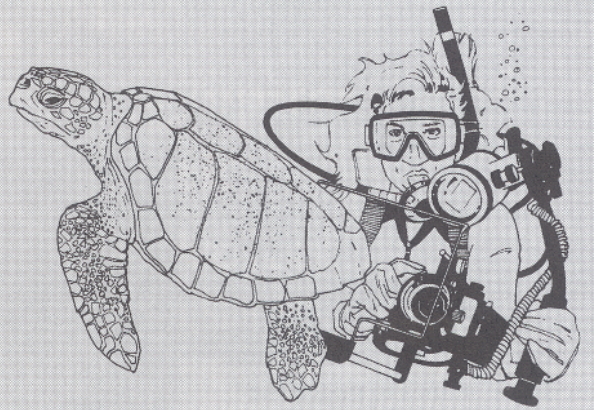


# BOUNTIFUL HARBOR

by Christine S. O'Connor



As the plane lifted from the Miami International Airport runway into a blue sky filled with puffy white clouds, my thoughts were on a tiny island in the Caribbean called St. Eustatius, or just plain "Statia". I was on the way to participate in an underwater archaeology expedition as an on-site still photographer, and I was excited. This little island has a great deal of historical background, including being the first foreign country to recognize the flag of the United States. It also has a small harbor that holds over two hundred shipwrecks, many unidentified and, certainly, unexplored. Duncan Mathewson, one of the archaeologists on the *Atocha*, headed up the group, and I was looking forward to learning what I could from him.

We had to take a small shuttle plane from St. Martin to Statia; the airport is the size of a postage stamp, not large enough to accommodate the commercial size airliners. It was late afternoon when we touched down, just enough time to grab our bags and a taxi to "Lower Town". We settled into fairly comfortable rooms at one of the two hotels on the island, had a pleasant dinner on the water, and took a leisurely walk along what years ago was a bustling waterfront of stone buildings. An earthquake toppled most of these into the bay many years ago; remnants of the foundations still stand as testimony of Mother Nature's unpredictability.

Early the following morning we had a briefing on the sites and our first dive into this bountiful harbor of wrecks. Our first wreck site was found by local people. They had established a shipwreck museum, a museum that was beginning to fill up with artifacts recovered from the various ballast mounds that seemed to be the attraction which drew visitors from around the world. They had requested donations of artifacts recovered by visitors, and of course we would contribute anything we found.

Morning came, and as we were sitting at breakfast looking out over the harbor, Duncan came in and filled us in on what was to happen this morning. We would take our dive boat to the site, gear up, and then start off by laying a line over the top of the wreck. This line was to be marked off in one foot increments, so that any artifacts found could be diagrammed, photographed, and logged in as to the location found on the wreck. This provides much of the information, such as what the ship was carrying and how the wreck might have occurred.

Our wreck site lay in fifty feet of water, and because it was my first underwater site I was surprised that it did not resemble a shipwreck at all. TV and movies spoil that for you. This wreck site looked like any other coral reef, except it was formed in a straight line, out in the middle of a sand patch. Gorgonias, sponge-like colorful growths, covered the site, but if I expected a wooden hull with ribs standing up in the sand, I was disappointed. Mother Nature doesn't seem to place many things in a straight line, so we knew this was our wreck.

We began laying out a measuring line and, of course, I was snapping pictures left and right. When the line was in place we began looking around and under the coral growths. Someone spotted a green moray eel in a small overhang of coral and began waving frantically. Of course, we all ventured around and, at first, thought the eel was the item of fascination.

As we looked more closely, we soon discovered that there were a couple of items more interesting than the eel. We had found a small anchor and several broken wine bottles covered in coral growth. After measuring the distance from the tape, logging it in, and taking numerous photos, the pieces were lifted to the surface to be preserved.

Later in the dive we found other items such as

pieces of clay pipes, a broken water jug, a small musket ball, and some pieces of blue and white pottery. Quite a find for our first dive! We came to the surface bubbling with excitement.

