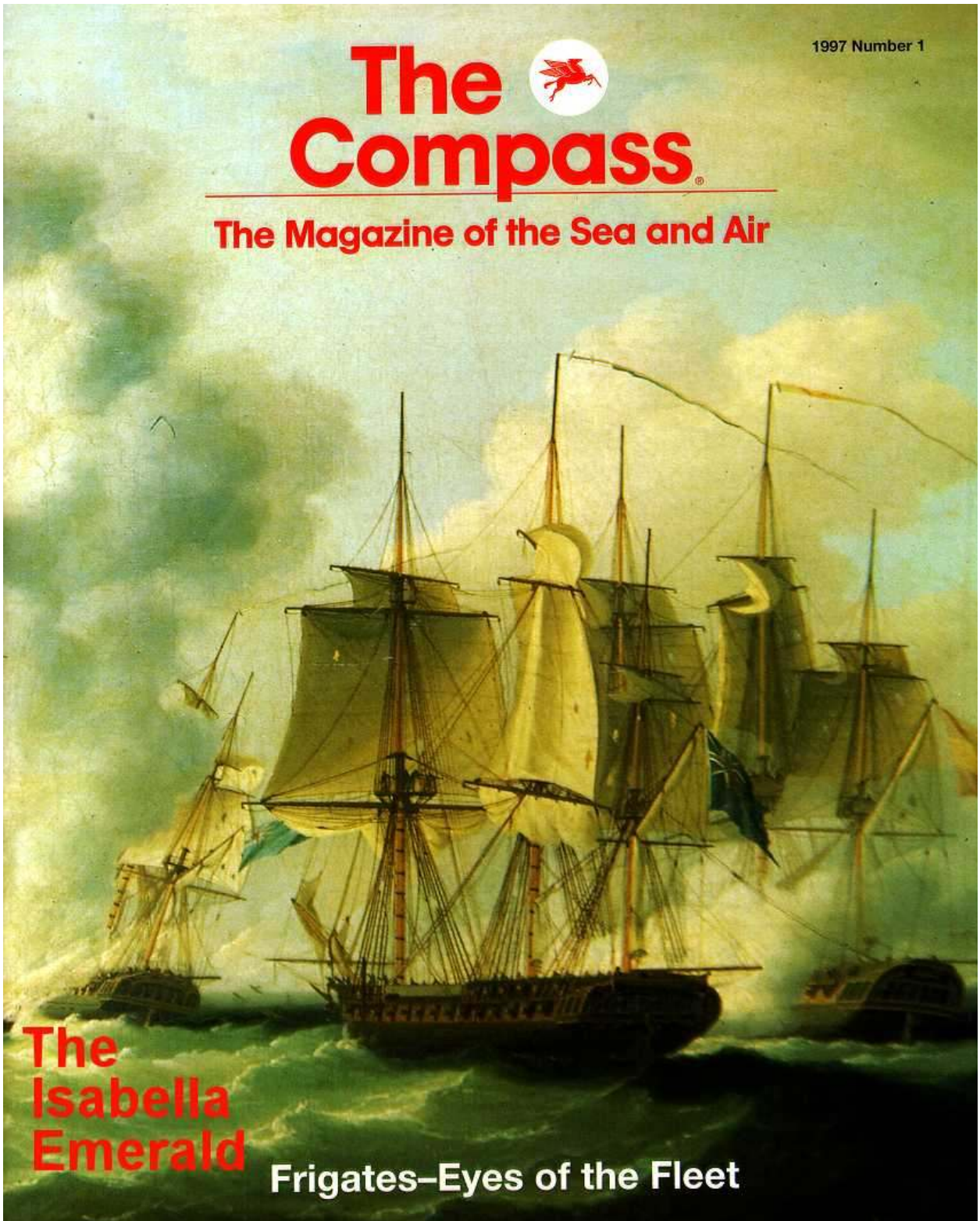
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**The
Isabella
Emerald**

Frigates—Eyes of the Fleet





*Finding the
Treasure of
Hernando Cortez*

OF PSYCHICS

by John C. Fine



The small, fast ship, loaded with New World treasure—including an astounding 100 chests of emeralds—was en route to Spain when it caught fire and

sank. The treasure was one of the biggest ever to travel by sea—a treasure originally seized by Hernando Cortez, whose brutal conquest in 1519 of the Aztec empire in Mexico with its incredible riches fundamentally changed European as well as American history.

But this shipwreck took place in 1756, more than two centuries after the death of the feared conquistador, and the treasure was being sent to Spain by descendants of Dona Juana de Zamiga, the second wife of

Cortez, apparently so they could use the gems to entice the Crown to give the family more land.

