



Costa Rica's
Cocos Island

— *An Epic Pelagic Adventure*

Text and photos by Matthew Meier



Cocos Island



Scalloped hammerhead shark (left) being cleaned by barberfish at Alcyone; Guineafowl puffer on reef (above)

PREVIOUS PAGE: Aggregation of blue and gold snappers, whipper snappers and burrito grunts fill the opening of a large underwater cave at Submerged Rock

Tucked behind rocks at 90 feet, my fellow divers and I were getting restless hoping for a visit from hammerheads or one of the resident tiger sharks, neither of which were cooperating. The dive master motioned for the group to follow, as he headed to another cleaning station and perhaps better luck. As I turned to make sure the videographer to my right got the signal, I saw him kicking in the opposite direction to deeper water. Figuring he saw something worth pursuing, I swam blindly after him through the haze of a shimmering thermocline. Emerging out the other side onto the sandy bottom at 104 feet, I was staring at my very first tiger shark as it swam past the videographer and straight towards me.

Instinctively reversing course in shock and with a slight pucker factor, I not so gracefully stumbled backwards over some rocks and fell flat on my butt. So much for those amazing tiger shark photos I had envisioned while staring with anticipation into the blue.

Happily all was not lost, the shark turned above me, seemingly oblivious to my plight, and continued on a wide circle that would bring it around for another pass between the videographer and myself. This time I managed to keep myself upright and captured a photo of the tiger as it slowly swam past the videographer—tiger shark 1, photographer 1.

Such is the diving at Cocos Island, where periods of waiting are punctuated by heart-stopping big animal interactions.

Cocos Island

Cocos Island, or Isla del Coco as it is known locally, first became part of Costa Rica in 1832. It is uninhabited, except for a small group of national park rangers. The island became a Costa Rican national park in 1978 and

was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997. The marine zone around Cocos Island was added to the World Heritage Site designation in 2002. Legend states that over the years, numerous pirates buried treasure on Cocos Island, though despite several extensive searches, none has been recovered.

Irregular in shape, Cocos Island has an area of approximately 9.2 square miles (23.85 sq km). Cocos is tectonic and volcanic in origin, primarily composed of basalt. The island is incredibly green and lush due to its wet climate and is covered in tropical forests and cloud forests at elevations above 500m. The cloud forest ecosystem is unique to Cocos



Red-footed booby looks down from its perch (left); Palm trees lean out over rocky cliffs (above)



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Scalloped hammerhead shark with Pacific creolefish; Tiger shark swimming past an underwater videographer; Goldrim surgeonfish and razor surgeonfish forage for food; Pair of octopus on the rocky reef appear to be mating

ing scalloped hammerhead and silky sharks, innumerable whitetip reef sharks, Galapagos, silvertip and now tiger sharks. It is also not uncommon to see whale sharks, manta rays and dolphins. The fish life here is incredibly abundant and the main reason these apex predators are so prevalent.

Sightings of jacks and snappers in schools that block out the sun are routine. The ample marine life surrounding Cocos Island

is attracted to the nutrient-rich ocean currents that swirl around this small island 340 miles west of Costa Rica in the Eastern Pacific Ocean.

Accessible only by liveaboard dive boat, this remote island requires a 32- to 36-hour transit across potentially angry seas for the privilege of diving this holy grail of pelagic encounters. Once in the water, the currents can be fierce and more than once I had to pull myself down the mooring line just to get to a dive site.

The majority of the diving is deep, taking place between 60 to 90 feet and nitrox is recommended for extra bottom time. Rebreathers are also very useful if available and you

are properly certified.

Diving at Cocos Island can be absolutely magical, but this is not a destination for beginners or the faint of heart. Divers that venture here should be comfortable with their buoyancy in blue water and

