



*Washington State's*

# San Juan Islands

Text and photos by Barb Roy



White plumose anemones cascade down the Wall at Whale Rocks underwater



Dive buddy Wayne Grant makes his way through the kelp forest (above); Alabaster nudibranch found in northern San Juans (right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Crimson anemones are often seen in the San Juan Islands

**Every now and then I get an assignment close to home, which means my dive buddy and I can usually load up the car with dive and photography gear, and maybe a kayak or two, and head out for a full weekend of adventurous exploring. If the location is exceptional, like an assignment to dive in Washington State's San Juan Islands, we often allocate several days to experience all that's available.**

When researching this unique area, I found there are over 170 different islands and reefs that have been named in the San Juan Archipelago. Of this spectacular array only four islands are serviced by the local ferry system—San Juan, Orcas, Lopez and Shaw—with daily departures from Anacortes. This would be great if we wanted to do some shore diving, since the ferries haul automobiles, but boat diving was on our agenda. To accommodate, we hooked up with a group of divers leaving from Anacortes on the dive charter boat, *Lu Jac's Quest*, run by Phil Jensen.

"Phil is an old sea dog, and I mean that in the best way," said Ron Akesson,



owner of the Bellingham dive store, Adventures Down Under (ADU). "On average, I book around 15 dive charters a year with Phil. He is thoroughly comfortable with being on the water and



## San Juans

life is rich and thick wherever we happen to splash. There's always something to film—be it nudibranchs, lots of anemones, crabs, the occasional harbor seal or sea lion, octopus, or lingcod."

As we approached the lighthouse overlooking the dive site, my imagination ran wild, wondering how many shipwrecks might be hiding below. Or maybe this current affected site would be covered in life, similar to the sites around Victoria, British Columbia in Canada, only a few miles away. The flow of the current had not yet slacked, resembling a river of moving water full of overlapping kelp fronds.

Most divers wanting to venture underwater in this northwestern part of North America have come to

clear summer day in June complete with a few squawking gulls in the distance and two bald eagles flying overhead, as we motored past lounging harbor seals and black cormorants. San Juan Island is the largest of the islands, with the dive site located on the northern side. This gave me plenty of time to interview other divers onboard and see why they like the San Juans so much.

Mike Meager and his dive buddy, Jim Copher, are regular customers of ADU, joining them almost monthly on their excursions into the San Juans. As an avid diver and an underwater videographer, Mike explained:

"I like diving the San Juans for several reasons but mainly because I am susceptible to motion sickness and because it is so beautiful here! The inland waterways of the San Juans are very protected, and the norm is flat calm or close to it. There's rarely any swell. Also, the evergreen trees grow right down to the waterline, and during the summer, you can usually see Mt. Baker in the background, making it very scenic above and below the water.

"Once underwater, the invertebrate



Divers prepare for a dive in the San Juan Islands (above); Sea lions at Whale Rocks (top right); Burrowing sea cucumber can be found at most sites (top left)

Location of San Juan Islands on map of Washington State in northwestern United States

freighters and tankers to avoid our divers.

"He lets me choose where I want to take my groups and works with me to select a proper slack time of when to put the divers in, according to what the currents are doing. Since currents can be pretty tricky around here, the small groups of ten or so work well to keep track of everyone. His 42-foot (12.8-meter) vessel allows plenty of room to deal

with all the gear or move into the cabin if it is raining."

**Lime Kiln Park.** Our first destination was in front of the lighthouse at Lime Kiln Park on San Juan Island. It was a sunny

is very experienced. Phil is very low key, which has a calming effect on everyone around him. This is really nice if we are doing a tech dive out in the shipping lanes of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and he is coordinating with captains of



NASA / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A collage of color beneath Deception Pass Bridge (right); Finger sponge cluster at Deception Pass below; Divers prepare for a shore dive at Deception Pass Bridge (lower right)

respect the power of these natural current flows, appreciating the rich nutrients that feed such an abundance of colorful marine life. Therefore, waiting for slack (when the flow of water stops to change direction) is a common practice as part of the dive's enjoyment. An experienced boat captain will know just when to put his divers in and for how long.

