



# Technical Diving Paradise

## *In the Northern Pacific*

Text by Ron Akeson

Photos by Ron Akeson and Barb Roy

**I often raise a few eyebrows when I exclaim, “I’ll take diving in the Pacific Northwest over anyplace else in the world.” And it’s true. We have a great variety of diving off the northwestern coast of Washington State, USA, and British Columbia, Canada. There are fabulous walls full of thriving marine life, historic shipwrecks and huge retired Canadian Navy ships placed as artificial reefs of steel. The drift diving is unmatched, complimented with a rich diversity of unique marine life including wolf eels, giant Pacific octopus, and six-gill sharks. Although recreational diving opportunities are also unsurpassed, technical diving is equally as good throughout the Pacific Northwest.**

So what makes this area one of the best technical diving hotspots in the world? I personally am partial to our deep 300-foot walls adorned with ancient sponges and populated by immense lingcod and healthy schools of rockfish. But my real passion lies in the opportunity to explore such a selection of very different deep wrecks, few have seen. Many of these wrecks often attract technical divers from around the world for exploration, research, or just the challenge of facing our temperate environment. Whatever the reason, the Pacific Northwest seems to fully accommodate a technical diver’s needs.

Although many tech sites in the Pacific Northwest are easily accessible from the shore, most of the choice sites require a boat for access. Browning Wall near Port Hardy on Vancouver Island in British Columbia (BC) is a local favorite and arguably one of the best dives on the Pacific Coast for any level of certified diver! You can easily spend an entire dive trying to find a single square meter of rock not adorned with red soft corals or yellow bread-of-crumbs sponge. This current-bathed wall stretches from the surface down to 73 meters (240 feet), where we often find 20-25 centimeter (8-10 inch) tall pink and white gorgonian

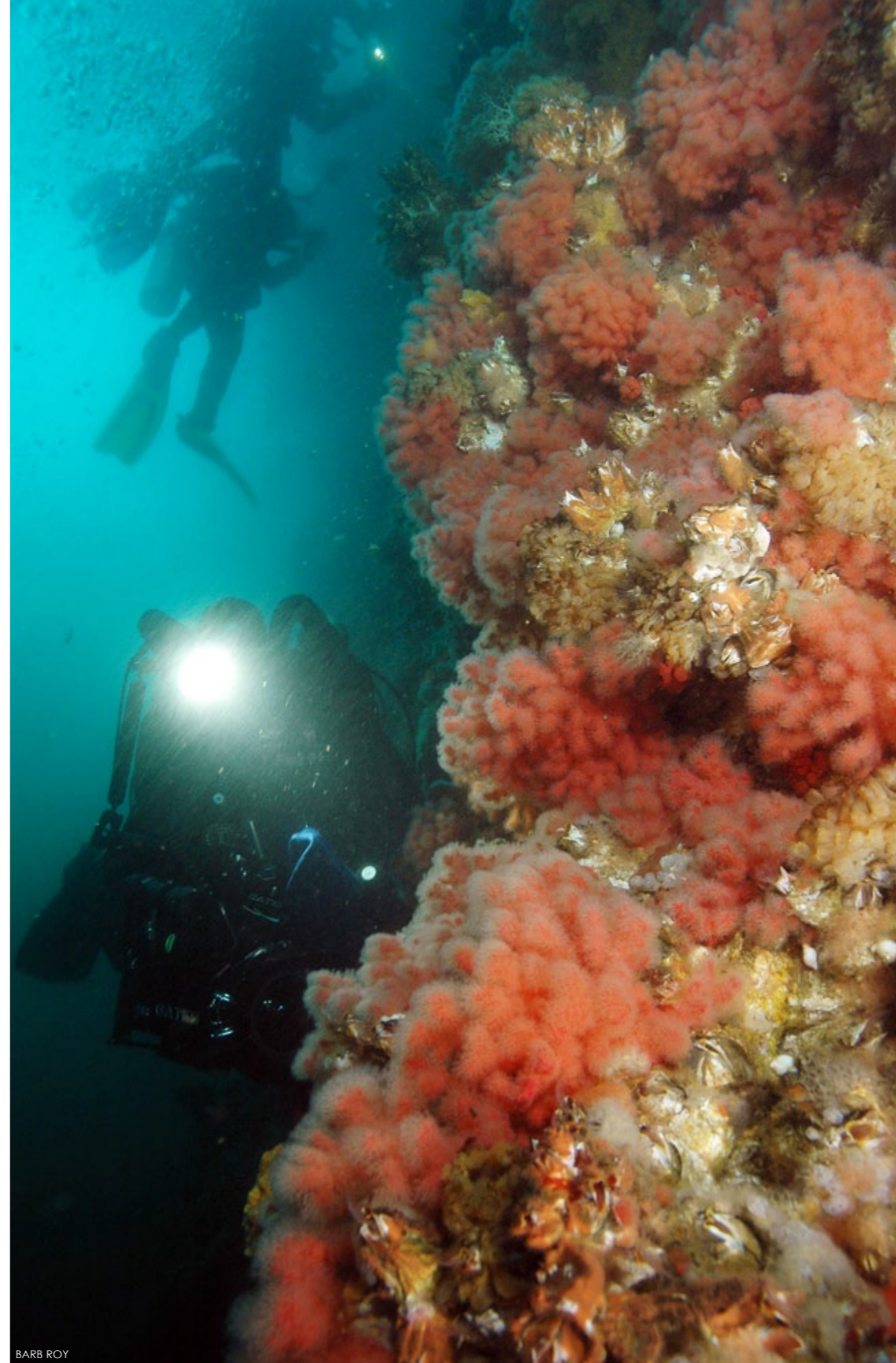
sea fans intermingled with the other soft corals, anemones, and basket sea stars.

