

British Columbia's Southern Gulf Islands

Canadian Diving

Text by Barb Roy and
Wayne Grant. Photos
by Barb Roy

Located between the lower part of Vancouver Island and Mainland Vancouver in the Strait of Georgia, the Southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia, Canada, are made up of over 12 large islands and several smaller ones. The larger, more populated islands are accessible by taking an auto ferry from the Mainland to Nanaimo or to Sidney, just north of Victoria. Visitors can spend a day or several exploring by car, bike or hiking.

These islands offer visitors unique crafts from local artisans, excellent vineyards (many with restaurants) and an array of coastal activities. One such water activity rapidly gaining popularity is scuba diving, which can easily be done on a year round basis.

Red Flabellina nudibranch
at West Race Wall





Tiger rockfish near Wolf Eel Den in Porlier Pass

British Columbia



There are several dive charter operators servicing the Southern Gulf Islands, offering two-tank day charters,



with assistance in arranging or will provide accommodations. Top this with a commonly mild coastal climate, friendly people and you have the makings of a relaxing BC dive getaway.



PADI Master Dive Instructor, Scott Stevenson, from Pinnacle Scuba Adventures has been diving in the area for over 18 years. "We accommodate all levels of diving from beginner to rebreather and technical," exclaimed Scott. "We will meet divers or pick people up as needed. Every group is different and we try to give each person the best experience both above and below the water."



barded with sea lions, the squeals of joy under the water and the smiles

Several lighthouses can be seen throughout the region; Frosted nudibranch at Race Rocks (left inset)

Location of Southern Gulf Islands on satellite map of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, and on global map





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

Colourful tubeworm at West Race Wall (top left); Divers (above) prepare to descend in Portlier Pass; Wolf eel peeking out from its den in Portlier Pass (right)

on the surface are always awesome. "The third site is Great Race, where the lighthouse is. The small bay where the boat launch is located is the best place to dive. This is a common hangout for sea lions; however, the bottom is covered in colorful brooding anemones, lots of rockfish and greenling, as well as a few resident wolf eels and octopus."

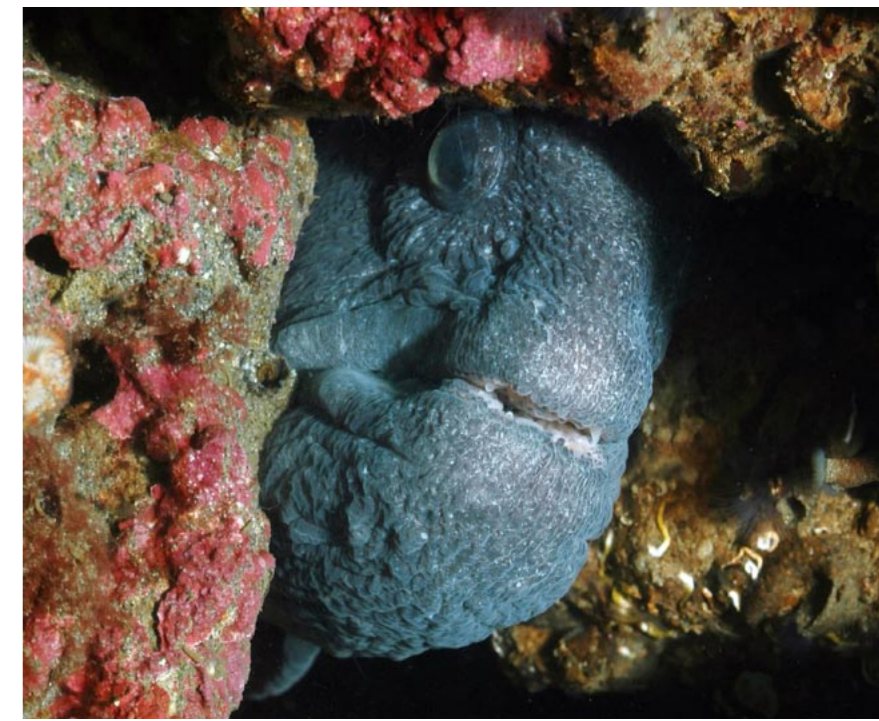
As an accomplished underwater photographer and dive guide, Scott enjoys West Race Wall for its diversity of life and great colors: "The amount of fish and invertebrate life inspire me; I simply love shooting there. This is one of my personal favorites I have dived many times and still get excited every time I go out there."

