

The water temperature off Vancouver Island remains around 5 to 8°C year-round.



what lies beneath

Hold your breath to experience **Vancouver Island's** surprising **underwater** scenery

by Dr Brad Bowins

Dr Brad Bowins is a psychiatrist working in a private practice and at the University of Toronto Health Service. He began scuba diving when he was 15 and has completed over 1000 dives, most devoted to underwater photography. He has explored the undersea riches of the Maldives, Egypt, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

The best scuba destinations have intriguing underwater terrain, accessible dive sites, helpful dive operators and, of course, highly sought after marine creatures.

Vancouver Island has all of that and then some, as I discovered on a dive adventure last December. Now, you might be thinking, “December? It must be freezing!”

Fortunately, other than in the higher elevations, Vancouver Island is blessed with a moderate climate year-round and

underwater temperatures that tend to hover around 5 to 8°C.

Fall and winter waters are usually clearer — the spring and summer sun warms the upper layer of water which can lead to the growth of visibility reducing algae. And in the cooler season, you'll often have the dive site to yourself and your buddy — a real plus.

South Pender Island, one of the many Gulf Islands nestled between Vancouver Island and the mainland, was my first destination. I stayed at Poets Cove Resort



Jonathan of Rockfish Divers cuddles a giant Pacific octopus.

PHOTOS ON BOTH PAGES BRAD BOWINS

Beating the bends

Mike Lever of the **Nautilus Explorer** (tel: 888-434-8322; www.nautilusexplorer.com) — a luxury live-aboard dive boat offering week-long summer trips in BC, Alaska and Mexico — has noted an excessive number of divers getting decompression sickness, typically a fairly rare occurrence.

He found that those with higher caffeine intake and lower water intake were more prone to this ailment, whereby nitrogen, originally absorbed at high atmospheric pressure, bubbles out of solution from bodily fluids, due to an excessively fast reduction in atmospheric pressure (coming up too fast).

While popular in cooler waters, dry suit diving does have one major

flaw: short of wearing an adult diaper, you cannot urinate until you take the suit off. As a result, many dry suit divers restrict their intake of water and other hydrating fluids, while drinking coffee and tea to warm up.

The result is dehydration, one of the key risk factors for the bends, since adequate hydration protects against nitrogen-bubble formation.

I suggest staying well hydrated and using an adult diaper. Personally, I would rather enjoy a good laugh than risk permanent injury — or worse.

Alternatively, I found that White's Almost Dry Suit, as the name suggests, only allows a minimal amount of water that quickly warms up, and wearing a thin tropical wet suit over top further increases the warmth.

& Spa (tel: 888-512-7368/250-629-2100; www.poetscove.com) at Bedwell Harbour, a five-star property with a stunning main lodge and luxury cottages extending up the hillside. A golf cart was dispatched to my room to ensure that my gear and I made it to the waiting dive boat, aptly named Sound Passage.

The calm waters, magnificent Gulf Islands scenery and spacious heated indoor cabin all made for an enjoyable ride to our first dive site — the HMCS Mack-

enzie, a 110-metre destroyer deliberately sunk off Sidney. Vancouver Island is one of the best places anywhere to experience so-called artificial reefs, those where boats are given a second life below water. Obstacles that could trap a diver and environmentally hazardous substances are painstakingly removed before the boat is rigged with explosives and sunk during a ceremony that is often more extravagant than the ship's original launch.

Marine life of all types and sizes move

in, irresistibly drawn to the best under-sea real estate around. Every surface is quickly adorned by encrusting sponges, hydroids, anemones, soft and hard corals, bryozoans, tunicates, feather stars, oysters and clams among others. From top-of-the-food-chain fish species to the very little guys, wrecks like the HMCS Mackenzie and GB Church as well as HMCS Saskatchewan off Nanaimo, provide an artificial environment so suited to marine growth that they quickly become more animal than metal.

WHAT A WRECK

Unfamiliar with the dry suits worn by most BC divers, I decided to stick with my wet suit. Along with my dive guides Dan and Tara, both highly accomplished free divers, I rolled off the side of the boat and pulled myself down the mooring line.

Thoughts of cold water faded once we sighted all the stunning marine life an artificial reef could possibly attract — from encrusting sponges to large ling cod. It was really only when we surfaced and got on the boat that we realized how cold we were. The hot tub at Poets Cove was much appreciated.

The next morning was a perfect day with blue skies and refreshing warmth. We were even comfortable standing in bathing suits on deck as we eased into our wet suits. Little did I know that the first site that day was easily amongst the best in the world for macro (small creature) photography.

Hopefully, divers will take care to preserve Tilly Point Caves just off Pender Island. It was so impressive, I hesitate to mention its name. After Vince backed the boat to the offshore rock formation, we jumped in and descended a mere three metres where we entered a three-metre-wide, 17-metre-long cave literally covered with plumose anemones of all colours and sizes.

Equally impressive were the strikingly beautiful nudibranchs. I could easily have shot six rolls of film. Fortunately, the currents in this cave were negligible, enabling us to stay as long as we wished to explore and photograph this amazing site.