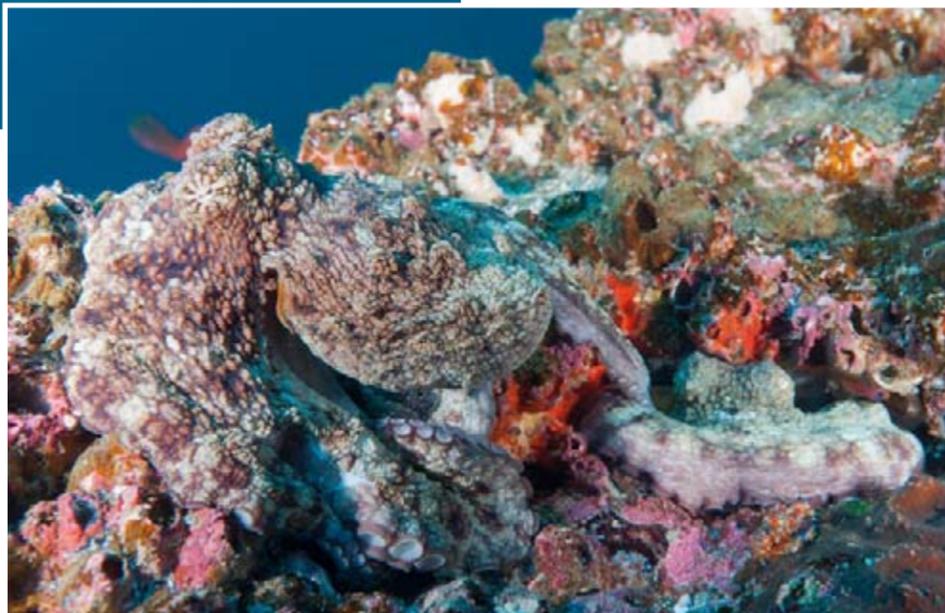
capable of holding onto rocks at depth so as not to be blown away by the strong currents.

Cleaning stations exist at several of the dive sites and are a major attraction for viewing sharks. Successful interactions at cleaning

Island and does not exist on any other island in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. Of the four mountain peaks on the island, the highest is Cerro Iglesias at 2,080 ft (634m). The mountainous landscape and abundant rainfall creates dozens of waterfalls, which drain off every side of the island.

Rich marine life

Cocos is perhaps best known for its sharks, with hundreds of school-





Massive school of bigeye jacks (left) form swirling tornado over 60 feet high at Dirty Rock; Commerson's frogfish (above) at Manuelita Channel; Whitetip reef shark (lower left) resting under overhang, surrounded by Pacific creolefish