At this point the ocean floor slopes off into deeper water with little to see. I like to dive the deepest parts of the wall with Trimix, but extended range and decompression procedure-trained divers can pick their depth based on their comfort level.

Two other popular deep walls are; beneath the power lines in Agamemnon Channel and at Whytecliff Park, both in BC. Agamemnon Channel is located on the Sunshine Coast, north of Horseshoe Bay and the town of Sechart. Here, we find huge yellow and white cloud sponges starting at 15 meters (50 feet) and 1.2 meter (4-foot) high red gorgonian sea fans at 56 meters (185 feet). The deeper you go the bigger the gorgonians get, but watch your depth, as this wall bottoms out around 182 meters (600 feet)!

Underwater photographers also enjoy this dive because it hosts an array of different rockfish. You can often find juvenile yellow-eye rockfish hiding in the cloud sponge openings and along the rocky terrain. Adult tiger rockfish are very colourful and quillback rockfish bravely hold their ground.

The wall at Whytecliff Park is popular among shore divers for parking, entry/



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Divers explore Browning Wall at Port Hardy



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bring the whole family. So, when diving here on weekends, make sure to arrive early for parking. The wall is a short walk down a paved road and then a relatively short swim from the shore.

### Historical sites

While the marine history of the Pacific Northwest isn't as lengthy as the East Coast's, nor did our coast have the maritime military action of

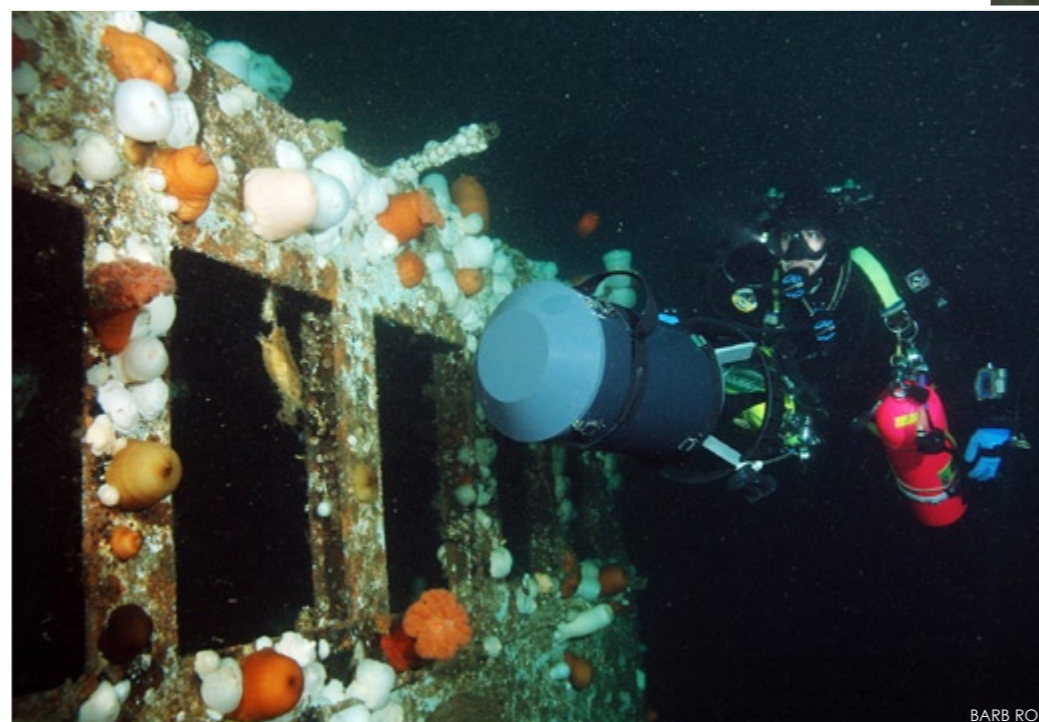
World War II, we still have a good selection of technical diving shipwrecks. But what sets us apart from the eastern US coast and the rest of the world are the extensive training sites we have.