While we waited for slack, everyone donned their gear. The boat is set up so divers are positioned on the back deck where they can easily enter and exit the water. Once gear is on, you do a giant stride entry off the back between two ladders (which are pulled up and out of the way). Once in the water, you wait for your buddy to follow.

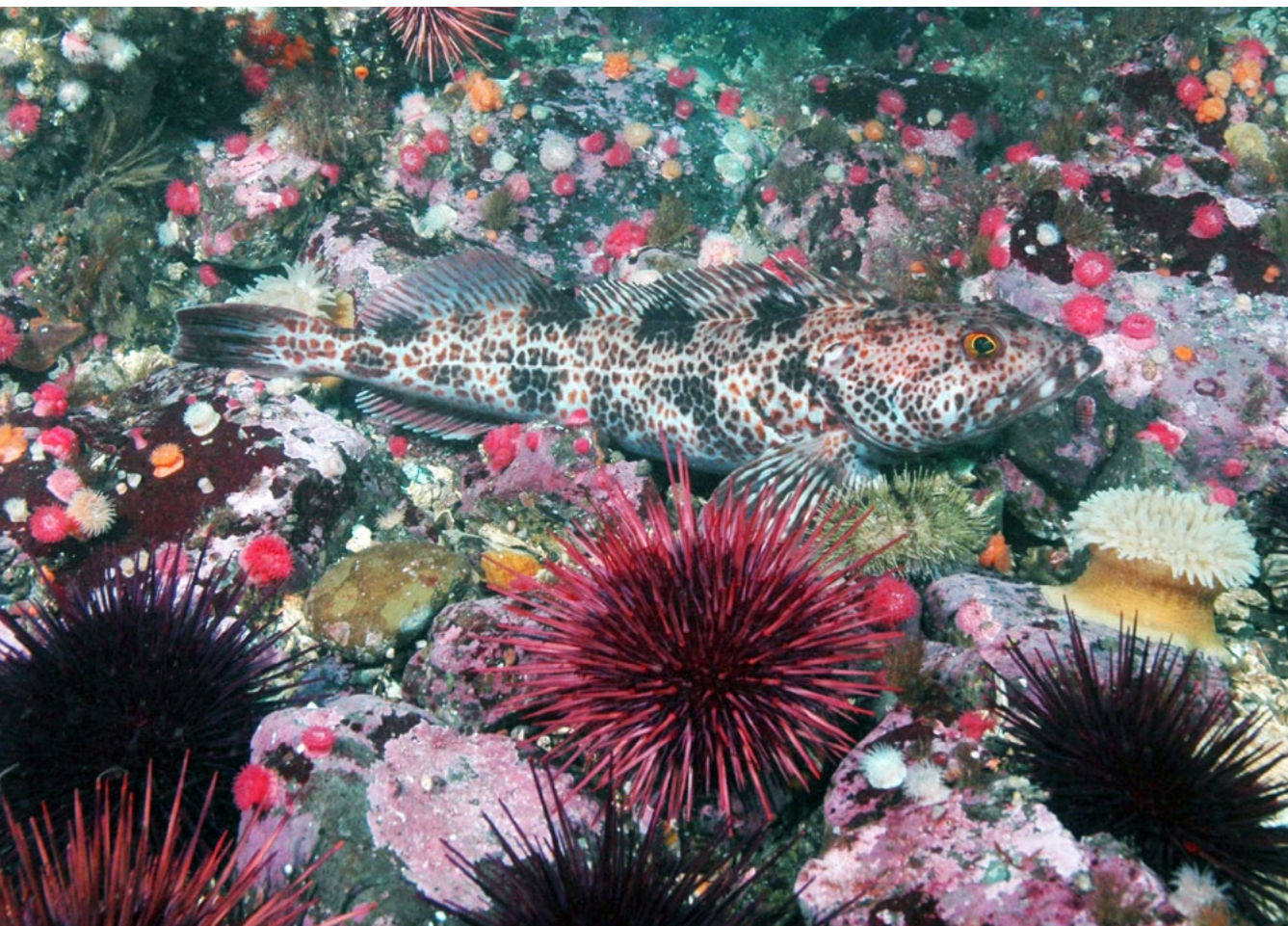
The water was clear and crisp at 48°F (8.8°C) as my dive buddy, Wayne, and I descended below the surface,



## San Juans

making it easy to locate a pair of wolf-eels peeking out from a den of overlapping flat rocks. Before long, two other divers joined us. The wolf-eels appeared very curious of their bubble-blowing audience but didn't venture any farther from their shelter, perhaps because they may have been guarding a cluster of eggs or maybe just wary of the divers in general since this underwater site is rarely visited.