Pinnacle's dive boat is 32 feet long, handling eight divers and is equipped with a cabin, camera rinse bin and toi-

let. Their range stretches from Victoria to Sidney and Saanich Inlet and even around to Port Renfrew, on the west side of Vancouver Island.

"If a group wants to dive a particular place, we will take the boat to wherever they want to go," added Scott. "We pride ourselves on our customer service, local dive site knowledge and versatility. We don't offer rentals, however, we have very good relationships with the local shops and believe that clients can get what they need from the shops."

When asked what other dive sites Scott likes to take his clients to, he replied:



"Swordfish Island is a very unique dive. The south end of the island has a naturally formed tunnel approximately 60ft long,



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Divers explore the interior of 737 airframe; *SS Del Norte* wreckage in Porlier Pass; Chemainus 737 airframe is encrusted with life

20ft wide and about 20ft deep. Because of the large amount of current flow in this area the tunnel is filled with life—red soft coral, brooding and plumose anemones, rockfish and nudibranchs. We also have several wrecks in the area other than the ones in Sidney. The *Swordfish* and the *Barnard Castle* are two often requested due to their age and unique pieces still left on the bottom.”

Chemainus

Another dive charter service with the option of accommodations is the joint efforts of Cedar Beach Lodge and 49th Parallel in the Chemainus area, south of Nanaimo. Andy and Virginia Lamb run the quaint bed-and-breakfast on Thetis Island offering divers and their traveling companions a quiet seaside environment with excellent views. The lodge has a drying room for gear and a hot tub for after the dives.

The dive charter portion of the relationship is conducted by Peter Luckham and his wife Simone. With over 12 years of diving experience, Peter tenders professional day adventures in Stuart and Trincomali Channels, which also include current dependent sites in Porlier Pass (the *Point Gray*, the *Peggy McNeill*,



Alcala Wall).

Currently 49th Parallel uses a 17-foot boat, accommodating four divers with two dives per day.

“Peter can still service all the usual sites,” informs Andy Lamb, “But can actually and efficiently go farther due to the smaller faster boat.”

Andy also told us he likes the underwater visibility best in the fall and winter months but assures it is usually good from late June through February too.

One of the many wreck dive selections Wayne and I enjoyed was the wreck of the *SS Del Norte*, at Canoe Islet in Porlier Pass. This historic vessel was a 190-foot long sidewheel passenger steamer that went down in 1868. Although there is not