British Columbia has four retired Canadian Destroyer Escorts (111 meters/366 feet in length) for both recreational and techni-

cal divers to enjoy. Add to this a 53-meter (175 foot) freighter, a 30-meter (100 foot) tugboat, a 122-meter (400 foot) Victoria-Class ship (equivalent to a US Liberty Class ship), and a 737 jet plane, all within recreational depths, and you have an endless playground to explore or train on!

These artificial reefs are commonly used by serious wreck divers to stage practice penetration

dives and learn in a semi-controlled environment. With outside entry to almost all deck levels, depths range from about 26 meters (85 feet) on the main decks to over 42 meters (140 feet) within the belly of the *HMCS Cape Breton*. For those looking to challenge their skills, the *HMCS Chaudiere* is located in Sechelt Inlet positioned on



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Diver with scooter on *Cape Breton* wreck



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THIS PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT: Barb Roy, with underwater camera, prepares to dive a deep wreck; Divers at *Gulf Stream* wreck; Diver on *Capilano* wreck

its side. This provides a different and often disorienting perspective when penetrating.

Unfortunately, none of the natural wrecks in Washington State or British Columbia are accessible from shore, but most are only a short boat ride from a local port of call. My favorites in BC include the wreck of

the *MV Gulf Stream*, a 44-meter (147-foot) vessel with its bow at 33 meters (110 feet) and the stern in approximately 50 meters (165 feet), near Dinner Rock off Powell River. Visibility is often excellent, particularly at depth. While the *Gulf Stream* can be done on air, a light Trimix makes the dive more enjoyable.



# tech talk

The *Capilano* is a 36-meter (120 foot) steamer located near Mitlenatch Island. Although this may not be a hardcore technical site at 42 meters (140 feet) of depth, it is worth a visit to see the amount of resident marine life, particularly the large lingcod and rockfish. While diving here last September we had over 30 meters (100 feet) of visibility—about as good as it can get.

A reel and lift bag is recom-



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mended for this dive as a back-up for safely doing decompression stops if the main ascent/descent line is not located. Be sure to check out the prop if gas permits.

Mitlenatch Island is also an enjoyable dive, especially if the curious Stellar sea lions come out to play. Across Georgia Strait near Comox is the wreckage of the *Scepter Squamish*, a 54-meter (180-foot) long barge, previously owned by the company Candive. There are many things living on the deck and various pieces of machinery for visiting divers to see.

The *Black Dragon* is a 45-meter (150-foot) freighter used as an illegal Chinese migrant ship transporting illegal people from China to British Columbia. It now lies in 45 meters (150 feet) of water near BC's capitol city of Victoria, on southern Vancouver Island. The *Black Dragon* is a great training site for some of the deeper more current laden wrecks, as there seems to always be a mild to moderate current present at some depth between the surface and the wreck.

