



## Explorers of Watery Wilds Dive for Urban History . . .

A steady rain speckled the Narrows as the Heaven, a 22½-foot fishing boat, cut its engine and bobbed under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Gene Ritter and Pete Oliver squeezed into their diving suits, strapped on scuba tanks and jumped into the murky water.

"You never know what you're going to find down there," Mr. Ritter said before disappearing under a cluster of bubbles.

They are urban divers, braving the slimiest of waters to search the depths of New York Harbor for historical sites and artifacts around Coney Island, Sea Gate and the Brooklyn Bridge.

"Where else in New York can you make discoveries?" asked Mr. Ritter, 36. "When you think of discoveries, you think of Christopher Columbus or Egypt. But you can make discoveries in New York, in Brooklyn, in Bensonhurst. You just have to go underwater, because everything on land has been discovered."

It has been five years since Mr. Ritter made his first history dive. Fascinated by a turn-of-the-century picture of Coney Island's Dreamland Pier, he ferreted out some old maps and began diving off Surf Avenue.

"I saw everything," said Mr. Ritter, who learned to dive as a teenager. "It was all spread out before me." The objects he uncovered — including beer mugs and old light fixtures from Dreamland's restaurant — were exhibited at the Brooklyn Public Library in 1991.

Seeking to avoid any conflicts over marine artifacts with professional archeologists — who often think of divers as scavengers, or worse — Mr. Ritter founded the Professional Diving Archaeology Organization. It

makes presentations before history groups and at schools, including Mr. Ritter's alma mater, John Dewey High School on Avenue X.

Mr. Ritter has yet to find a corpse in concrete shoes sleeping with the fishes, though he did recover a rusty 9-millimeter handgun last year. Visibility is variable. "It's better than you think," he said. "From above, you just see the surface scum, but underneath it gets clearer." And stringent anti-pollution laws have made the waters clearer over the last decade.

Diving in New York's waters is not altogether uncommon, said Steve Bielenda, president of the Eastern Dive Boat Association, which takes divers to nearby wrecks.

"A lot of people still go to the Caribbean to dive," Mr. Bielenda said, "but others just get hooked on going into the water here."

He said there were thousands of urban explorers of reefs, wrecks and rocks off the Rockaways and under the Throgs Neck Bridge. But, he said, most avoid the inner harbor, including the Narrows and the East River, where the tides are swift and perilous.

On their recent dive, Mr. Ritter and his team waited patiently for the period between high and low tides when the water stops rushing. The team includes Mr. Oliver, 53, a diving instructor from Staten Island, and Benny Ortiz, 45, a Con Ed mechanic and weekend fisherman who lives in Alphabet City. Mr. Ortiz moors his boat, the Heaven, in a marina on Coney Island Creek, the small inlet that divides Coney Island from Gravesend. "Everybody needs something to do," he said. "It's an adventure." **MICHAEL COOPER**



Steve Berman for The New York Times

"Where else in New York can you make discoveries?" asked Gene Ritter, right, as Peter Oliver dove in near the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.