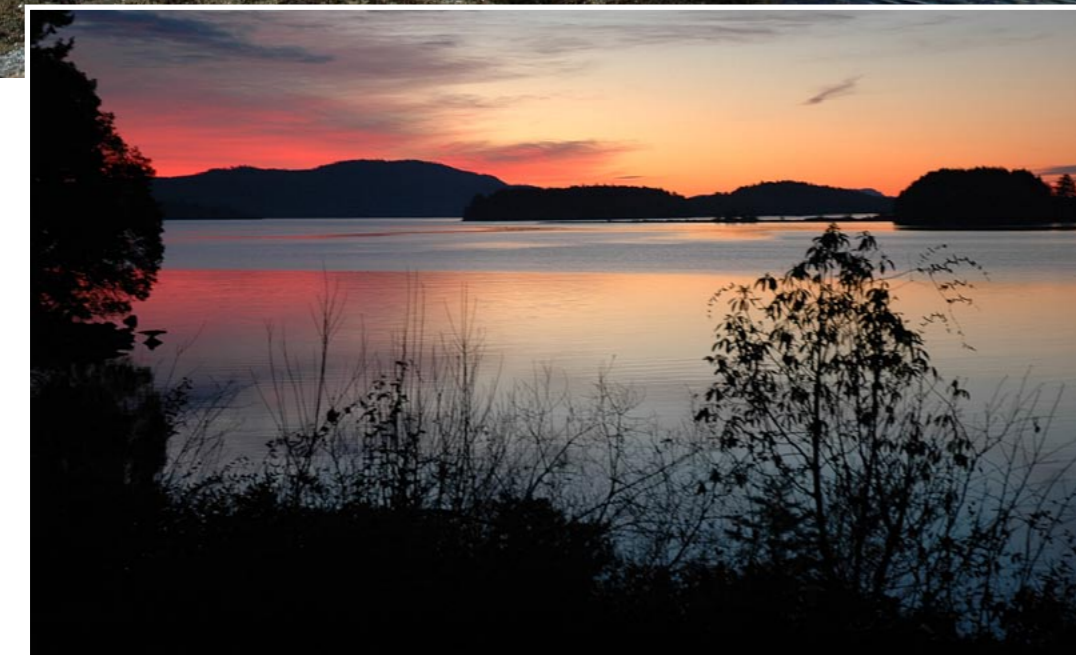
much structure left of the ship, you can still make out the paddle wheel, covered with life, nourished from the high currents in the area. Of course, we waited until the current stopped to dive!

Another site my daughter Tallen really

Diver checks out what is left of the *SS Del Nort*es sidewheel



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Cedar Beach Bed and Breakfast on Thetis Island; Painted anemone found near Thetis Island; Sunset view from Cedar Beach Bed and Breakfast; Andy Lamb and Peter Luckham offer dive charters in the Chemainus area



liked was wreck of the *Point Gray*, a 105-foot long steel tugboat that ran aground in 1949. The tug lies upside down in Porlier Pass at Virago Rock, blending in with the natural kelp forest surrounding it. On her dive she observed huge lingcod, tiny Puget Sound king crabs and empty sea urchin shells. What was left of the remaining structure, including a few propeller blades, were coated with an assortment of invertebrate life!

Topside excursions

When we finished our diving we decided to check out the Shaw Ocean Centre in Sidney. This small public Aquarium was completed in June of 2009 housing 87 tons of seawater in 17 aquarium habitats. Resident critters on display represent marine life found living in this region. Two of our favourites were a wolf-eel and a giant Pacific octopus. At the time of our visit the octopus was tending to a mass of eggs. Each egg was no bigger than

a grain of rice! The thin delicate strands hung by the hundreds from within her rocky den on the ceiling. In the wild we have photographed octopus eggs with visible eyes in them! It was quite a treat to see some of the fish we were diving with the day before.

Sidney

Wrecks in the Sidney area include the *GB Church* and the retired *HMCS Mackenzie*, both placed as artificial reefs. The 175-



Diver Tallen Patrick with her treasure of urchin skeletons

SOME OF THE MOST
UNIQUE DIVING
IN THE WORLD



Explore the emerald seas and lakes of British Columbia

Find giant Pacific octopus, wolf eels, six gill sharks, soft corals, huge cloud sponges, large red sea fans, wrecks and artificial reefs

COME AND VISIT US AT THE TACOMA DIVE & TRAVEL EXPO AND PICK UP A WRECK TREK PASSPORT!

April 20-21st
Tacoma, Washington
Booth 224

VISIT OUR NEW WEBSITE!
www.diveindustrybc.com



Photos: Bill Coltart and Lee Newman



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Zanthids around huge rock scallop; Sydney to Vancouver run on BC Ferries; Wayne Grant searches for critters on reef near Sidney; Victoria is the capital city of British Columbia; Wayne reaches up to octopus on eggs at Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre in Sidney



foot freighter *GB Church* sits upright in 65-99 feet of water on the east side of Portland Island, scuttled in 1991.

During the early spring months, divers may find lingcod or cabezon guarding clusters of eggs on the decks of the *GB Church* and quite often octopuses under the hull on the bottom near the bow. I have always been fortunate to find several different types of nudibranchs and sculpins on this wreck. A diver can easily swim the length of the ship and even have time to check out the propeller as well.

