

USA's #1 Vacation Destination
Mackinaw City

Win a Vacation
 Getaway!

ENTER

HOME & AWAY

Hunting Sea Glass

Treasures from the ocean go beyond precious gems and metals.

By Sherry Ballou Hanson

Folks who do not live on the coast may wonder what the big deal is. Why would anyone want to walk a beach to pick up broken glass? Find the perfect shard and you will understand this behavior that can become an addiction lasting through generations of families. Think colors, frosty surfaces, that smooth-in-the-palm-of-your-hand feeling. Good-sized chunks of sea glass are not as common these days. Still, if you know where to look, you can find these treasures, pieces of broken bottles sanded to a fine frosty finish by the action of rocks, sand and water.



Samples of bottleneck sea glass in shades of blue.
 Sherry Hanson

Where and How to Find It

“We cannot emphasize enough that sea glass has to have a way to get on the beach,” said Bill and Helen Carney of Saco, Maine, who have been collecting for more than 50 years. Some beaches yield nothing because there is no way the glass could make it to shore. Other beaches cough up a new crop of glass with each a storm, as wave action unearths fragments and drives them onto the beach with piles of sand.

There are two primary sources of the glass: dumping trash at sea and in harbors, rivers, even the Great Lakes, for hundreds of years. Long before landfills, household junk was disposed of off shore. Ships also dumped as they traveled, and hotels along the coasts routinely disposed of trash in this manner. And it’s still down there!

In the Prohibition era, Canadian bootleggers, being chased by American Coast Guard ships, would dump their rum and whiskey into the Bay of Fundy, between Maine and Nova Scotia, Canada.

The other main source of sea glass is the vast number of ship wrecks from Canada to Florida; near San Francisco and Monterey, Calif.; and in the Great Lakes, not to mention around the world. Over thousands of years, the wrecks have yielded up gold, silver and priceless gems—and always the glass.

New England Booty

In October 2016, the Carneys harvested about 3,000 pieces of sea glass along the shores between Eastport, Maine, and Campobello Island, New Brunswick. Diligent searchers can do this, too, but vast tons of the stuff are often just off shore in less than 20 feet of water. Glass and pottery shards can be spotted while snorkeling, not to mention scuba diving.

Scuba diver Rick Carney of Brunswick, Maine, Bill's nephew, was the first man in modern times to dive the harbor in Rockland, Maine. He brings up dishes, bottles, vases and other vessels untouched since they were dumped, and always the glass. Asked recently what his rarest find was, Carney said "I found a half-melted clear-glass crucifix in Portsmouth (N.H.) Harbor a few years ago."



Sea glass in shades of green are hard to find.

Sherry Hanson

About the Colors

While glass was first made as early as 1730 B.C. in Asia; colored glass was not in wide use until the 12th century. The ingredients to make it remain the same: sand, soda and lime.

Wonder where the various colors come from? Purple shards seldom started out purple any more than aqua-colored chunks necessarily started out as soft drink bottles.

Dark olive-green glass, known as "black glass," was produced from iron slag up to 1860 and used for beverage bottles needing protection from light. Most glass produced before 1880

was aqua green, the natural color of the product. The intense blue, green and purple colors of that time were produced by adding metallic oxides and cobalt for the blue medicine bottles. Maybe the blue chunk you find this summer will be quite old; or you might have a piece of an Arizona Iced Tea bottle of the 1990s.

Why is red glass so rare? Copper, gold and silver were used to produce the garnet red, ruby and yellow colors. Your chances of finding a ruby shard, maybe from a Victorian era lamp, are about one in 5,000. These precious metals, still used to some degree today, explain the rarity of red glass. It was expensive to produce.

A Bit of History

You have one in 1,000 chances of picking up a pink chunk used in the manufacture of tableware during the Depression. Equally rare is purple, but this color is misleading. Clear

glass was most commonly produced between 1880 and 1914 and was made with manganese, which turns a rich light purple when exposed to ultraviolet rays. Clear glass produced between 1914 and 1930 usually changes over time to an amber color, indicating you may have found treasure—or just a piece of algae-stained glass caught among dock pilings.

One sunny morning a few years ago, at the end of Cape Breton Island off Canada, my sister and I walked a beach at low tide and sticking out of the sand before us was a frosty lilac-colored glass mug handle. You don't find a treasure like this every day! "Look for out-of-the-way places where people gathered on the water before the 1900s," advised Rick Carney.

While in New York last June, Bill and Helen were the only ones at DUMBO (down under the Manhattan Bridge) picking up sea glass, hoping the crowds of people did not catch on.

Want to know what Rick Carney does with his finds? Visit seaglassofmaine.com for a look at some of his art. If you want more detail about the colors of sea glass, visit odysseyseaglass.com. These folks have collected glass around the world and have classified the colors on their site.

Numerous books may be helpful, too. Richard LaMotte's *Pure Sea Glass* is an excellent reference guide published in 2004 by Sea Glass Publishing, Chestertown, Maryland. And two books by C.S. Lambert, *Sea Glass Chronicles: whispers from the past* (2001) and *A Passion For Sea Glass* (2008), both published by Down East Books of Camden, Maine, are also wonderfully colorful and informative.

What Have You Found?

- Extremely rare: red, orange, yellow, turquoise, black, teal, gray.
- Rare: pink, aqua, cornflower blue, cobalt blue, opaque white, citron, purple/amethyst.
- Uncommon: soft green, soft blue, forest green, lime green, golden amber, jade.
- Common: Kelly green, brown, white (clear).

Planning Your Trip

The off-season yields the best treasures, especially after storms, and northern beaches are less picked over. For information on colors, visit odysseyseaglass.com. More travel information can be found from the Maine Office of Tourism at visitmaine.com. For travel planning assistance, contact your local AAA office or AAA.com/travel.

Sherry Ballou Hanson is a freelance writer based in Brunswick, Maine.

Published: Jun 01, 2017