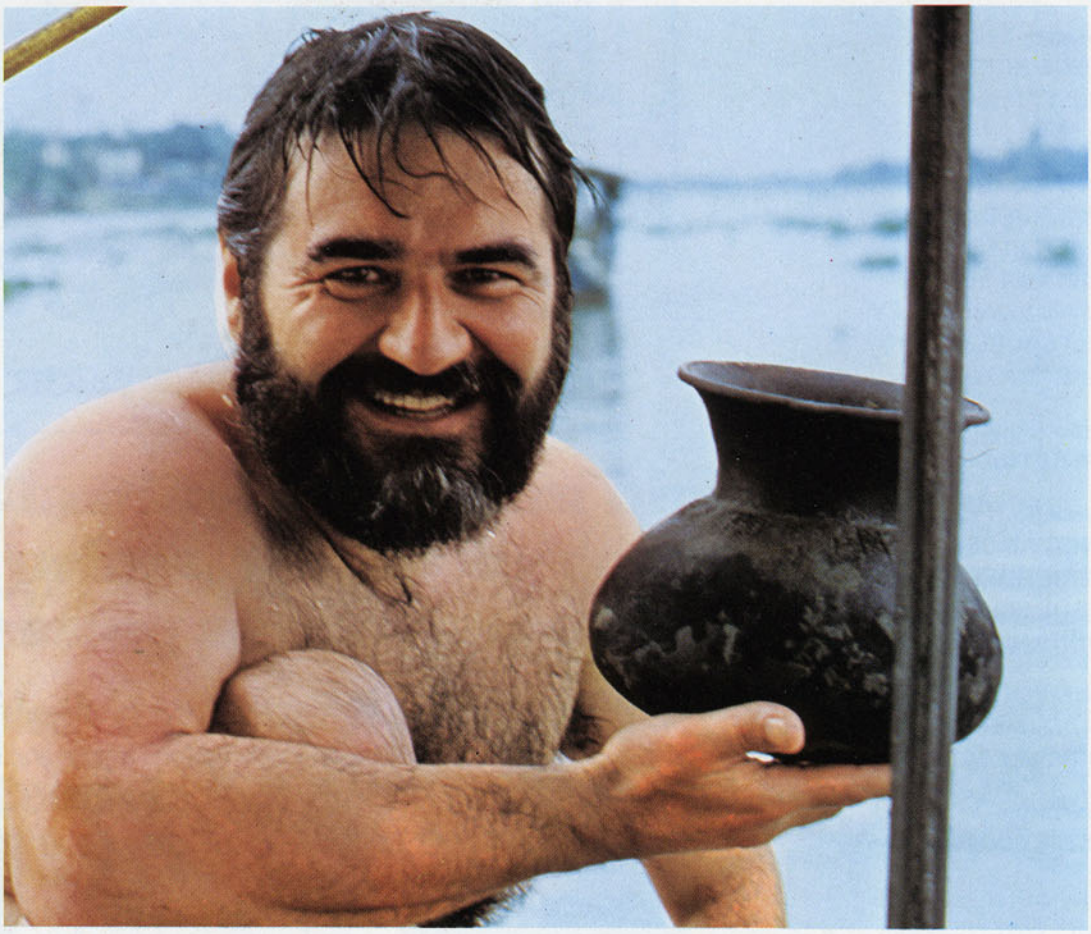
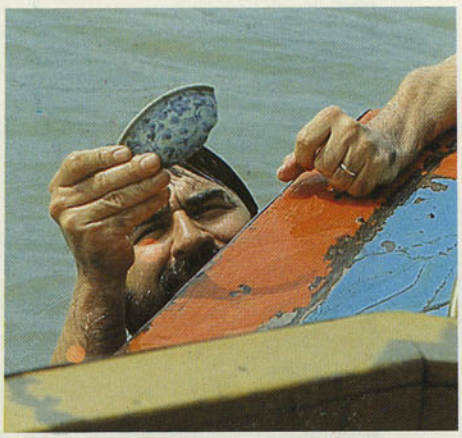


TO THE BOTTOM OF THE RIVER – WITH FEAR AND TREPIDATION

The boat boy lowers the helmet and the world turns orange. The water hose twists and bucks like a deranged boa constrictor. Air hisses past your ears. You begin your descent.

