



British Columbia's
Sunshine Coast

— Diving Along Canada's Salish Sea

Text and photos by Barb Roy



Juvenile Puget Sound king crabs like to hide under kelp leaves. PREVIOUS PAGE: Cluster of anemones paint terrain of the Skookumchuck Rapids

With over 53 miles (86km) of scenic picturesque coastline along Highway 101 and less than 40 inches (104cm) of rainfall per year, it's no wonder the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia in Canada is a popular getaway for travelers from around the world. Both the upper and the lower sections offer an array of great dive sites and a myriad of other fun activities on a year-round basis.

The lower Sunshine Coast is located between Langdale and Earl's Cove,

accessed via a car ferry from Horseshoe Bay to Langdale (40 min sailing). The town of Sechelt is a 30-minute drive north where divers can explore Sechelt Inlet. This is actually a peninsula formed between the Strait of Georgia and Sechelt Inlet. Narrows Inlet and Salmon Inlet branch off to the east of Sechelt Inlet opening the possibility to even more boat exploration. Due to the ease of getting here, divers tend to spend one to three days shore diving or join up with a group dive charter.

HMCS Chaudiere. The wreck of the HMCS *Chaudiere*, a retired 366ft (112m) destroyer escort, scuttled by the Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia (ARSBC) in 1992, is quite an experience. You have the opportunity to see and photograph

a variety of critters, without the worry of currents. Orange and white plumose anemones adorn the ship's railings from bow to stern. The bridge, ladders and stairs are also covered with anemones, feather stars (crinoids) brittle stars and white glass-tunicates.

I am always amazed at the amount of juvenile rockfish on this wreck, as well as thick patches of life thriving on the underside near the stern, which is where I have seen octopus! For divers possessing deep-diving skills, cloud sponges can be found on the forward gun barrels, which point straight down.

"The *Chaud* is an amazing wreck," said Jon Dewsbury, local PADI Instructor and owner of The Scuba Shack accommodations (TheScubaShack.ca). "It was actually the first of all the wrecks that were

British Columbia



Sunshine Coast highlighted in yellow on map of the southwestern coastal area of British Columbia, Canada (right); Location of Sunshine Coast region on global map (inset)

Rockfish are seen resting on rocks and in sponges (top right)



Frosted nudibranchs can be found in both Upper and Lower Sunshine Coast

sunk up here in BC. This destroyer is unique, and over the years, has become home to lingcod, perch, octopus and wolf eels. It's a fun ship to explore."

Several buoy lines are usually attached to the wreck, providing direct access to the ship. The vessel rests on its port side with the bow at 145ft and the stern at 90ft (44-27m). Wreck penetration is only advisable with proper equipment and training.

Tzoonie Narrows. Tzoonie Narrows is not far from the Chaudiere and a great second dive if currents permit. Depth varies from 50 to 60ft (15 to 18m). During my last dive here, a dozen dogfish (small sharks) came to check us out. Alas, they were a bit too fast for my camera, not to mention intimidating as a group!

A gentle drift carried us over

multitudes of white tube-dwelling anemones and ivory-colored giant swimming nudibranchs as they tried to feed on them. Other nudibranchs, rose stars and various invertebrate life can be found covering surrounding rocks and ledges. Aside from the dogfish, macro and close-up lenses worked well.

Tuwanek Point. Tuwanek Point is easily accessible as a shore dive for both day and night dives. This is one of those sites where you never know what you might come across, as Dewsbury recalled:

"This beautiful site boasts amazing visibility and often a giant octopus to visit, as well as wolf eels, seals and sea lions. It's pretty cool: Once a sea lion notices you, it usually keeps you company for the duration of your dive!

"Our rental cottage is located

just up the street from Tuwanek. I offer package deals to stay at the cottage and also dive. It's a beautiful cottage with a great hot tub deck. We're not a dive shop but do have over 30 tanks, which I rent out to divers visiting the coast. I also have numerous dive sets to accommodate certified divers wanting to rent all dive gear or just a couple of things."

Degan Walters, a visiting diver residing in Washington State said: "I have dived the Sunshine Coast in several places—Tuwanek, the *Chaudiere*, Egmont, Skookumchuck, Agamemnon Channel and Saltery Bay near Powell River. My shore diving trips were between one and two days, and the trips with Porpoise Bay Charters were usually four days.