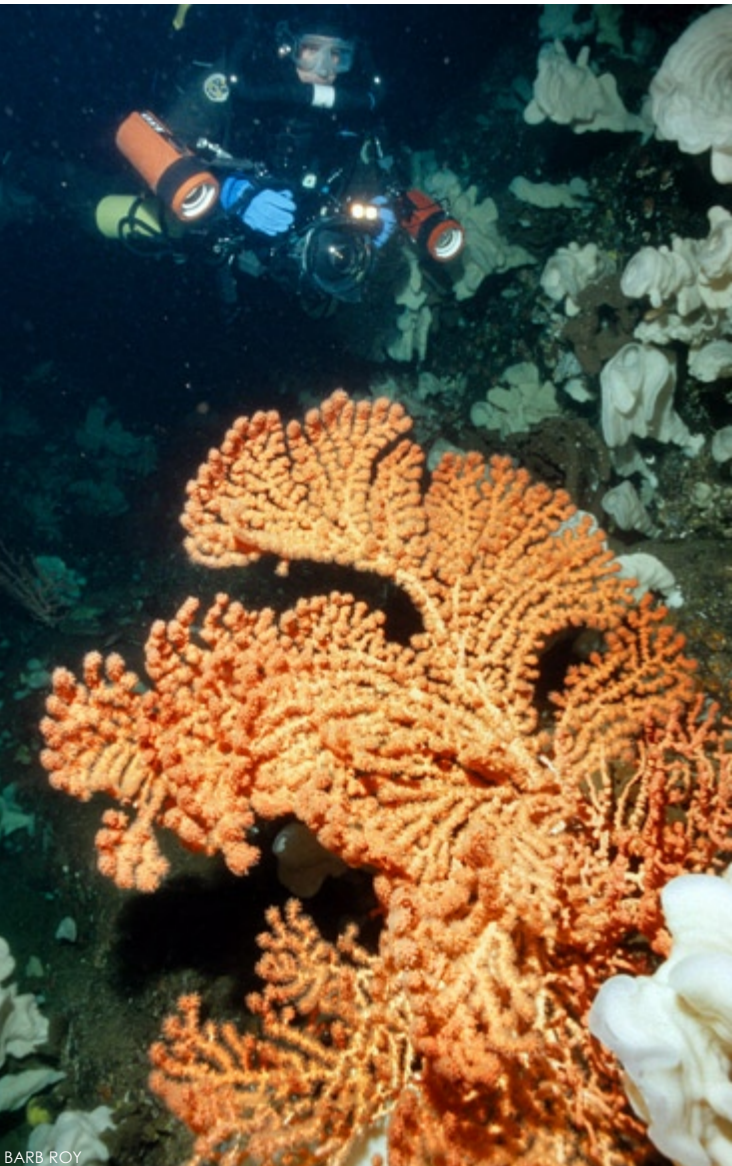
These are just a few of the great natural shipwrecks in BC.

## Depths of wrecks

Washington State shipwrecks tend to range in depth with the deepest feasible site at 106 meters (350 feet). The majority are only accessible with Trimix.

In the Straits of Juan de Fuca leading in from the Pacific Ocean, is the wreck of the 99-meter (326-foot) freighter *Diamond Knot*. The *Knot*, as local divers fondly call it, was inbound from Alaska with a full load of canned salmon when it collided with the *Fenn Victory* in a thick fog. Sitting in approximately 42 meters (140 feet) of water, the *Knot* can be quite a challenge due to strong currents and unpredictable weather. However, it is one of the wildest dives on the coast. Be sure to bring the camera on this one.

At the top of Admiralty Inlet, where the Straits of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound meet, we have the wreck of the 125-meter (412-foot) passenger steamer *SS Governor*, in 70 meters (230 feet) of water which sank in 1921. This is often considered the toughest technical dive in the Pacific Northwest, if not in North America. It requires special US Coast Guard permission, as do most of Washington's deeper wrecks, because they are located in active shipping lanes.



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THIS PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT: Ron Akeson with camera checks out a gorgonian fan at *Agamemnon*; Divers with John deBoeck; Diver Wayne Grant at *Saskatchewan*