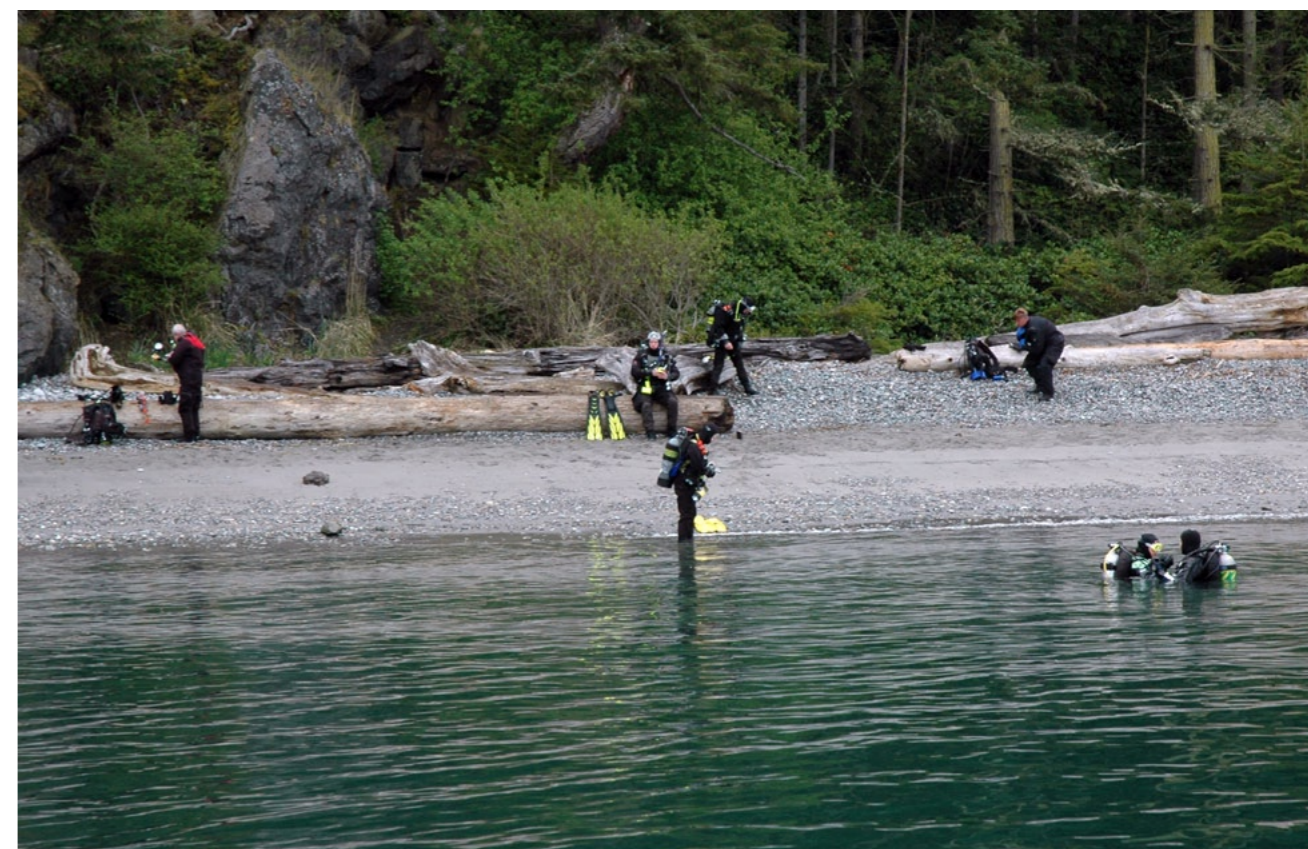
Staying at the same depth, we continued along a beautiful wall of large white plumose anemones that seemed to cascade down like a white waterfall. In the light of the video cameras, their long white columns and cotton-like plumes began to take on a regal appearance. Another section of the rock wall provided a foundation for clusters of yellow sponge, more crimson anemones, sea stars and deep red giant urchins within numerous cracks and jagged fractures. With the exceptional visibility, I could see