"I love Tuwanek for its excellent visibility," said Degan. "Large and abundant octopuses, wolf-

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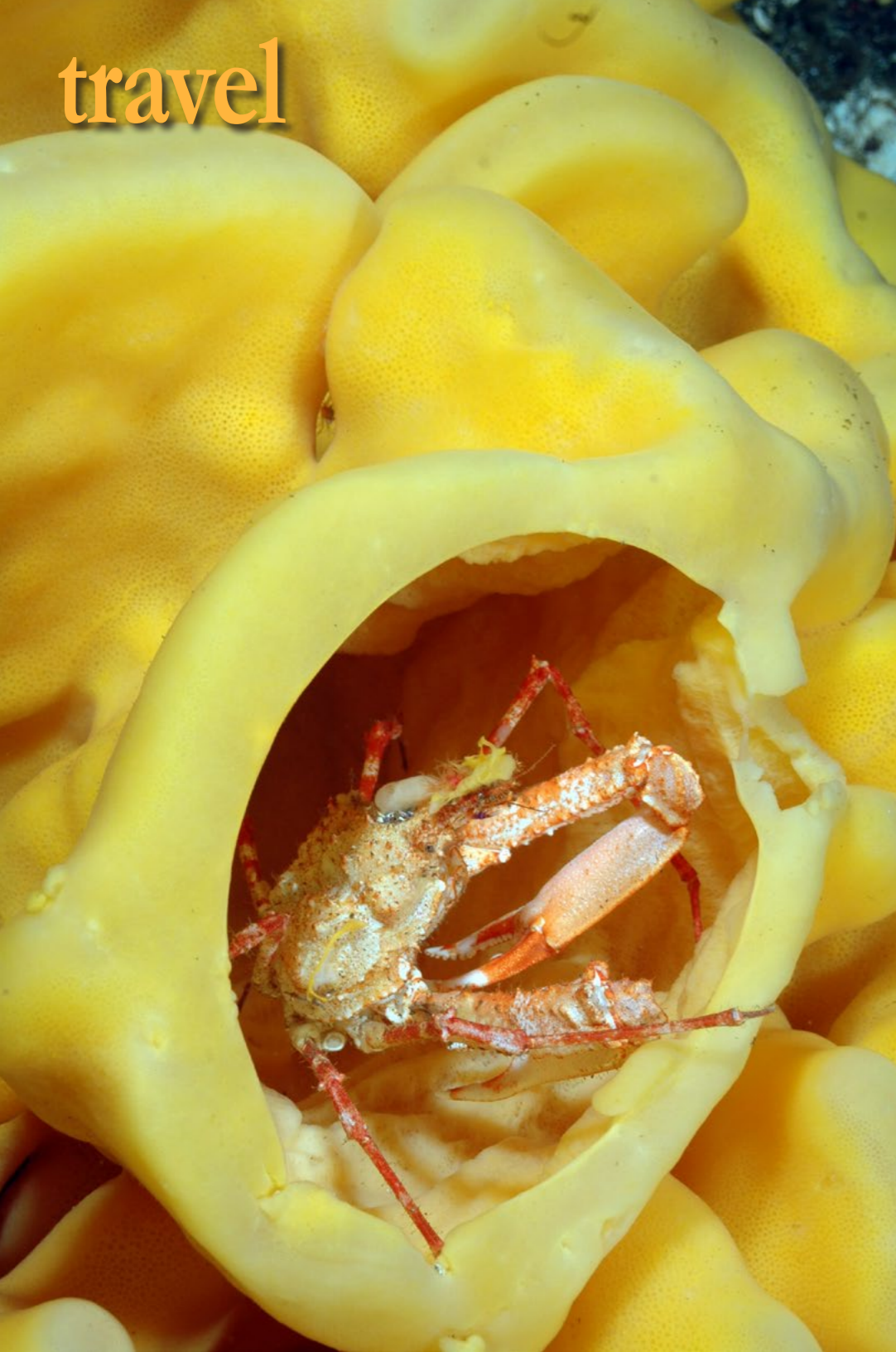


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Crabs often hide in sponges for protection (left); Gorgonian sea fans are found in Agamemnon Channel in deep water (right); Sea cucumbers are frequently seen along the Sunshine Coast (below)

along the shore next to the park or in the Glory Hole—a crater-shaped gap in the middle of the rapids—you can expect to see a hodge-podge of colorful anemones, sea stars and multicolored fish.

Try using a wide-angle lens, if visibility permits, to catch your buddy hovering above or next to a large boulder full of marine life. Orange, black and white burrowing sea cucumbers can be seen as they compete for space between sponges, tiny sculpins, anemones and the infrequent octopus. Experience and advanced training is the key for being able to enjoy this fast-paced adrenalin site.



