Searching for Geographic Information Online

While maritime history is, in many ways, the history of the space between places, it certainly also has important connections with specific locales. Finding information about such places can sometimes be a real challenge. One of the greatest benefits of the internet is its ability to remove the distance between a researcher and a source. When you seek geographical information about New Zealand, instead of having to locate a research university that comprehensively collects data on Pacific nations, or traveling to New Zealand itself, you can simply visit the online site of the New Zealand Geographical Society at **http://www.nzgs. co.nz** without leaving your home.

Many other resources offer ways to find geographical information about nearly any place in the world, from your computer. Google, as always, is a great place to start. **Google Maps** (**http://maps.google.com**) has maps and satellite images of pretty much the entire terrestrial world. They even show the underwater world as well, with images that show incredible topographical representations of the ocean floor. **Google Earth** (**http://earth.google.com**) provides an even more remarkable way of exploring the world's geography, through Google's free downloadable geographic information program.

For information about a country, **Wikipedia** (**http://www. wikipedia.org**) is an excellent starting point. Entries for major countries can be surprisingly long and complex, and most link to numerous related entries as well. Even more useful, in some cases, are the footnotes Wikipedia contributors provide, which can guide one to excellent primary resources. For a summarized view that focuses more on facts and figures, the **World Factbook**, published by the CIA and available at **https://www.cia.gov/ library/publications/the-world-factbook/**, has an entry on every country in the world recognized by the US Government.

Using the appropriate **top-level domains** (**TLD**s), one can limit searching to information created by a specific country's government. The TLD is the last part of a URL; we're most familiar with ones such as **.com**, **.edu**, or **.gov**, but these are primarily American uses. Each country has its own TLD, such as **.fr** for France, **.mx** for Mexico, **.qa** for Qatar, or **.bd** for Bangladesh. A web search for **geography site:.bd** will return the term "geography" found only in sites with a top-level domain ending in **.bd**.
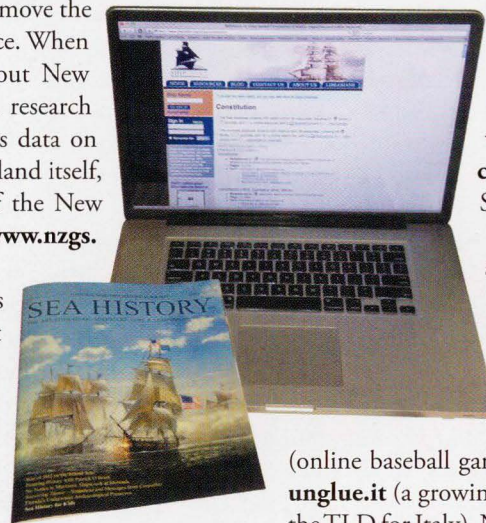
In Google, the use of "site:" limits the search to only sites within that range. This can be applied in many different ways, from **site: umd.edu** for information from just the University of Maryland's website, to **-site:sears. com** for information from everywhere but the Sears pages.

Beware—even when limiting to a country-specific TLD, the sites are not always from the country in question; many companies now use such top-level domains to customize their URLs, creating sites like **http://last. fm** (an online radio service, using the TLD from Micronesia), **http://mlb.tv** (online baseball games, using the TLD from Tuvalu), or **http:// unglue.it** (a growing use, in which action words are created from the TLD for Italy). Nevertheless, it can be a good way of narrowing down results to government-published content.
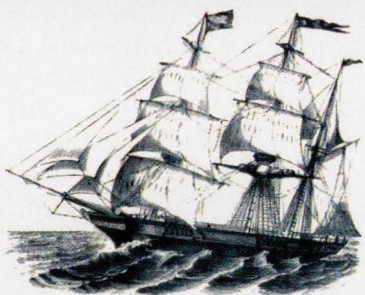
Several online gazetteers provide useful tools for learning more about specific locations. **GeoNames** (**http://www.geo names.org**) has over 8 million place-names from around the world, and you can limit your search to just a single country, as well as use a variety of advanced search options. **The Global Gazetteer** (**http://www.fallingrain.com/world/**) is one of the few sites to include elevation information. It doesn't provide much of a search function; you need to know the country and the region within the country to narrow down to the location you're seeking. Finally, the **National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency**'s **GEOnet Names Server** (**http://earth-information.nga.mil/ gns/html/**) covers the entire world except the United States and Antarctica. Like many government sites, it's got a clunky interface hiding an enormous amount of information.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at **peter@shipindex.org**. See **http://shipindex.org** for a free compilation of over 140,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