following golden brown fronds of kelp down to 40 feet (12 meters) where the terrain was covered in large boulders on a gently sloping decline. A closer look revealed each of the boulders supported a vibrant collection of invertebrate life like small orange tunicates, yellow zoanths and several different species of anemones. We were now within a forest of kelp along with a school of large rockfish that ignored us, as they hovered in mid-water.

Needless to say, I wasted no time with my Aquatica-housed Nikon collecting shots. Wayne had his Go-Pro camera and was already absorbed in watching a morning sunstar heading for the siphon of a buried clam. A pair of bright pink crimson anemones and a delicate white alabaster nudibranch caught my attention.

The kelp forest thinned out as we descending to 60 feet (18 meters),



Lingcod discovered on dive at Deception Pass Bridge



Large male orca from resident pod in the San Juans (left); A morning sunstar next to burried clam siphon (right)

San Juans

Juans he responded:

"Long Island West Wall is my favorite. I just love that wall on the west side and the blanket of strawberry anemones (*corynactis*) that carpet the bottom. For some reason, I love filming the little squishy critters, and you can see some of this beautiful scenery in my *Exploring the San Juans* video. Whenever I get to dive there, I stick to one spot and just concentrate on the anemones. The wall is full of other beautiful anemones also."

A collection of Mike's underwater videos can be found on his YouTube page: [www.youtube.com/wolfeeldiver](http://www.youtube.com/wolfeeldiver).

"I count nine specific San Juans videos," adds Mike. "I do have several specific videos on the San Juans posted on my YouTube channel. Just scroll down and



Wayne about 50 feet away.

As our dive time grew to an end, we slowly began our ascent back up the wall. Hidden within a mass of giant acorn barnacles was a cute tiny male scalyhead sculpin (fish) in an empty barnacle shell. Only its tiny head stuck out, possibly guarding a nest of eggs as well.

We ended our dive with a long safety stop back in the thicker part of the kelp forest next to shore. After getting situated with our buoyancy, we looked around at all of the hovering black rockfish, feeling like one of the crowd.

Before long, I could feel the tug of the current beginning to grow in strength. And as we waited at the surface for the boat to pick us up, a couple paddlers in kayaks paused to ask about our dive, curious of the critters we encountered. As usual, it was fun to watch their surprised expressions when we told them of the colorful variety residing just below their boats.

**Whale watching**

Time between dives can be equally as fun on a San Juan dive charter, especially if you have ever paid to be on a whale-watching boat, knowing how crowded they can be. Not so on Lu Jac's Quest during the months when the southern resident orca pod is cruising about the islands; divers are often treated to quite a show of activity.

In the past, Wayne and I have enjoyed photographing orcas passing so close Phil has had to turn off the engines. But orcas are not the only topside wildlife commonly seen; the occasional group of dolphins or pod of porpoises might also pass by. I don't think there has ever been a time on any of the trips when we have not seen huge

sea lions or harbor seals out on the exposed reefs enjoying some dry time.

"One of the best minke whale encounters was with Ron Akeson's group off Ice Berg Point," said Phil. "We watched a whale jump completely out of the water five or six times! 2013 is our tenth year of taking divers out, and you never know what you will see out here."

**Long Island.** When asked where Mike's favorite dive was in the San



It's not unusual to see a pair of wolf-eels in the San Juans (above) or moon snails (left)





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver Ron Akeson adjusts video camera before descending; Male scalyhead sculpin likely guarding eggs in empty barnacle shell; Divers Nolan and David Grose enjoy diving the islands whenever they can

bridge is equally as full of life as Browning Wall."