British Columbia

eels and relatively easy access but Skookumchuck Narrows is also spectacular and Porpoise Bay Charters never disappoints. Once we saw orcas in the inlet, and then also as we were getting into the water (but not under it)! At Tuwanek, I see large Puget Sound king crabs, carpets of anemones and sponges."

Skookumchuck Rapids. Skookumchuck Rapids is quite a sight from the surface. Viewing this mighty force of nature during a full current flow creates a measurable amount of respect for this site. Diving is only possible from a boat and during slack current (when the water stops to change direction). Whether the boat takes you



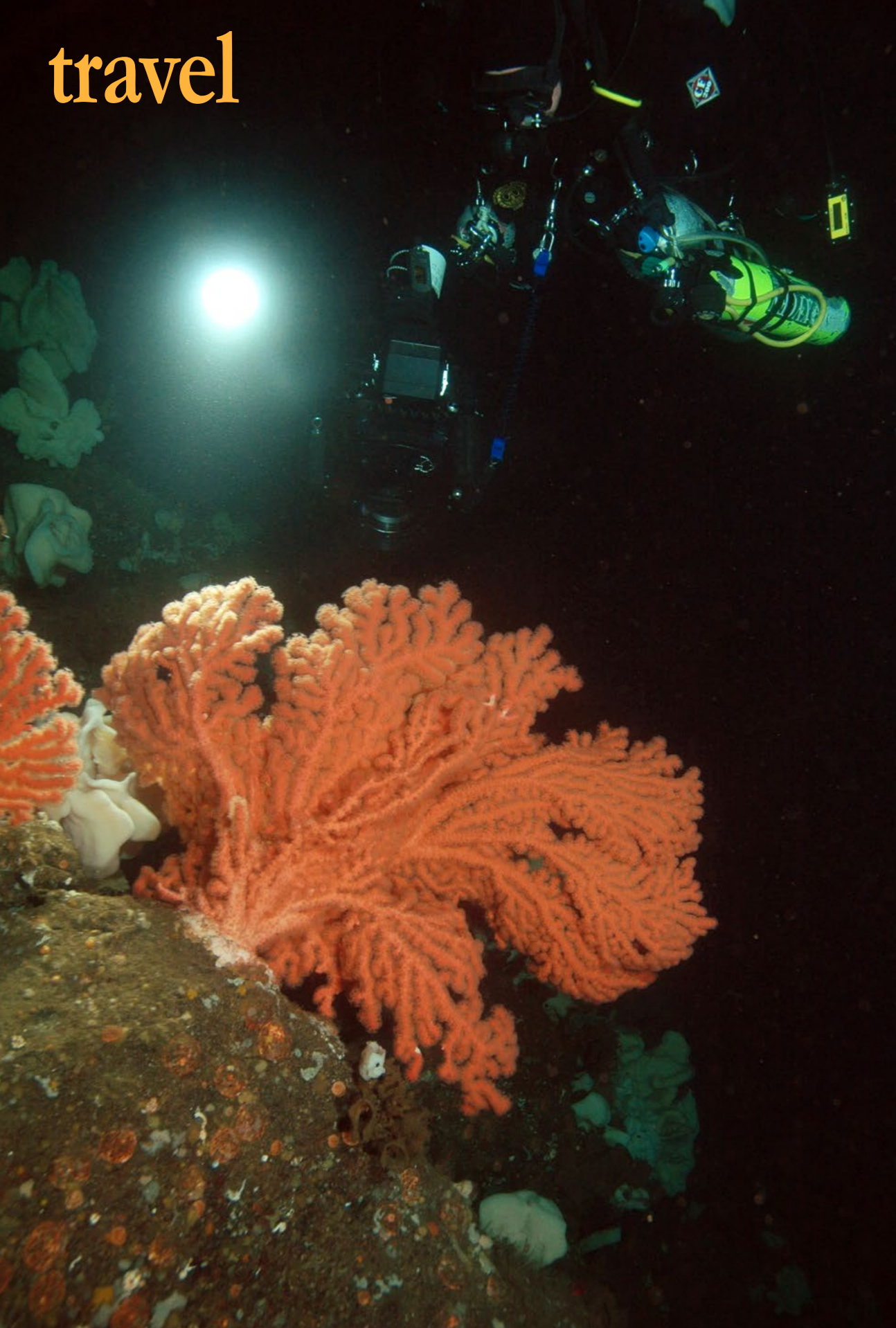
"The SKOOK runs at a rating of 16 knots on the ebb and 16.5 knots on the flood," said Kal Helyar, co-owner and operator of Porpoise Bay Charters (www.porpoisebaycharters.com). "This is BC's fastest! We pick up divers at the government dock in Egmont, providing accommodations, food and boat diving."