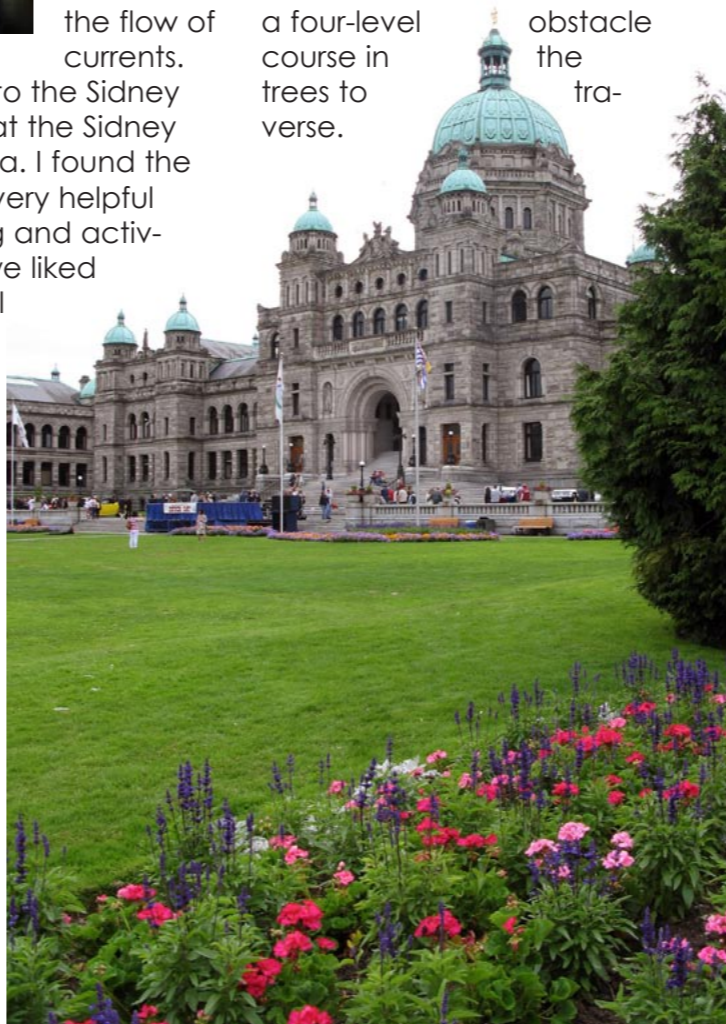
The 366-foot *Mackenzie* was scuttled in 1995 and rests upright in 50-105 feet of water off Rum Island. We have experienced currents on several dives here, causing us to select calmer slack-current dive times (when the water stops to change direction). As with the Nanaimo reefs

of steel, the *Mackenzie* is full of resident marine life, except these tend to thrive in the flow of currents. During our trip to the Sidney area we stayed at the Sidney Pier Hotel and Spa. I found the hotel staff to be very helpful with local dining and activity advice, and we liked the fact the hotel engaged in earth-friendly practices, committed to eco-friendly sustainability.

Another exhilarating activity in the southern region is ziplining. Adrena Line offers tree-top excitement above 100 lush acres of diverse temperate rainforest in the Sooke area. When I brought

my teenage granddaughter for a visit, we were treated to a day of ziplining through the treetops. What a blast!

Not long after we checked out Wild Play near Nanaimo, this time with my teenage grandson. Nanaimo's location offered a four-level obstacle course in the trees to traverse.



Again, we spent the whole day having a wonderful time of bonding. Places like this provide awesome activities to do with family members who do not dive.

Afterthoughts

With the amount of dives possible and the varied locations found in the Southern Gulf Islands region, I would advise several trips over time to see it all. Since we usually travel dur-

ing off-season when water clarity is at its best, weather can be a challenge. Communicating with the dive and tour operators before you leave will assure you have a good experience upon arrival. ■

Associate editor and underwater photographer Barb Roy and Wayne Grant are dive writers based near Vancouver, Canada.