**Deception Pass.** This is another favorite dive destination Wayne and I like to visit, where we are able to dive beneath the huge Deception Pass Bridge. The 1,487-foot (453-meter) steel structure was completed in 1935, connecting Fidalgo Island to Whidbey Island. Today, over two million vehicles cross the bridge annually, and the bridge was declared a Natural Historic Monument in 1982.

Below extreme currents form impressive whirlpools and cause turbulent water to rush around Pass Island causing downdrafts and standing waves during low tide. For diving the area, good slack currents are limited to only a few days per year, making it a challenge for dive organizers like Ron to predict when the best dive time will be.

"Like any other location, when Phil and I put together a trip to Deception Pass, we give a thorough dive briefing and

only allow experienced divers to participate," said Ron from ADU. "All the trouble we seem to go through to plan and organize the trip tends to pay off when we see what's down there. The life is incredible!"

Incredible may not be the correct word to describe the dive—it's more like spectacular!

I entered the cool clear water first, holding onto a strand of bull kelp in a protected part of the Pass, as I waited for Wayne to enter the water. Looking down, I thought I was in a huge tank at the Vancouver Aquarium. Multitudes of varying size fish freely swam about the kelp. Thirty feet below, swaths of lavender and pink covered much of the rocky terrain. Green and red sea urchins added texture while orange, purple and tan ochre sea stars seem to pile together on smooth rock faces.

Once Wayne was in, we followed Ron and the other divers underwater to the main part of the wall on the south side of Pass Island. Our time was limited to only 40 minutes, so everyone quickly moved to their favorite depths. The plan was to swim down the wall then turn around and head back, usually at a different depth because of the



look at the playlist for Washington State dives. Scroll that list to watch videos on: *Kellets Bluff*, *Exploring the San Juans*, *Strawberry Island*, *Invertebrates*, *Whale Rock* and *Deception Pass*. Also, *Colors of Cold* is a good sampling with some San Juan shots, as well as *Salish Sea Life on the Rocks* has lots of shots from the San Juans."

"I don't have just one favorite dive site in the San Juans," said Ron Akeson. "But if I could only do one dive in Washington State, it would be Deception Pass. It reminds me so much of the Port Hardy area on Northern Vancouver Island, probably because the site we dive under the



Harbor seals are a common sight in the San Juan Islands





Divers emerge after a dive at Lime Kiln on San Juan Island

eels and seven different species of rockfish were counted at Bell Island.

Topside activities for us included a drive and hike at the top of Mount Constitution in Moran State Park on Orcas Island for a beautiful panoramic view of the islands and Mount Baker of the Cascade Range. It was also on Orcas Island where we met up with Tim Ferguson and his dive buddy, as they prepared for a shore dive.

"I like snorkeling here from my dive kayak so thought the diving might be good as well. We had to bring everything and no airfills are available. Boat diving is also a favorite too, but we felt like trying something different. We both like hiking, so when we're not diving, we have three great hikes to try: Mount Constitution, Turtleback Mountain and Obstruction Pass."

For those wishing to visit the San Juan Islands, they are located about 65 miles (105km) north of Seattle. They are conveniently in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains, yielding summer temperatures of around 70°F (21°C) and winter temperatures in the low 40's.

Group dive charters can be organized directly through Phil Jensen (Lujacsquest.com) or through Adventures Down Under in Bellingham (Adventuresdownunder.com). Expected pricing in 2014 will be US\$115 for two boat dives, which includes lunch—no dive gear included. Full rental (hire) packages are available on ADU charters for \$65 (wetsuit) or \$90 for a drysuit package (must already be trained in drysuit use).

Whether you are an underwater photographer, videographer, technical or recreational diver, the San Juans in Washington State offers a cornucopia of dive opportunities. ■

diverse variety of critters.

I was so enchanted with the colors; even the lingcod we came across were dappled in blue and orange spots. Heart crabs, painted anemones, orange burrowing sea cucumbers, pink brooding anemones, hydroids and giant barnacles were everywhere. Between the barnacles, tan finger-like sponge and assorted groups of feather-duster worms took up the remaining space.