Since this is a very popular dive area, advanced reservations are recommended and minimum

group sizes may apply.

When not diving at this site, one of my favorite hikes is along the trail leading to Skookumchuck Rapids. It is a very scenic walk through the forest, totaling about 2.5 miles (4km) from the parking lot. The best viewing times for the rapids can be found posted on a schedule at the start of the trail or in the local newspaper. Usually an hour before and after peak tides will give enough time to watch the rapids, as they go from boiling or standing waves to flat-calm waters, then back to a cauldron of turmoil.

The word "Skookumchuck" comes from the Chinook words meaning "powerful water". If you are lucky, the wave runners will be out challenging the current with their small white-water kayaks.

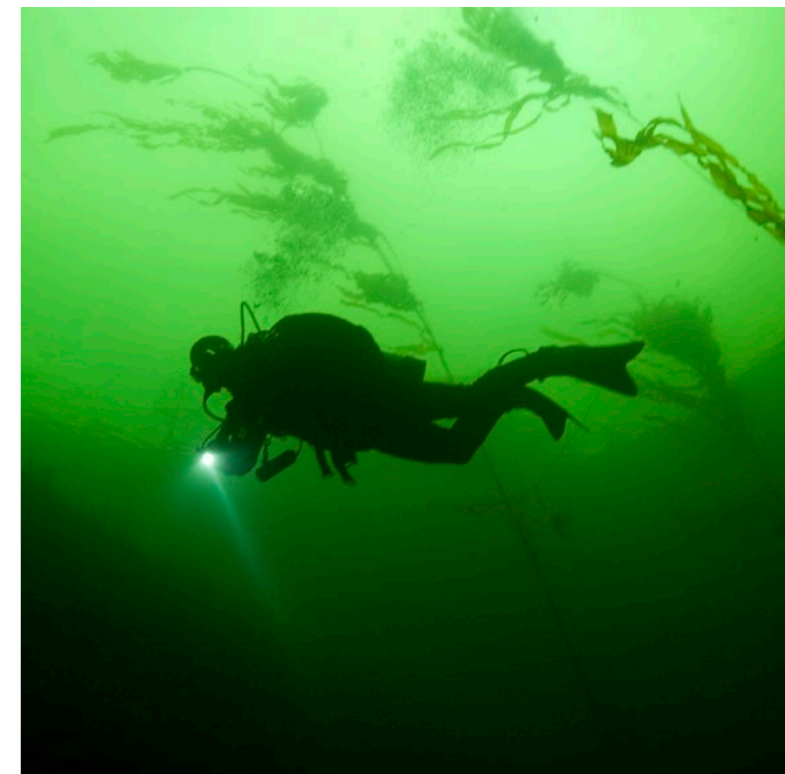


Captain's Island. Captain's Island on a sunny day can be a spectacular dive. I have often cruised along the wall at 60ft (18m), observing juvenile rockfish hiding in the openings of the protruding chimney sponge or giant yellow cloud sponges. Resting cabezon, lingcod and various species of rockfish seem to position themselves equally apart. Large sections of the wall are covered in small blankets of dark red algae and deep purple encrusting hydrocorals. Rose, blood and leather sea stars are always numerous here, creating photogenic possibilities.

