

The Treasure Hunter: Mel Fisher [C1]

Nel 1985 Mel Fisher, esperto sommozzatore, trovò al largo delle coste della Florida i resti di un galeone spagnolo del XVII secolo contenente uno spettacolare tesoro d'oro e d'argento. Sette anni dopo, fondò il suo museo.

A Spanish galleon [steers](#) into the [Florida Straits](#), a [narrow](#) passage of water connecting the Gulf of Mexico with the Atlantic Ocean. There, between the Florida Keys archipelago and Cuba, it [runs into trouble](#), perhaps hit by a hurricane or perhaps [grounded](#) on the [hazardous reefs](#) that lie just beneath the surface. Centuries on, a team of [divers](#) and archaeologists discover the [wreckage](#) of the galleon and [retrieve](#) its treasures. Many then go [on display](#) at the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum in Florida's Key West, the [southernmost](#) city in the US.

TREASURE HUNTER

Mel Fisher was a charismatic American diver who has been called “the world's greatest treasure hunter.” In the Spanish colonial period, thousands of ships are estimated [to have sunk](#) in the [treacherous](#) waters of the [Florida Straits](#). Fisher spent sixteen years searching for the [wreckage](#) of one of them, a Spanish galleon called Nuestra Señora de Atocha that sank in 1622. He eventually discovered the ship in the vicinity of the Florida Keys in July 1985 and [retrieved](#) around \$450 million worth of treasure from the [wreck](#). It included more than one hundred thousand Spanish silver coins, gold coins, emeralds and other precious artefacts.

THE MUSEUM

Fisher founded the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum in 1992. Today it houses treasures from the Atocha and from other ship [wrecks](#). Visitors also learn about Florida's maritime history and experience the conservation and archaeological laboratory, where artefacts are carefully prepared before being put [on display](#). It isn't only Spanish galleons represented in the museum, however. One of its most important collections was [retrieved](#) from a British slave ship called the Henrietta Marie, which sank [off the coast](#) of Key West in 1700. Discovered by Mel Fisher in 1972, this collection represents one of the most important historical records of the transatlantic [slave trade](#). To find out more, Speak Up contacted Corey Malcom, director of archaeology at the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum. We began by asking him why there are so many ship [wrecks](#) in the area. **Corey Malcom (American accent):** The Florida Keys, the north coast of Cuba, the Bahamas... that whole area is one of the world's great ship [traps](#). And here in the Florida Keys, it's really a combination of things: historically, you have a lot of ships sailing by here because

the [Gulf Stream currentflows right past by](#) and the ships would [ride](#) that current from the Americas back to Europe; and you also have a lot of [reefs](#) just [lurking](#) right below the surface waiting for these ships [to run up](#) on to them and sink; and you also have a lot of hurricanes. And that combination, lots of ships, [shallow reefs](#) and hurricanes, just makes for a bad combination. It makes it very [hazardous](#) to sail through these waters, especially in the era before there was GPS and good navigation.

A DRIVEN MAN

As Malcom explains, Fisher took to treasure hunting like a fish to water. **Corey Malcom:** Mel was one of the first [scuba divers](#) in the United States. And he was just looking for interesting things to do under water, and one of those things was, “Hey, you know, let’s look for old ship[wrecks](#)!” And then, in the 1960s moved to the East Coast of Florida, partnered with some people that had found ship[wrecks](#) from a [fleet](#) that had been sunk up there in the summer of 1715. And Mel and his group found great success on those ship[wrecks](#) there. He was just a [driven](#) man, and when he heard about the Atocha down here somewhere, he said, “Oh my gosh, I bet I can find that too!” And he was a [go-getter](#), he didn’t [give up](#) but he was also extremely optimistic about things, and he just believed that it could be done.

A LONG SEARCH

Fisher took more than a decade to find one [wreck](#). We asked Malcolm why it took so long. **Corey Malcom:** The Atocha that Mel Fisher found was a very [purposeful](#) search. He had historical information that told him that the ship was sunk somewhere west of Key West here and he had a team and looked and looked and looked, and it was a very long, arduous search. It actually took sixteen years to find that particular ship[wreck](#), because the Atocha was broken up in a hurricane and [scattered](#) all along the seafloor in a, what’s now known to be, an eleven-mile-long [debris](#) field. They would find [bits and pieces](#), think they were in the right place and it just wasn’t. So, it took sixteen years to find the main part of that ship[wreck](#), where all the silver and other things were.

SHIPWRECKS ALL OVER THE WORLD

And are there still treasure hunters out there today, looking for other [wrecks](#)? **Corey Malcom:** Ship[wreck](#) research is a very active field. It’s happening around the world. Over the last thirty years especially, people have become increasingly [aware](#) that there’s a lot of information in these old ship[wrecks](#). They’re not just curiosities on the seafloor, they’re actual time capsules that can help us understand what was happening with that particular ship, what was happening

with the people on board, how they lived their lives. And with that, you get a look into the society at the time, the economics at the time, the technologies at the time. And I think, more and more, archaeologists especially have come to understand that shipwrecks are a fascinating and important historical resource. I mean we find big things like cannons and anchors, and of course silver ingots and all these things that you might expect to survive, but we've also been able to find things as small as seeds, grape seeds, pepper seeds, those sorts of things, and even insect fragments. Really, if it was on a ship that sank, there's a pretty good chance that some sample of that stuff is still surviving on the seafloor. You just have to be careful in your excavation.