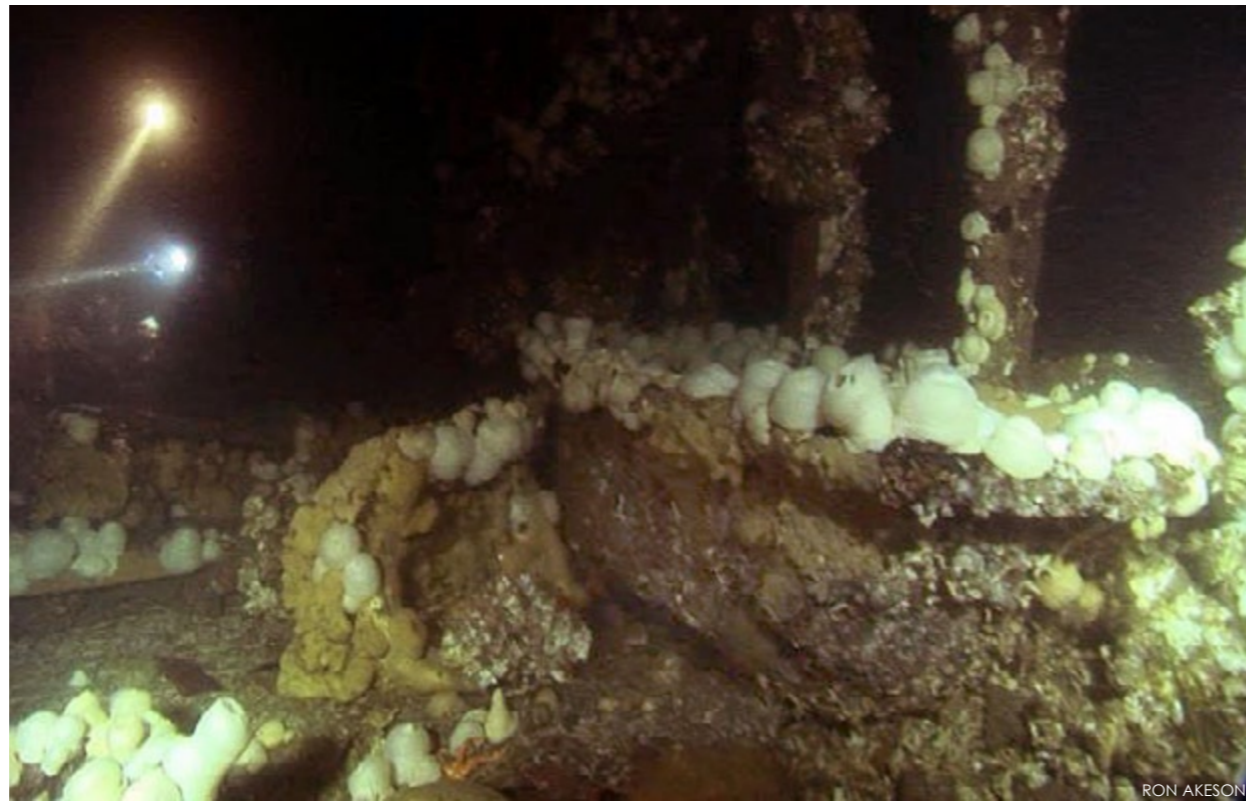


The complexity increases from here due to the very treacherous currents to deal with, which have been known to be moving in layers of opposite directions at the surface and on the bottom. The *Governor* is truly the 'Mount Everest' of Pacific Coast technical diving, fueling the drive even more.

The 91-meter (300-foot) wreck of the *Bunker Hill* is another challenging dive due to low visibility conditions. The oil tanker sank in two separate pieces in 86 meters (285 feet) of water after an explosion in an empty cargo hold blew the ship apart while in transit to Anacortes. This left the bow and stern sections about one and a half nautical miles apart.

I have been on the bow section numerous times and due to low visibility (typically 4.5 meters/15 feet) and currents, I have yet to identify the mid ship bridge, if it survived the explosion. This is an advanced Trimix dive not for the faint of heart.

The *SS Admiral Sampson* is at the bottom of Admiralty Inlet, in 99 meters (325 feet) of water off Point No Point near Seattle, due to a collision in the fog. This



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85-meter (280-foot) passenger steamer is only visited by a handful of local technical divers due to its depth and location.

The *Sampson* was commercially salvaged with the ultimate goal of retrieving the Purser's safe (still waiting to be found, as is the *SS Governor's* safe). As with the *Governor*, the *Sampson* is in the shipping lanes and not only requires permission from the Coast Guard to dive it, but permission from the individuals who own salvage rights.

### Wreck alley

Elliott Bay, bordered by the Seattle waterfront, is often referred to as 'wreck alley'. Here a large number of wrecks can be found at various depths, some still waiting to be discovered.