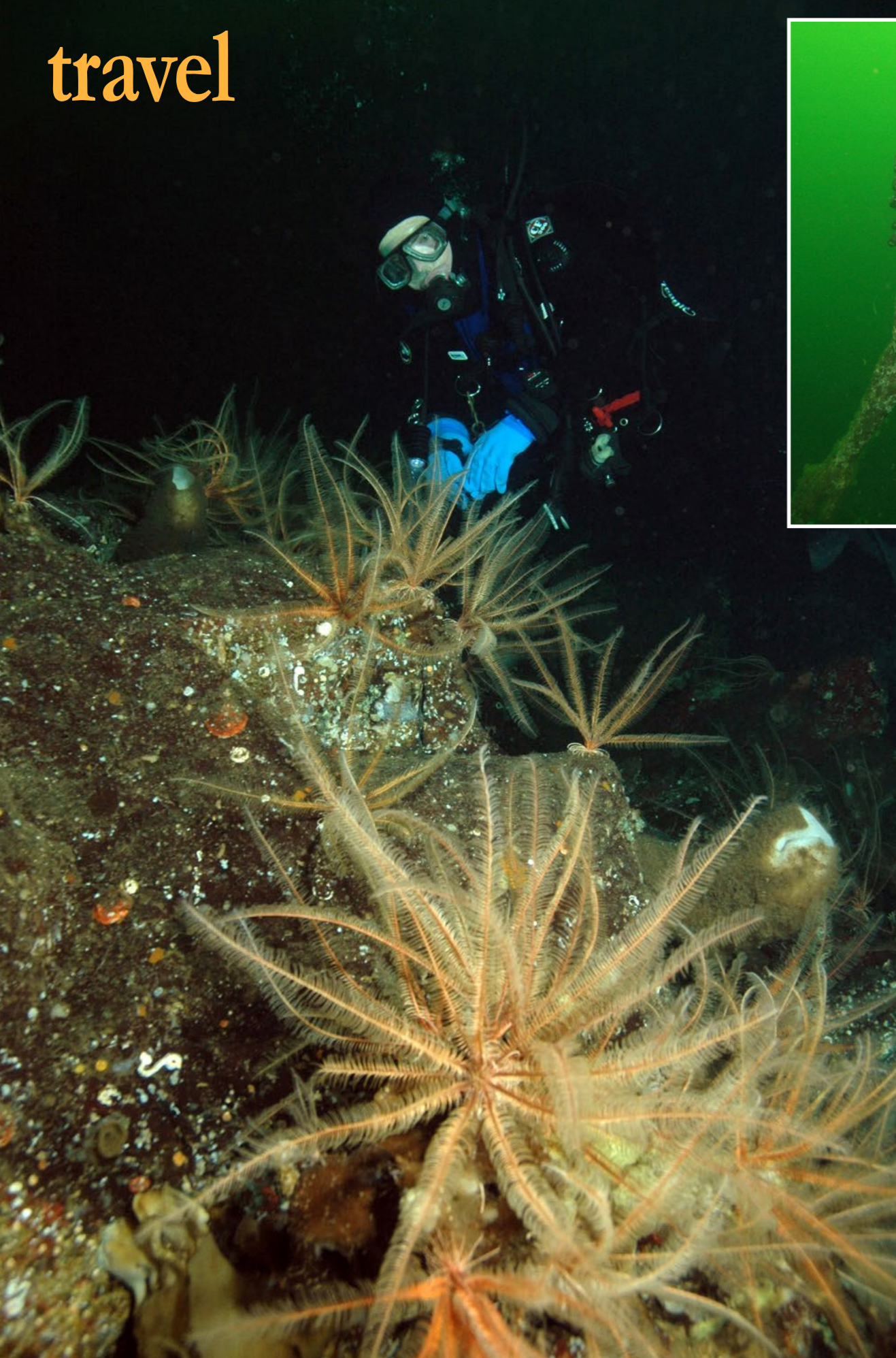
Beneath the Power Lines. Beneath the Power Lines is a wall dive located in Agamemnon Channel. Seeing the unique life at this site convinced me it was time to become a trimix diver.

Huge colonies of cloud sponge start around 60ft (18m) and seem to head endlessly down. They are brilliant yellow and white in color and highlight silhouetted divers in breath-taking wide-angle shots.

But the best part is even deeper, around 120ft (36.5m) where giant red gorgonian sea fans can be found. Proper buoyancy control is necessary around these delicate fans and sponges, so watch your fins! I have found this to be a great site not only for photographers but marine life enthusiasts as well, yielding clear visibility, abundant marine life and limitless photo opportunities with any size lens. Visitor information can be found at the Sechelt and District Chamber of Commerce (SecheltChamber.bc.ca).



To see gorgonian sea fans, deep diving gear is best to use (above); Gorgonian sea fans are found in Agamemnon Channel in deep water (top right); Diver explores one of the many kelp forests (right)



Diver with mermaid statue at Mermaid Cove



Plaque on *Malahat*, Powell River (left); Wreck of the *Chaudiere* in Sechart Inlet, with anemones all over it (below)