CENTURIES UNDERWATER

Retrieving artefacts centuries old from deep underwater is an extremely delicate procedure, says Malcom. **Corey Malcom:** People have this notion that we just dive down and we grab stuff and we put it in the case at the end of the day and then we go home and we're done. It's not like that at all. The things that come up off the seafloor, they've been changed physically, the metals are encrusted... They've been changed inside chemically, and they're really no longer stable in the air. So we have a full laboratory here where we are able to take these artefacts that have been transformed by centuries under water and bring them back to as close to their original state as possible. I think most people don't realise though that that takes years and years of work. A full shipwreck excavation, that can be twenty years of laboratory work afterwards.

FINDERS KEEPERS!

But no matter who finds it, state law governs who gets to keep the treasure! **Corey Malcom:** The law is not finders keepers, it just doesn't work that way. And it never really has. The laws change from state to state here in the US, they change even within that... Is something a park, is it a marine sanctuary, is it...? And then of course it changes from country to country as well. So there's no one blanket answer for how it all works. But in a nutshell, you can't just dive down and grab stuff because some government entity somewhere has control over it.

SLAVE TRADE

One of the most important collections in the museum was retrieved from a British slave ship. We asked Malcom to tell us more. **Corey Malcom:** People tend to have this notion that all the shipwrecks out there are treasure ships! And of course that's just not true at all. Ships have represented all sorts of different aspects of our world, and really, the history of the world is preserved on the seafloor in a way. And, of course, part of the history of the world is the transatlantic slave

[trade](#). Most notably perhaps is the [wreck](#) of the Henrietta Marie, which was an English slave ship [sailing out](#) of London, had gone to the West coast of Africa, traded for African people there, carried those people to Jamaica, sold them in Jamaica, and then was returning to London with a cargo of sugar and other American goods. [It] [Vanished](#) off the face of the Earth, most likely in a hurricane in the summer of 1700. That [wreck](#) was found in 1972 by Mel Fisher and his team, as they were searching for the Atocha. They quickly realised it wasn't a Spanish galleon and they really didn't do much with it. And it is really the most complete collection of material goods related directly to the transatlantic [slave trade](#). And it shows us how those trade networks operated between Europe and West Africa and the Americas. It shows us how the African people were treated; they were basically cargo on the ship. And we see the [shackles](#) that held them chained two by two, so they couldn't escape. We see the big [cauldrons](#) that were used to prepare their meals across the ocean. We see some of the medical equipment that was used; things like a tooth extractor, just to keep people somewhat healthy as they made that horrible transatlantic [crossing](#). So I think the Henrietta Marie really serves to us as a very direct physical reminder, something that you just cannot [deny](#) when you see it, that this did indeed happen. Really, the Henrietta Marie is as important as any of the ship [wrecks](#) anywhere in the world.

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Glossary

- **retrieve** = recuperare
- **aware** = consapevoli
- **grab stuff** = prendere cose
- **retrieved** = recuperare
- **deny** = negare
- **Vanished** = scomparire
- **cauldrons** = calderoni
- **Florida Straits** = Stretti della Florida
- **wreck** = prezzo
- **shallow** = poco profonde
- **go-getter** = carrierista
- **debris** = detriti
- **dive down** = immergersi
- **flows right past by** = passa proprio da lì
- **to run up** = passare
- **steers** = navigare
- **runs into trouble** = imbattersi in problemi
- **reefs** = barriere coralline
- **southernmost** = più a sud
- **slave trade** = tratta degli schiavi
- **Gulf Stream current** = corrente del Golfo
- **driven** = motivato
- **encrusted** = incrostatati
- **grounded** = arenarsi
- **wreckage** = relitto
- **treacherous** = traditrici
- **shipwrecks** = naufragi
- **bits and pieces** = frammenti
- **ingots** = lingotti
- **hazardous** = pericolose
- **traps** = trappole
- **scuba divers** = sommozzatori (abb. self-contained underwater breathing apparatus)
- **purposeful** = determinato
- **shackles** = catene, freni
- **divers** = subacqueo
- **off the coast** = di fronte alla costa
- **lurking** = annidarsi, nascondersi
- **seeds** = semi
- **in a nutshell** = in poche parole (lett. guscio di noce)

- **sailing out** = salpare
- **narrow** = angusto
- **on display** = in mostra, in esposizione
- **to have sunk** = affondare
- **ride** = navigare attraverso
- **scattered** = disperdersi
- **blanket** = globale
- **fleet** = flotta
- **give up** = arrendersi
- **case** = valigia
- **crossing** = traversata