With memories of these great dive sites still on my mind, I drove to Victoria for a day of sightseeing. I stayed at the ultra-modern Victoria Marriot Inner

Wrecks provide an artificial environment so suited to marine growth that they quickly become more animal than metal

Harbour (tel: 250-480-3800; www.victoriamarriot.com), where many of the rooms overlook the Parliament Buildings and the harbour. I explored the city and was particularly impressed by the Royal BC Museum and its exhibits on natural and aboriginal history.

LONE WOLF EEL

The following day, I was off to Nanaimo where I boarded a ferry to Gabriola Island. I was staying at the Melville Grant Inn (tel: 866-247-5444/250-247-9687; www.melvillegrantinn.com), a five-star inn with four luxury rooms whose tranquil mood is enhanced by a fireplace and Jacuzzi.

I would have gladly lounged the next morning, but I was meeting Dan Ferris of Mamro Adventures (tel: 250-756-8872; www.mamro.com). I soon discovered why the operation uses the term "adventures." With cool air temperatures and an open dive boat, the ride to and from the dive site was invigorating, to say the least.

Equally invigorating was the first dive at Madronna Point where we found the most unusual of Vancouver Island's marine creatures and a must-see for any diver: the wolf eel. Displaying a vaguely human face that even a mother couldn't love, this eel can grow to two-and-a-half metres in length. Several rows of canine teeth are just right for crushing the shells of scallops, crabs and urchins.

From time to time, wolf eels will swim out and interact, but more often they prefer to stay safe in their rocky retreats. On this dive I counted four pairs, all of whom remained just out of camera range. With some difficulty I was able to take one shot and managed to capture the image I was hoping for: two wolf eels side by side. Later, at Snake Island, we encountered seals whose favorite game is to elude divers — underwater photographers, in particular.

After failing to convince my hosts at the Melville Grant Inn that a full-time resident diver was required, I made my way to the west coast of Vancouver Is-

land, taking a break to hike the trails at the amazing Cathedral Grove near Port Alberni, the site of a towering old-growth forest dominated by Douglas Fir trees. Refreshed, I proceeded to the Long Beach Resort (tel: 250-725-2442; www.longbeachlodgeresort.com) in Tofino, a magnificent property which merges nicely with the forest and seashore. With limited time for hiking I decided to try the Rainforest Trail between Tofino and Ucluelet and the must-see Wild Pacific Trail cutting through a slice of temperate rainforest along the rugged Pacific Rim coastline.

Massive waves originating in the Far East end their journey with thunderous impact on the many rocks and small islands just offshore. In addition to the spectacular winter waves, one definite advantage of visiting in the off-season is that the trails are pretty much yours, while in summer there are thousands of visitors.

After all too short a stay, I travelled to the Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa (tel: 888-544-2079/250-544-2079; www.brentwoodbaylodge.com), about 20 minutes from Victoria and five minutes from Sydney. Given the close proximity to these two cities, as well as the airport, this resort is ideal for a pre- or post-con-

Best underwater beasts

An outstanding feature of Vancouver Island waters is how large and abundant its nudibranchs are compared to those in tropical seas. Appearing in an amazing diversity of shapes, sizes and arrangements of external gills, nudibranchs — such as the **white-lined dirona** all decked out in white-tipped translucent appendages — are a great pleasure to spot and photograph.

One of the most striking and abundant of the area's filter feeders is the **giant plumose anemone** which grows to a metre in height in brilliant white, radiant orange and subtle brown. Another anemone worth watching out for is the **fish-eating anemone** with its maroon base and red, pink or white tentacles.

Sea stars off the BC coast move at a blistering pace compared to those in warmer seas. In particular, the large and voracious **sunflower star** can move three metres a minute while in hot pursuit of crabs, snails and oysters. Adults can have over 24 arms with brilliant orange, pink or purple colouration.



The giant plumose anemone can grow to a metre in height.



Nudibranchs are common on the area's many artificial reefs.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE BRAD BOWINS

A must-see for any BC diver is the unusual wolf eel.

An outstanding feature of Vancouver Island waters is how large and abundant some creatures are compared to tropical seas

behind a tall cloud sponge which resembled a human spine with hip bones and lungs.

AN OCTOPUS' GARDEN

Up until this point in the trip I was pleased to have encountered and photographed some amazing marine creatures, but one still eluded me: the giant Pacific octopus, the largest in the world. Previously, at a site off Pender Island, I saw a large arm with sucker cups deep inside a crevice, but the octopus wasn't interested in coming out.

I was hoping to encounter one at McCurdy Point, where the giant Pacific octopus is often sighted. Preparing for the dive, we noticed that the seas were picking up and rain was beginning to fall. As a safety precaution we dropped anchor in addition to tying off to the mooring line. With waves trying to pound us against the hull we pulled ourselves to

the bow and descended the mooring line into the sea's reassuring calm.

As if on cue, a brilliant red, giant Pacific octopus appeared. These are the most intelligent of all invertebrates, having even been known to climb out of one tank, make their way over to another to get food, then return to their original tank. This octopus actually seemed to enjoy the encounter, allowing both of us to hold him for a while without releasing clouds of dark ink.

When it was time to surface, we found that the underwater calm was deceptive. Intense wind, large waves and driving rain awaited us above. As it turned out, our line had pulled so tight that neither of us could untie it. While I steered and used engine power to keep us off the rocks, Jonathan cut the line so that we could escape to the safety of Brentwood Bay. But I was already longing to head back to the octopus' garden in the sea. **DR**