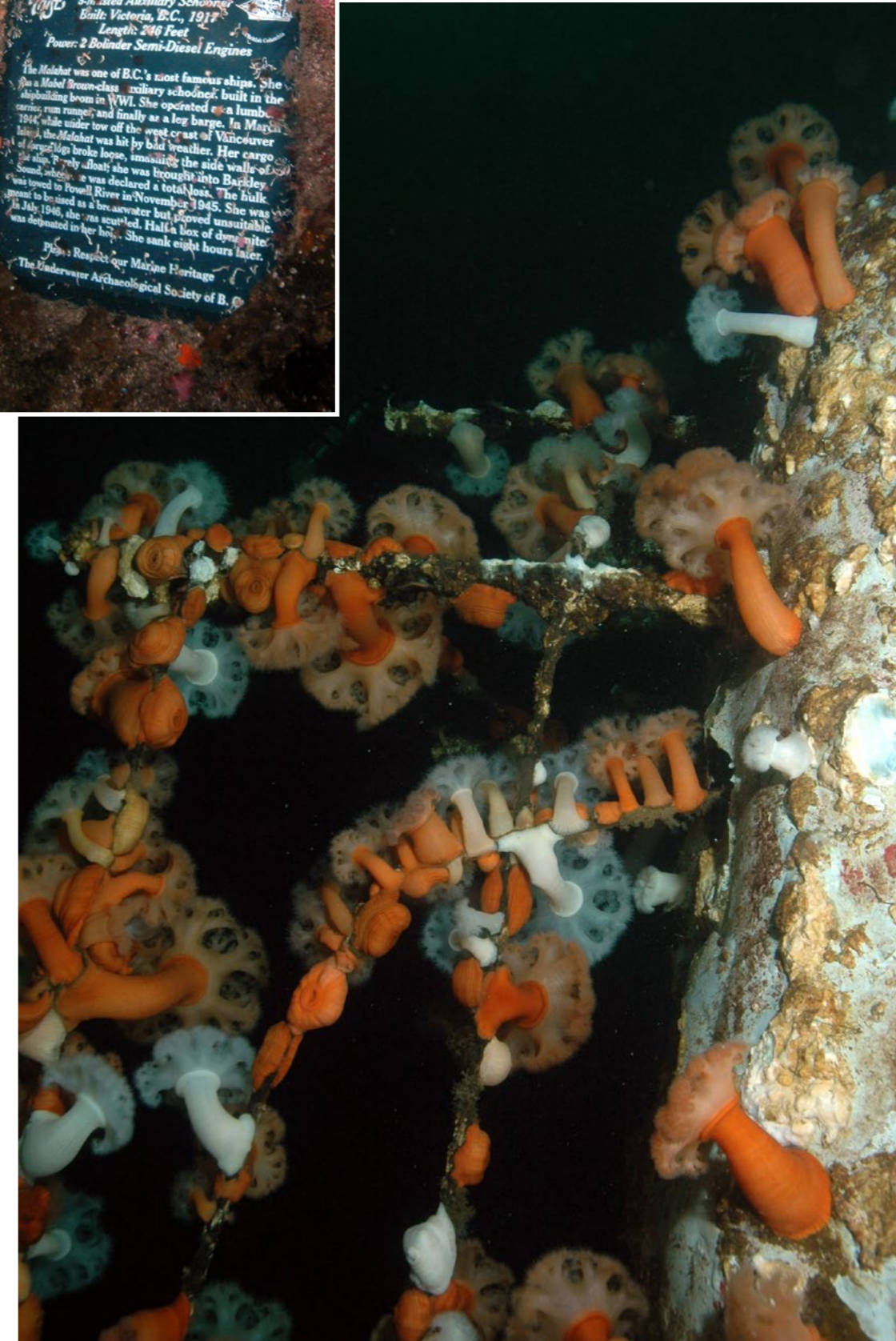
Upper Sunshine Coast

Continuing north on Highway 101 from Sechart, Powell River can be reached by taking another ferry at Earls Cove to Saltery Bay (a 50-minute ride). From the mouth of Jervis Inlet, along the Malaspina Strait coastline to the northern community of Lund, divers can explore a range of exceptional shore diving with little worry of currents. Boat diving is also available. For ferry schedules, consult BC Ferries (BCFerries.bc.ca).

Saltery Bay Provincial Park. A nine-foot bronze mermaid can be found in the protected cove of Saltery Bay Provincial Park, along with a small boat hull and a great wall full of craggy boot sponges. Bright crimson anemones, octopi, swimming nudibranchs and an assortment of sea stars can also be found. The park offers campsites, toilet facilities and a changing area for divers, with a ramp into the water.

Mermaid Cove. Mermaid Cove is where my daughter, Tallen, went on one of her first dives at the young age of around 12. Those of you who have pre-teen divers in the family may relate to the clinging-buddy effect I felt with her at first until she grew confident enough to let go. Although I learned that day what it was like to have a giant remora attached, it was worth it to be able to show her how beautiful and full of life our northern waters can be. Before long, I wished I had brought a bungee cord!