Pulling yourself down the anchor rope you struggle against the triple forces of buoyancy, the current and the water jet in your left hand. The impulse to breathe in gasps, to hold your breath as the water laps against your chin, is overpowering. Soon you notice that the water rises only when you hold your breath. Breathing normally stablilizes the air pressure in the bell and – wonder of wonders – keeps the water out.

About three meters down, the pale orange light from the helmet's transluscent window fades to total darkness. The hiss in your ear is reassuring. Increasing pressure in your ears reminds you to swallow– often. Vertigo teases your senses. You feel a strong desire to take a deep breath and climb up as fast as



DIVERS of AYUTTHAYA

ROBERT RETKA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIM RETKA

possible. Childish stubbornness drives you down.

Your feet strike mud – very slippery mud. You wrap arms and legs around the anchor rope. Carefully you crouch and find the small guide rope tied to the bottom of the anchor rope. An eternity later clumsy hands find the loop at the free end. You slip it over your wrist, almost losing the water hose in the process. Your legs are reluctant to abandon the anchor rope, your only certain path out of this watery darkroom.

Carefully you work back along the six meters of guide rope. Still attached. Amazing! You abandon the anchor rope and push off into the void.

Balance is lost but easily regained. A foot stubs something hard and you remember you are down here for a purpose. Gingerly you bend and feel the object. A vase – earthenware, big chunks out of the mouth. Never mind, it is a find and produces a powerful feeling of accomplishment. The vase is stashed beside the anchor.

Fear has been replaced by a new emotion. You would call it curiosity but you know it is avarice. The bottom is littered with shards. Surely there is a perfect Ming bowl down here somewhere.

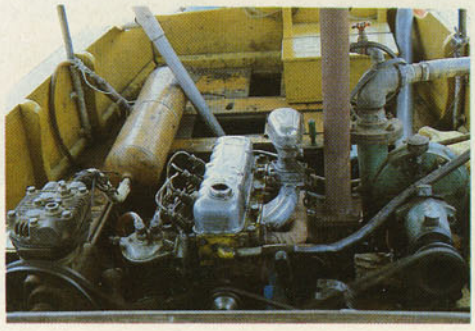
The search is resumed. A large earthenware pot – this time in perfect condition – is found off to the right. Undoubtedly you have a knack for this business. The air keeps hissing. The water hose keeps trying to escape. It is very dark, but fear is gone.

A need to see the discoveries finally prevails. You pull yourself back to the anchor rope, cautiously let go of the guide rope and begin your ascent. You have to climb up the rope. There is very little buoyancy. Orange light returns and grows stronger. The water line appears in the helmet window as the bell is lifted. Brass bands begin to play. Your discoveries are greeted by tumultuous applause. You have conquered the deep. At least it seems that way.

The Diamond Fortress (Pom Phet) of Ayutthaya is home to about twenty families of salvage divers who work the Paa Sak and Chao Phya rivers. From February to September they scour the river bottom for the antique ceramics that are in constant demand by collectors and dealers. Their work is as uncertain as the fisherman's, as intriguing as the archaeologist's.

The community is closely knit. Many families are related by marriage; all share gossip about recent finds and, more important, recent prices. Several families live at the fortress itself, either on houseboats or in more permanent homes on the bank of the river. Others live nearby. The community is quite stable; at least one family has lived there for twenty years.