That ship and its vast treasure, lost for so many years, has been found—thanks to

John C. Fine, an accomplished scuba diver and writer and a frequent contributor to The Compass, is a member of the Executive Bureau of the prestigious Confédération Mondiale des Activités Subaquatiques.

the work of a small team of explorers, commissioned by descendants of Dona de Zuniga and, (unlikely as it may seem) the help of psychics.

The tale of the discovery is every bit as dramatic as the events that surrounded the accumulation of one of the most extensive fortunes in emeralds, gold and silver bullion and Aztec and Mayan artifacts ever gleaned from the New World.

It begins with adventurers Victor Benilous, his wife Sue, and Diego Vallone. They started their quest with the help of a bit of corrected history about a famous emerald. As Benilous recalled, "It was Diego who first approached me with the story of an emerald he said was associated with Queen Isabella of Spain. The problem was that the story didn't match historical fact. Queen Isabella died in 1504, the same year Cortez sailed for the New World. Then it dawned on me: It



They told me they had sufficient documentation that a shipwreck carrying the treasure, which included the giant gem called the 'Isabella Emerald,' was never recovered.

"Out of fear for their family, they made me swear not to disclose the family name or the name of the treasure ship," though he added, almost matter-of-factly, "It is relatively easy if you have some information to go to the archives to discover the route the ship took and its cargo."

Adhering to the family's conditions, Vallone took the information he had about the shipwreck to Victor Benilous in West Palm Beach, Florida. Benilous certainly seemed the perfect partner in adventure. In 1987 he had identified and excavated one of the oldest shipwrecks in the Western Hemisphere off the Florida coast near Juno.

Opposite page top: A 16th Century engraving of Hernando Cortez includes an inscription with the Latin spelling of his name. Opposite page left: This intriguing figure, evidently carved from an emerald by an Aztec craftsman, and the jeweled cross (inset) were among the priceless artifacts recovered at the shipwreck site. Left: Whimsical birds, set in minute mosaics, adorn this golden brooch recovered by the treasure hunters.

AND EMERALDS



wasn't that Isabella, but Isabella of Portugal, who was the wife of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, who also held the title Charles I of Spain. This established the association with the emerald."

The emerald Victor Benilous described is huge: a cut, 964-carat, deep-green oblong stone that overlaps the palm of the hand. The gem has been described in books about Cortez as a wedding gift to his new wife—a gem that Queen Isabella envied. In fact, she told Cortez when he visited her at court that she desired the gem, which then as now was of incredible value. Cortez may have affronted Isabella by refusing to give up the stone. What we do know is that he presented it, as planned, to his wife, along with other precious stones.

Fast-forward to the present day, to our intrepid adventurers. Victor Benilous is a south Florida restaurateur-art collector-treasure hunter, Diego Vallone an Argentinian tennis pro-adventurer. "By playing tennis I meet a lot of people," said Vallone in nearly accentless English, "Descendants of the de Zuniga family had confidence in me [in Argentina he had taught the entire family to play tennis] and knew of my adventures looking for treasures, and mining in the Andes.

"Diego approached me with the story of the emerald associated with Queen Isabella, an emerald the Queen wanted but couldn't have," said Benilous. "We knew, also, that Dona Juana de Zuniga followed her husband to Mexico on numerous voyages. And we knew that emeralds were regularly being sent back to Spain. De Zuniga family members were second cousins to the King and received many land grants from the Crown," he explained.

This was the historical background. Further research convinced the treasure hunters they were on the right track. They now knew, for example, that in 1756 a courier from Spain came to the New World, and while returning to Spain with a fortune in jewels, his ship burned and sank. But where? This essential piece of information was apparently lost in the mists of time.

Lost, that is, until something quite extraordinary happened. "The information we had was not enough to start an expedition," Benilous said. "So I tried something different. I had worked with marine archaeologist Peter Throckmorton in the past and he had had luck working with psychics. I contacted two psychics I'd used in the past.



Top: An Aztec whistle, and (above) an ornate cross, fashioned from New World gold, were part of the hoard of treasure removed from the Spanish shipwreck by divers.

One of them worked with the U.S. Government and helped locate lost submarines."

He sent each psychic a plastic overlay map of a huge area of ocean where he thought the treasure ship might have gone down. "When they came back, the maps were marked in almost the same spot, only centimeters apart—in actuality a distance of less than four miles [6.4 kilometers] apart."