Malahat. Another easy shore dive is the wreck of the *Malahat*, located next to the log mill's breakwater (old ships), in northern Powell River. The ship's skeletal



Boot sponges and feather stars along the wall at Mermaid Cove dive site



Vivian Island (top right) is known for its huge cloud sponges (above)



remains provide superb habitat for nesting lingcod, cabezon, greenlings and young wolf eels. I received directions from Beach Gardens Resort.

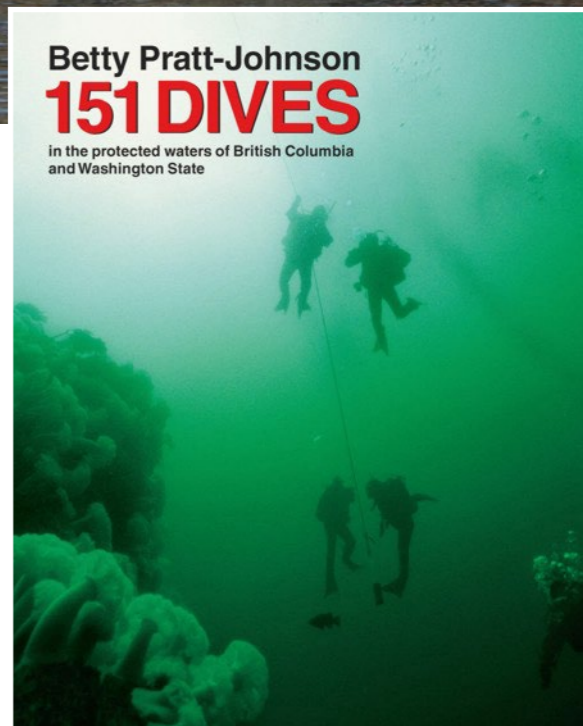
Texada Island. On one of the local boat dives, departing from Powell River, I was treated to a site where the bottom resembled the top of a city filled with chimneys of all sizes and shapes. (Descending, I kind of felt like Santa Claus). They were actually boot sponge with yellow patches of cloud sponge scattered about. Soon, great masses of cloud sponges were everywhere!

This location, near Texada Island, soon became the cover image for Betty Pratt-Johnson's last dive book: *151 Dives*. Within her book, Betty lists 13 different

dive sites for the Sechelt Peninsula and 10 for the Powell River area, indicating how rich this coast really is for the adventurous dive traveler.

Vivian Island. Another boat dive I really enjoyed was the beautiful wall at Vivian Island, also full of cloud sponges, but with clinging feather stars. Huge orange plumose anemones covered a steep wall down to 125ft (38m). Juvenile yelloweye and tiger rockfish are both common to see here, making it a good location for close-up or wide-angle photography.

Shamrock. A great second dive is the wreck of the *Shamrock*, a 76ft (23m) tug, which met its demise in 1926. It is



Betty Pratt-Johnson's book, *151 Dives*, with cover shot by Barb Roy, taken near Texada Island