The divers go out six days a week. They usually work in teams of two, but it is not uncommon to see an entire family at work — the husband diving, the wife handling hoses and pumps, the children playing or sleeping in makeshift hammocks. It is also common for the boat owner to hire a helper. The helper is paid by being given a chance to dive. What he finds he can sell but he is then obliged to split his proceeds with the boat owner as rent for the use of the equipment.



Equipment is simple. The typical boat is about six meters in length with a beam of about one-and-a-half meters. A converted automobile or field tiller engine is mounted inboard amidship. The pilot sits at the rear and steers by means of a wheel-connected rudder.

At the diving site the propeller is disengaged and the motor slows to an idling speed. Two auxiliary pumps, one for the air supply and one for the water hose, are attached using fan belts.

The diver's equipment consists of a steel diving helmet, a high pressure water hose with which to dig and a net bag for collecting. The air supply is provided through a plastic hose. The helmet itself fits over the diver's head and has shoulder rests cut out of its bottom rim. Although the helmet has a glass window, it provides no useful vision; at the bottom of the river all searching is done by feel in total darkness.

Air is pumped through a hose to an inlet near the bottom of the helmet. A bubble of air is trapped in the helmet around the diver's head allowing him to breathe normally. As additional air is pumped in, increasing pressure in the helmet forces air out the bottom and prevents water from rising around the diver's head.

A margin of safety is provided by a pressure tank connected between the air pump and the helmet. Should the engine stop while the diver is submerged, there is sufficient air in the system to allow him to ascend safely. He is signalled by the person in the boat who pulls on the air hose.

At the bottom of the anchor rope is a thin six-meter long guideline. Immediately upon descending, the diver slips his hand through a loop at the end of this guideline. Without it he would quickly become disoriented and would be unable to find the anchor rope, his stairway to the surface.

The remaining equipment consists of a high pressure water hose and a collection bag made

from fishnet and old fan belts. The water hose has a nozzle similar to that of a fire hose which provides a narrow, powerful jet of water for the diver to use in loosening bottom mud and sand. The propulsive force of the water jet can also be used to maneuver against the force of the current and the weight of the helmet.

Digging is done by feel. Novice divers tend to come back with abundant cuts inflicted by jagged porcelain shards, sharp clam shells and excess enthusiasm. The trick is to let the water jet loosen a layer of sediment and to pat the area to determine what has been uncovered. When a protruding edge is felt, the water jet is used to loosen the piece completely.

It is sometimes necessary to dig down several feet into the bottom to loosen a large piece or to get down to a layer of sediment which contains the ceramics. The divers know the layering well and on their first dive will dig test holes to determine the bottom's structure. Three major layers are usually found: hard, highly compacted earth at the lowest level, a layer of gravel in the middle and firm, elastic mud at the top. A layer of sand may also be found, often as part of the middle gravelly layer.

Ceramics will usually be found in the top two layers. As in other sedimentation, the older ceramics tend to be found at the lower levels. Exceptions to this archaeological rule abound, however, due primarily to disturbances resulting from the dredging of bottom sand for use in construction. Such dredging does reveal ceramics on the river bottom, but it also results, according to the divers, in the destruction of large numbers of beautiful pieces.

The divers always work in pairs. Someone must stay above to tend the motor and assist with the helmet when the diver ascends. He keeps an eye out for river traffic which might cause problems for the

diver. Around noon he also watches for the noodle and curry vendors who provide boatside service.

Diving locations are chosen by a consensus based on recent finds, state of the bottom and instinct. The boats arrange themselves in a rough circle or an arc. Air hoses are uncoiled, water hoses are pressurized. The divers say a short prayer and descend. They wear only swimming trunks, a collection basket and the diving bell. Some wear a shirt as protection against branches and other underwater hazards.

Topside, the diver's assistant adjusts the motor, pumps the bilge, reads or does housekeeping chores. Fifteen to twenty minutes later, the first divers surface. Quickly a picture of the bottom begins to develop. Evaluating sand, mud, dredging trenches and shards, the divers assess their situation. Some descend again; others move their boats upstream or downstream as instinct dictates.