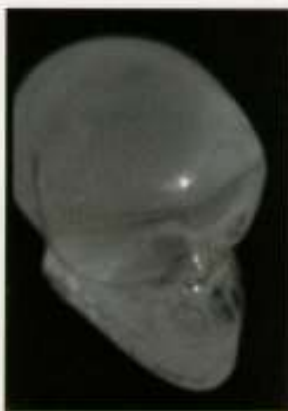
Benilous brought one of the psychics out to a research boat. "When the psychic came with us, he targeted seven potential shipwreck sites. We used a magnetometer, side-scan sonar, and a bottom profiler. At three of the sites, our instruments located three anchors from the Spanish colonial period. We eliminated these sites and concentrated on the other four sites identified by the psychic," he continued. "At one site we discovered a ballast pile. Diving in deep water, we found some charred ribbing and a silver bar dated '1757'."

Vallone picked up the story from there. Already a convert, he confirmed, to himself at least, the psychics' unusual abilities.

"Psychics are very special people," he said. "I believed from the beginning, but when you see the results, you get goosebumps." One of the most startling finds occurred when a psychic picked up a "sensation" in a certain spot. The divers went down and within 10 feet (3 meters) of where they had buoyed the place indicated by the psychic, they discovered a crystal skull.

"We found three Aztec crystal skulls," said Benilous. "They were used in ceremonies and at sacrifices in the temples. The largest is made of rose quartz and radiates a six-pointed star when light strikes it." This find brought to possibly nine the number of Aztec cere-

These Aztec and Mayan artifacts (right) are part of shipwreck finds that have significant archaeological value.



Top: A diver studies part of the treasure. Above: A crystal skull, fashioned by an Aztec artisan, is among three found in the shipwreck and is very rare, as only six other such skulls are known to exist.

monial skulls known to exist in the world.

But that, as it turned out, was just a teaser, for he brought forth the *pièce de résistance*: the enormous cut emerald he is certain is the one Cortez gave his wife four centuries ago. Holding it is an almost indescribable experience. It glows with a green

inner fire when the light strikes it, and, of course, is aglow with history.

The team continues to proceed cautiously. They will not disclose the exact depth of the shipwreck, and will only say that it's very deep, and is some 12 miles (19.3 kilometers) off the Florida coast, somewhere between Sebastian and Cape Canaveral. Since the shipwreck site is in international waters, the state of Florida has no claim on the ship or its treasures, which will be shared by the salvors and the descendants of Doña de Zuriga.

While the team remains purposely vague about the location of their finds, one

monial skulls known to exist in the world. "So far we have only been able to identify six other such skulls," said Sue Benilous. "The largest is in the British Museum and is about the size of a human skull." The skulls were only part of an incredible treasure of Aztec artifacts unearthed by the salvors. More exciting (and potentially far more valuable) was what they found next. "We brought up hundreds of conglomerates," Benilous recalled. "We X-rayed many of these clumps but still have about 50 to 70 to check. Some conglomerates were the size of my desk..." He paused, reflecting the excitement he must have felt. "In some we uncovered 25,000 carats of cut emeralds. I can't tell you how many uncut emeralds. We have barrels of them!"

Among the artifacts Benilous proudly showed me were magnificent examples of whistles, some embedded with gold, some still bearing traces of red paint. Pottery jars along with ceremonial gold orna-



Inset: Treasure hunter Benilous (holding a gold cross) poses with author Fine, who holds the 25,000-carat uncut emerald believed to be the largest such emerald in the world. Right: Divers Angela Birk and Diego Vallone at the shipwreck site with an emerald clump (left), the 25,000-carat emerald in matrix (right), and next to it, an ornate gold cross.



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thing is clear: They have discovered a fabulous treasure. Valuations are difficult when it comes to unique pieces like the Isabella Emerald. However, this single gem, already authenticated by a former University of Chicago lapidary professor, may be worth upwards of \$20 million. The many pieces of Aztec jewelry, along with the numerous other cut emeralds recovered, are doubtless worth millions today.

The Cortez treasure is the stuff of dreams, so perhaps it's fitting that the treasure was discovered by dreamers who insist that



Treasure recovered by divers includes a silver bar (above) and at right, a thumbnail-size emerald, set into a gold ring.

their prime motivation was the adventure of discovery. "Some people try to destroy our main meaning, which is to bring out the treasure so everybody can appreciate it," said Diego Vallone. "The past and the adventure of discovery—that's our way to keep dreaming. I'm very fortunate right now to have had my dreams come true," he added, putting into words the sentiments expressed by the entire team of explorers who may have discovered the richest treasure ever lost—and subsequently found—beneath the sea. 🌊