Porpoise Bay dive charters serves the Egmont area

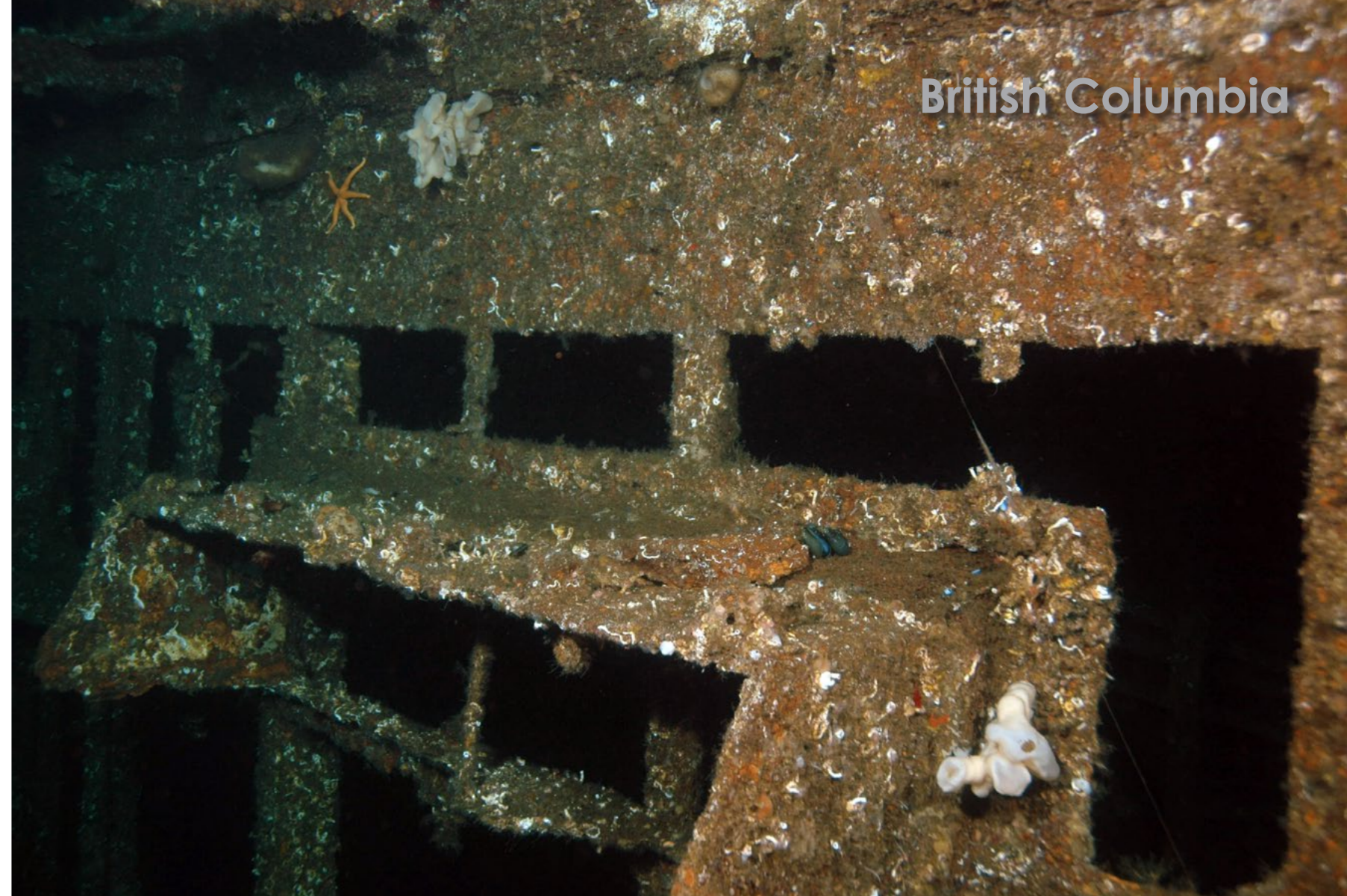


The Sunshine Coast is full of hikes and trails to enjoy in between dives

also located at Vivian Island in shallow water, which I prefer diving during the winter months when visibility is clear. Keep an eye out for nudibranchs, octopi and wolf-eels, since there is plenty of kelp-covered debris.

Dinner Rock. A boat dive technical divers enjoy is at Dinner Rock, south of Lund where the wreckage of the MV *Gulf Stream* (sunk in 1947) can be found on the south side. The wreck starts around 100ft and stretches down to 165ft (30-50m). The most impressive life, however, is scattered all around Dinner Rock at various depths, making this site great for recreational divers too. I have photographed large lingcod, giant lion's mane jellyfish and abalone here, among other critters. A lot of invertebrate life covers many of the large boulders in 20-60ft (6-18m).

"The wreck is suitable for most levels of divers comfortable with cold-water diving," said Technical Dive Instructor Bill Coltart, operator of Pacific Pro Dive out of Courtenay, British Columbia. "A permanent line is attached to the stern of the wreck at 100 feet with a wall located immediately adjacent. Technical and



rebreather divers can extend their exploration time on the wreck checking out large 'rusticles' hanging from the bow at 165 feet. This is one of those wreck sites that divers visit, not because of an excess of marine growth, but because it truly looks like a wreck.

"We expanded operations earlier this year with the purchase of a high-speed zodiac and from that operate daily seasonal snorkeling and whale-watching excursions," said Coltart.

When not diving, it is fun to visit Lund for some sightseeing or lunch, walk along one of Powell River's many beaches or launch the kayaks at Mermaid Cove. Powell River travel information can be found at Tourism Powell River (DiscoverPowellRiver.com).

Although I have only mentioned a few of the many dive sites along the Sunshine Coast, I encourage you to search the Internet, read some guide books and go exploring with a buddy or join a group charter. The possibilities are endless! □

The wreck of the *Gulf Stream* located at Dinner Rock is deep, but the site also offers shallow sections

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