



I'VE BEEN CHIC WRECKED

Century-old champagne, reindeer-skin brogues and watches embellished with steel from the *Titanic*... Mark Ellwood hauls the ultimate in limited editions. Illustration by Paul Slater.

Shipwrecks have long been a source of ephemera such as plates, combs or tincture bottles, hauled *en masse* from watery storage and sold as collectable curios. But now salvage firms, trawling for new opportunities, have come up with a canny premium alternative to these quirky souvenirs. A trend has emerged for even rarer, high-priced treasures, fished from the ocean floor and sold to an elite clientele as the ultimate in limited editions. These “shipwreck chic” items include handmade shoes, vintage champagne, custom watches

and even American Civil War coal, albeit with a 21st century chemical makeover.

London-based cobbler New & Lingwood, for example, sells bespoke shoes fashioned from a vintage leather salvaged from a wreck off Plymouth Sound, lost over 200 years ago. The *Catherina von Flensburg* was a Danish brigantine hauling luxuries from St Petersburg to the republic of Genoa when it sunk in a squall just before Christmas 1786. Its most precious cargo was a pricey leather known as Russia Calf (a misnomer, since it's actually reindeer). By chance, these hides were wrapped in sealskin, whose extreme

oiliness was ideal insulation against two centuries of salty, ice-cold water. When the wreck's cargo was finally salvaged in 1973, its stock of Russia Calf (estimated at 1,200sq ft in total) was almost entirely intact.

The stash was a unique find because the exact process by which it was originally produced – treating the hides with a medley of yeast, oat flour, wood liquor, seal oil and birch oil to make them both soft and strong – was lost in the turmoil of the Russian Revolution. That made it an easy decision, when New & Lingwood was offered a batch of the hide to turn into custom shoes.

“Russia Calf was first made as bookbinding leather, because it was so supple,” explains MD Justin Sumrie. “It has a fantastic aroma that fills the room when you work with it – it smells of history, though you could argue it has a bit of the sea about it.”

The shoes were an instant success, though New & Lingwood’s workshop still has enough leather left to make 20 bespoke pairs (from £2,750; ready made pairs cost £995); it also offers belts (£250), umbrella handles (£295 per umbrella), wallets (£395) and key fobs (£95) made from the offcuts. Only recently did Sumrie succumb to his own pair. “I have Semi Brogues that were for a bespoke customer,” he explains sheepishly. “He paid for them but he never came back, and I hope he never does!”

Just as we have White Russians’ love of the good life to thank for that haul of leather, so they are also the reason we can sample some century-old champagne. The \$5,000-a-bottle fizz, now on sale at The Setai Hotel in Miami, was originally destined for the wartime table of Tsar Nicholas II; 2,300 bottles of 1907 Heidsieck Monopole went to the bottom of the Baltic Sea when the Swedish schooner carrying it, the *Jönköping*, was torpedoed by a German submarine in 1916. The wreck was located in 1997 and most of the champagne salvaged the following year.

The bubbly had weathered surprisingly well, in part because ocean-floor temperatures remain a constant, cellar-like 2-4°C. There were other crucial factors, according to Stephen Williams, MD of The Antique Wine Company in London, who supplied the hotel. “The pressure of the water was greater than the pressure of the CO₂ inside



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the bottle, so the champagne still sparkled,” he explains, noting that the waxed cork – a standard procedure then – also prevented spoilage. “This champagne had 150g of residual sugar – it was sweeter than Sauternes – and that’s what gave it longevity. Wine gets drier as it gets older, but if it was sweet in the first place, after 100 years you end up with something still very drinkable.” Indeed, the 1907 vintage has been enthusiastically quaffed by both history-minded connoisseurs and those eager to impress their dining companions. “One bottle was ordered by a company CEO who wanted to impress his board of directors,” recalls a former Setai sommelier, Sergio Caceras.

Handing each of his directors a pair of diamond-encrusted cuff links would

have been a more enduring – and just as impressive – gesture, especially if they were made from chunks of 19th century coal. The *SS Republic* was travelling from New York to New Orleans after the American Civil War, bringing urgently needed commercial goods to rebuild the ravaged city. It sank and sat undiscovered on the ocean floor until 2003, when Florida-based Odyssey Marine Exploration located the remains. The hold was combed for salvage and archeological treasures; alongside standard collectables such as vintage glass, a hoard of coal was recovered. Thanks to a science-minded board member, the wrecking firm found

an innovative use for this soggy coal: it was turned into lab-made diamonds. “Each coal has different chemical properties, and this was a high grade mined 150 years ago with fewer impurities,” explains Odyssey’s president Mark Gordon. “It produced a really beautiful stone, almost chestnut in colour – gemologists call it an orange-ish yellow.” Odyssey’s retail prices seem a steal – an *SS Republic* diamond necklace costs \$6,900 – when compared to a necklace made using *SS Titanic* coal diamonds which cost many times that. The *Titanic* connection boosted the price – an ironic situation, as Gordon confesses: “The *Titanic* diamond coal wasn’t

half as good as the *Republic*’s, so we abandoned that effort.”

One company, though, did find a luxurious use for

the *Titanic*’s waterlogged stash of coal. Last year, upstart Swiss watchmaker Romain Jerome launched its *Titanic-DNA* collection, using coaldust from the hold of the liner to create an ashy effect on each model’s face. The firm also snapped up 3lb of rusty steel from the hull – certified as genuine by *Titanic* builder Harland & Wolff – which it then used for the bezels, giving each watch a rusty patina. The run is strictly limited to 2,012 pieces, symbolising the centenary of the sinking; prices start at £5,600 and top out at £280,000. The company’s T-oxy Concept (£14,000) is less a wristpiece than a mantel-piece: housed in an inert, argon-filled glass dome, it can’t be removed and worn since the parts, made from non-stabilised *Titanic* steel, would corrode and cease working.

But even that rarefied timepiece could be trumped, as New & Lingwood’s Sumrie muses. Asked what he’d dream of rescuing from the ocean floor, he doesn’t hesitate. “Imagine finding some sort of rare or endangered or extinct skin, like a dodo,” he says. Salvage firms, get that sonar ready. ♦

PLUMBING THE DEPTHS

The Antique Wine Company, Suite 211, 52

Upper Street, London N1 (020-7359 1109; www.

antique-wine.com). **Kismet Jewellers**, 18

Buttermarket, Thame, Oxon OX9 3EP (01844-261

166). **New & Lingwood**, 53 Jermyn Street, London

SW1 (020-7493 9621; www.newandlingwood.com).

Odyssey, 001800-558 6468; www.shipwreckstore.

com. **Romain Jerome**, 01844-218 239; www.

romainjerome.ch and see Kismet Jewellers. **The**

Setai Hotel, 2001 Collins Avenue, Miami Beach,

Florida, US (001305-520 6000; www.setai.com).

Above: New & Lingwood’s Russia Calf Loafer, Derby and Semi Brogue, from £2,750 bespoke.