I routinely dive a 69-meter (229-foot) long ship here with a group of fellow tech divers, on a wreck believed to be the *AJ*

*Fuller*. At 73 meters (240 feet), the *Fuller* is an easier technical Trimix dive because currents are not always an issue (but visibility can be). Also found in the Bay are the *Multnomah*, an old paddle wheeler



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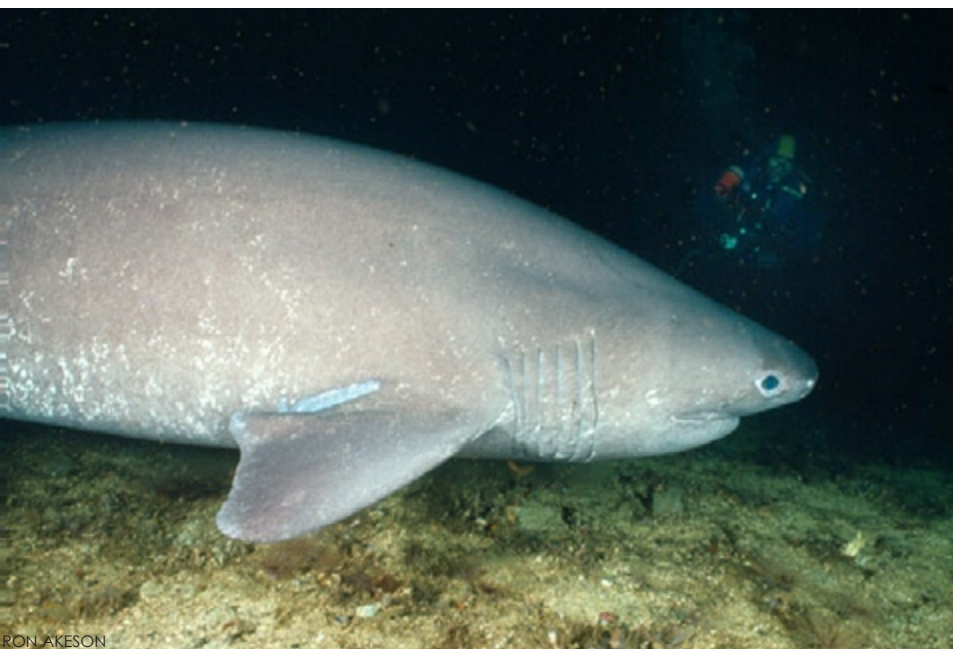
that sunk in 88 meters (290 feet) with livestock still chained to the deck.

An easier training dive in this area is the *MT6* barge sitting in 61 meters (200 feet). This barge was a railway barge sunk during a collision in 1949. The *MT6* actually carried Teddy Roosevelt's personal train

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Six gill shark; Captains bath tub on *Governor* wreck; Browning Wall at Port Hardy; Tiger rockfish (inset)



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across the Columbia River when he visited the Washington territory—before it was a state.

### Practical information

It should be noted that while a number of dive charter operators run trips to BC's technical sites, there are not many open-boat charters offered to the wrecks within Puget Sound, Washington State, except through qualified technical dive organizers. Currently, only Adventures Down Under in Bellingham and Northwest Sport Divers in Bothell do such trips.

While many of the above sites can be done on air, many charter operators require Trimix to be used due to the complexity of currents, low visibility, and cold water. As with most

temperate locations with water temperatures ranging from 5.6-9.4°C (42-49°F), the length of time underwater suggests the use of a dry suit. Many of the dive locations also only offer a handful of suitable current diving times throughout the year.

So, no matter what type of technical diving you prefer, the Pacific Northwest has something to offer both resident and visiting technical divers. You can bring your rebreathers or doubles, scooters, and find mixed gas

fills at many shops in the Pacific Northwest. Don't forget the photography or video systems because you will not be disappointed in what you find. Limited technical rentals are available through dive stores (usually double tanks) but it is wise to check first. A bit of logistical homework ahead of time will save numerous headaches or perhaps an entire dive trip. ■

*Ron Akeson is a technical diving Instructor Trainer for several training agencies and commonly organizes trips to the various technical diving sites in Washington State and British Columbia (for over six years). He can be reached by phone at 1+360-676-4177 or via email at [ron@adventuresdownunder.com](mailto:ron@adventuresdownunder.com). Ron's technical diving experience spans over 14 years with close to 4500 cold-water dives.*

### Travel Links

- Adventures Down Under [www.adventuresdownunder.com](http://www.adventuresdownunder.com)
- Dive Industry Association of British Columbia (DIABC) [www.diveindustrybc.com](http://www.diveindustrybc.com)
- Tourism British Columbia [www.hellobc.com](http://www.hellobc.com)



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Mamro charter boat at Port Hardy



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Underwater descent; Porthole Charters dive boat in Washington State; Divers at Sunshine Coast; Diver Craig Linburgh diving in Washington State