

The Treasure Daze

Around 1972, Bernard seeks his fortune in the Caribbean hoping to run a charter sailboat. Willing companion, Warren Foss and he choose Grand Cayman as the first stop. Caymanians are most hospitable and the island is virtually free of crime. The would-be adventurers camp by "Gun Bay," on the remote East End of the island, the site of the famous "Wreck of the Ten Sails" where the brave islanders rescued many English sailors and were granted tax-free status by England as a reward.

One day, while skin diving on the reef about a half-mile off the beach, Bernard pried a coral encrusted object from the sea floor. Once cleaned, the object revealed itself to be a bronze timber spike from an old shipwreck. This find triggers a chance encounter with Captain John Leeper of the *Research Vessel Beta*. John has recently arrived from San Pedro, California, where he owns San Pedro Boatworks and has completed building and outfitting the *Research Vessel Beta* as a salvage vessel uniquely designed to hoist a small two-person dry submarine between the catamaran's hulls. *Beta* is well equipped with magnetometer, dive equipment, hydraulic winches, generators, and two large freezer holds for extended cruising.

Back in California, John is friends with Mel and Deo Fisher and provides Mel with a Caribbean-based fishing trawler for what turns out to be an unsuccessful hunt for the famous Wreck of the *Concepción* on the Silver Shoals off the North Coast of the Dominican Republic. John's current project

involves searching reefs along the route of Spanish ships carrying silver and gold from New World Mints to Havana for transshipment to Spain in large armadas.

The *Beta* is in Grand Cayman for repairs and its engineer and another crewmember have just been “relieved of duty.” Reller already has sufficient SCUBA experience to sign-on as diver. His experience rebuilding automobile engines and motorcycles wins him the engineer’s slot, experience with electronics awards him responsibility for the ship’s magnetometer (a device used to detect magnetic anomalies resulting from things like iron anchors and cannons). Reller is also a qualified navigator as a result of his pilot training.

Thus is launched a relationship that lasts three decades. Initially, Reller sails with the *R/V Beta* exploring sites in the western Caribbean—reefs and islands near the Galleon routes. Cannons and anchors are found, along with other artifacts. The real riches are in the adventure—the camaraderie—the friendships and connections that follow and last a lifetime.