Ron was busy shooting video of the wall when we came across him. Later he explained, "I am currently working on a film of under-

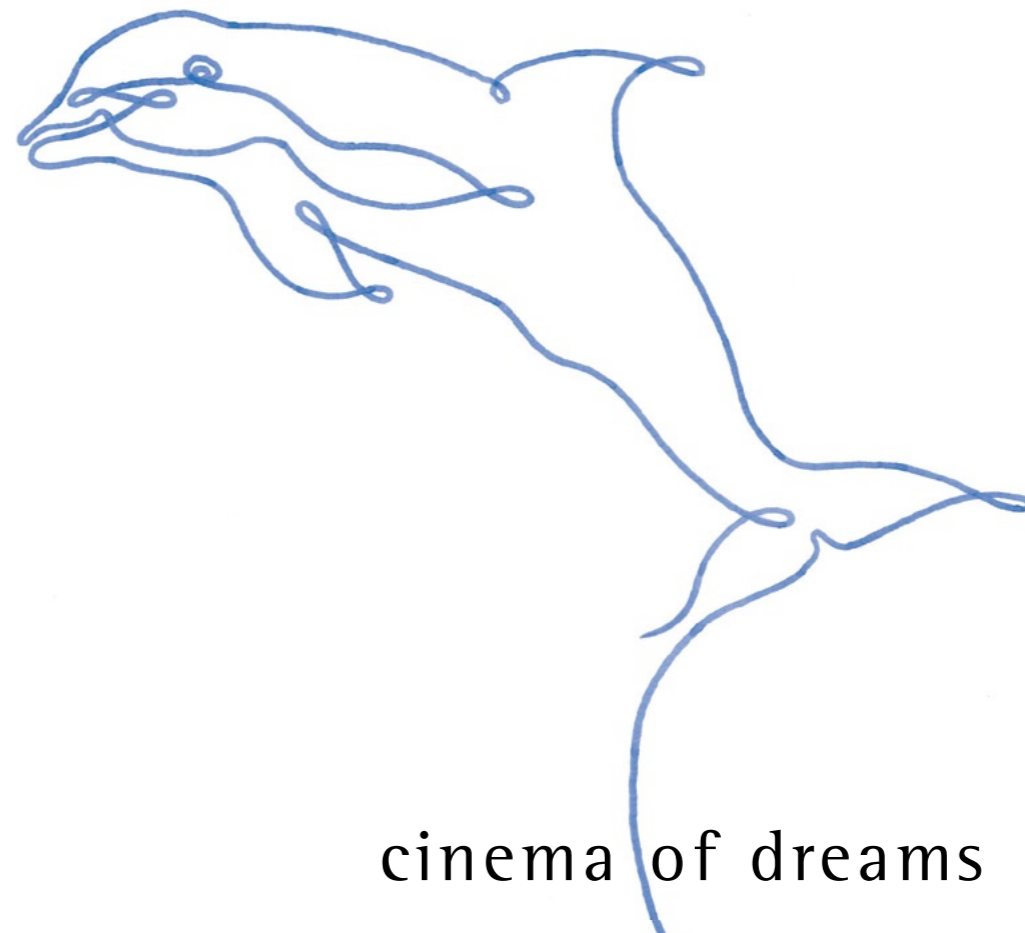
water life in Washington State, which will be followed by one portraying British Columbia diving. Third on the agenda is a film on diving high current sites of the northwest, not when the current is running, which commonly reach up to seven knots (8 mph)."

### Afterthoughts

Overall, the diving we enjoyed throughout our San Juan adventure was delightful and so different at each location. At Whale Rocks, we had sea lions join us, as we checked out an excellent wall full of invertebrate life. Three wolf-



silver



cinema of dreams



www.seacam.com

**Explore the Pacific Northwest**

**Adventures Down Under**  
360-676-4177  
www.adventuresdownunder.com  
Bellingham, Washington, USA

Dive Charters in  
Washington & British Columbia  
Rentals - Retail Sales - Repairs  
Rebreather & Technical Diving  
Air - Nitrox - Mixed Gas - Argon