The cycle continues until someone finds a good piece. At this point, a distinct change in diver activity occurs. Whereas previously some unspoken sense of territoriality kept the boats at least five to ten meters apart, now they crowd in on one another gunwale to gunwale. The water is filled with an often tangled skein of air hoses, water hoses, anchor ropes and guidelines.

Topside, the accelerating rate of discoveries charges the atmosphere. Assistants who think their divers are in poor locations pull on air hoses to signal ascent. Boats shift about restlessly to explore the bed thoroughly. As the rate of finds slows, the boats drift apart until another discovery is made. Then the cycle is repeated.

Diving is normally not dangerous by Thai standards. The equipment, while primitive, is by the same token simple, uncomplicated and relatively safe. During the frantic activity that follows a major discovery, danger increases precipitously. With anchors dropping haphazardly, and hoses and ropes

doing their best to become entangled, it is surprising that there are not more accidents.

The major targets of all this searching are two general classes of ceramics: blue and white (referred to generically as "Ming") and celadons, both Chinese and Thai, with the Chinese celadons commanding the higher prices. Among the blue and white wares, true Ming period pieces form a small part; many Transition period, Ching and later period wares are also found. Sukhothai and Sawankhalok wares abound. The glazes of most are badly water damaged and the unbroken piece is uncommon. Underglaze black-painted wares with white slip grounds from the Sukhothai kilns and dark-bodied stoneware with chocolate-colored glazes from Sawankhalok are both referred to as "Tau Chaliang" wares and are found quite regularly. Annamese wares are not uncommon, Japanese wares are. Ayutthaya period unglazed pottery is very common. Since these materials were not highly fired, their unglazed bodies suffer proportionately greater damage from long submersion than do some of the earlier wares.

The second most frequent question asked about ceramics purchased from the divers is "Are they real?" (The first is "How much did you pay?") There is an abiding suspicion that the divers plant the wares and subsequently "discover" them. Familiarity with the diving techniques and environment quickly convinces one that systematic planting and harvesting are not involved. The area is too vast, the bottom too unstable and the conditions too unpredictable to allow systematic manufacture of the divers' wares. What is found is what was lost — how it came to be lost will remain a mystery, but lost it was.

This is not to say that everything that is found is old. The Chao Phya has always been a grand garbage can for the river traffic that continues to this day. The divers are not scholars of the ceramic arts. If they find a twenty-year-old pot, whole in form and pleasing to the eye, they will bring it back for sale. They will not normally try to sell it as something it is not, but they will try to sell it.

The diver's income is uncertain. All dive in hope of the big find. Everyone knows who has recently found what and how much it brought at sale. Prices in the range of ten thousand to twenty thousand baht, while uncommon, are not once-a-year occurrences. The best finds are almost always bought the same day by antique dealers from Ayutthaya. The rest are sold to tourists and irregular buyers who come to Pom Phet.

Prices are not necessarily better near the water's edge. The divers share information constantly and, for the better pieces, prospective buyers should be prepared for asking prices in the thousands. Damaged pieces are considerably less expensive. The buyer's bargaining skill has a major impact on the final price.

The diver's economic fate is one of constant outlays and unpredictable income. Expenses are high. Initially there is the capital investment required for a suitable boat (upwards of thirty thousand baht). Thereafter there is the constant necessity of fuel. An average boat will require about ten liters of diesel fuel each day. At current prices this means a daily fuel cost of ninety to one hundred baht with maintenance and repairs adding to the total.

Given this uncertain return, why do so many boats set out each day in search of what, by definition, is an ever-dwindling stock of ceramics? The fisherman, the hunter and the gambler could answer best. There is always the lure of the big find — the perfect Ming bowl that will sell for tens of thousands of baht. Weeks may go by without a major find, but when one occurs, the divers attack the river with an intensity that is awesome. ■