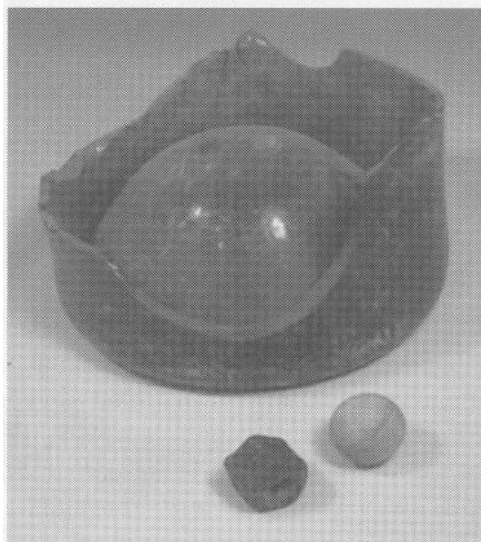
Duncan told us that there are many shipwrecks in this famous little harbor, but that due to storms and a shallow bottom, many of the ships and artifacts are mixed up together, and it is extremely difficult to determine the ships' names to match the artifacts. We also learned that the local dive shop had found a small cannon just off the beach, and that we were now going to collect it and give it to the museum. We assembled at the beach and took a small Zodiac to a site about fifty to 75 yards off shore.

First we used a small "drop camera" to determine if we were in the correct spot. There it was in about twenty feet of water. We dived down and gasped at the small but well preserved cannon. It was about three feet long and very ornate. Ropes were soon in place and gently it was brought to the surface. It was hauled ashore and placed in a fresh water bath to keep it from deteriorating. After a photo session we set out to learn more about this unique little island.

As we spoke with local residents, we found out that many people come to Statia to find the infamous "blue beads". These beautiful tian glass beads were used by the slaves on the island for trading purposes. The story goes that when the slaves revolted, they took all the blue beads and threw them down a rather large well. Today the beautiful beads are very valuable.

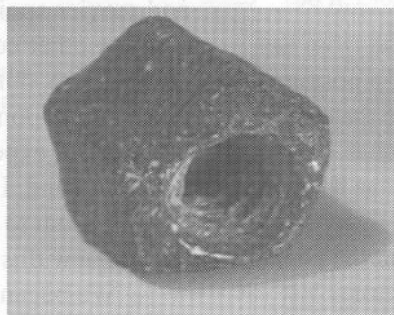
Of course, we had to go exploring to see what we could find. Many areas on the beach have been dug up by persons looking for these beads. Some of us found small pieces of the beads on the beach. Storms have raised the level of the water around Statia Harbor, covering much of the old seaside town, and also washing many beads out to sea. No one found any whole beads!

The next few days were spent diving on other wrecks, and then Duncan said that we had permission to dive under the local concrete pier used by tug boats, ferries, and local fishing boats. We found out that the tug boats made deliveries also, and came in twice a week. When they did, they reversed their engines while at the dock, and literally churned up the ocean bottom, much like a giant cauldron. We were told that there were many artifacts here, but no one could tell where they were from with any certainty, because they were like potatoes and carrots in the stew pot, getting stirred up twice a week. Still, we would try to make some sort of measurement diagram and see what we could find.



**BLACK GLASS "SPIRITS" BOTTLE BOTTOM, glass bead, and musket ball found by author on "Statia". Photo: Author.**

The water was fairly shallow and very murky, but over we went. We decided to use the pier to make our measurements, and soon were finding a lot of broken pottery, clay pipes, and -lo and behold- an old musket! All items were brought in, photographed, catalogued, and preserved for the museum.



**COBALT-BLUE GLASS BEAD ENLARGED. Found by author on "Statia". Photo: C. O'Connor.**

Our time was running out. Ten days is so short. We decided to go for a walk on the beach and photograph an old steel hulled ship that had been blown ashore by a hurricane. As we walked our eyes were ever downward, looking for that illustrious treasure! Sure enough, we found broken wine bottles, pieces of blue beads, square head nails, and pot sherds! We were told that beach junk was okay to keep. We were in heaven finding the treasures that we could take home and share with family and friends.

What an exciting trip! As our little Sea Otter lifted and headed back to St. Martin, we talked of the experiences we had, and vowed that we would one day come back to this beautiful "bountiful harbor".

*Christine S. O'Connor*