held my collective breath, at least a dozen barberfish

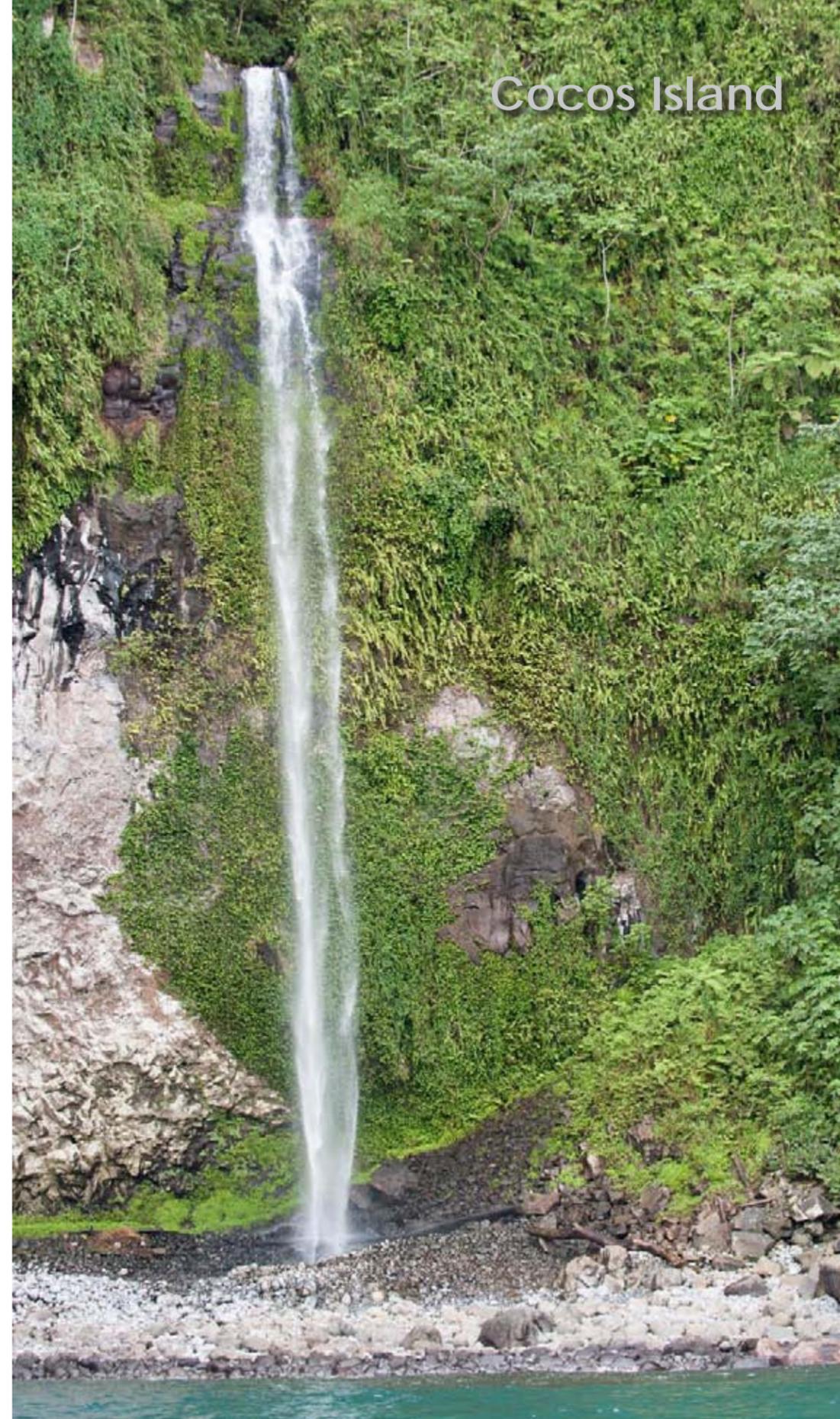
swooped in to clean off parasites and bits of dead skin. Just as the hammerhead began to turn away, I managed to capture a photo documenting this classic cleaning station behavior. Not all diving at Cocos Island involves lying in wait at cleaning stations. There are several underwater swim-throughs filled with fish, marbled rays and whitetip reef sharks to explore. Rocky reefs are teeming with life including spiny lobster, octopus, urchins, sea stars and numerous reef fish. Sea turtles cruise past in the blue water, and huge schools of fish appear without warning, often swimming circles around you or swirling into a gigantic underwater tornado. If you are lucky, you may also find an endemic Coco's batfish or orange Commerson's frogfish.



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stations require a collaborative group effort. Divers need to hide amongst the rocks, doing their best to control their breathing and wait patiently for the sharks to come in close to be cleaned by the lingering angel and barberfish. Most cleaning stations are at 90 to 100 feet, limiting the amount of dive time for all the

pieces to fall into place, and it only takes one diver swimming up in the water column or worse, swimming through the cleaning station to keep the sharks away. I experienced idyllic conditions at Alcyone dive site while watching a scalloped hammerhead approach out of the blue and swim directly towards me. As I



Cocos Island

Spotted eagle ray (left) at Submerged Rock; Waterfall (above) cascading off Cocos Island in the rainy season





Whitetip reef shark resting on the rocky reef during the day

Cocos Island



Whitetip reef sharks (*Triaenodon obesus*) pack hunting at night; Marbled ray (*Taeniura meyeri*) resting on rocky reef (right)



Tails of several resting whitetip reef sharks poke out of a hole in the rocky reef

Whitetip reef sharks

For the truly adventurous, a night dive with the whitetip reef sharks at Manuelita dive site is a must. Dropping into the water after the setting sun, I switched on my dive light and tried to remember the dive master's instructions. We were to stay as a group, using our flashlights in unison, highlighting a particular reef fish in hopes that we attracted the larger black jack fish to feed.

Black jacks are efficient hunters, fast and maneuverable, and the whitetip reef sharks follow them, as they hunt at night in search of food. It turns out the sharks are not very good at hunting on their own, but they have more success searching for food when they rush in

by the dozens once a black jack has crunched down on a fish.

The action takes place mere inches above the coral reef, and it is truly a sight to behold, as dozens of sharks pack hunt directly beneath you. I was tempted to get down on their level and experience the rush, as they swarm past, but we had been warned about becoming prey ourselves, and so I stayed slightly above the fray.

From experience, I have learned that it is also prudent to look behind yourself once in a while, as you float along in total darkness, just in case one of the larger species of sharks, which you were so eager to see during the day, comes to investigate the commotion at night.



ONCE UPON A TIME...

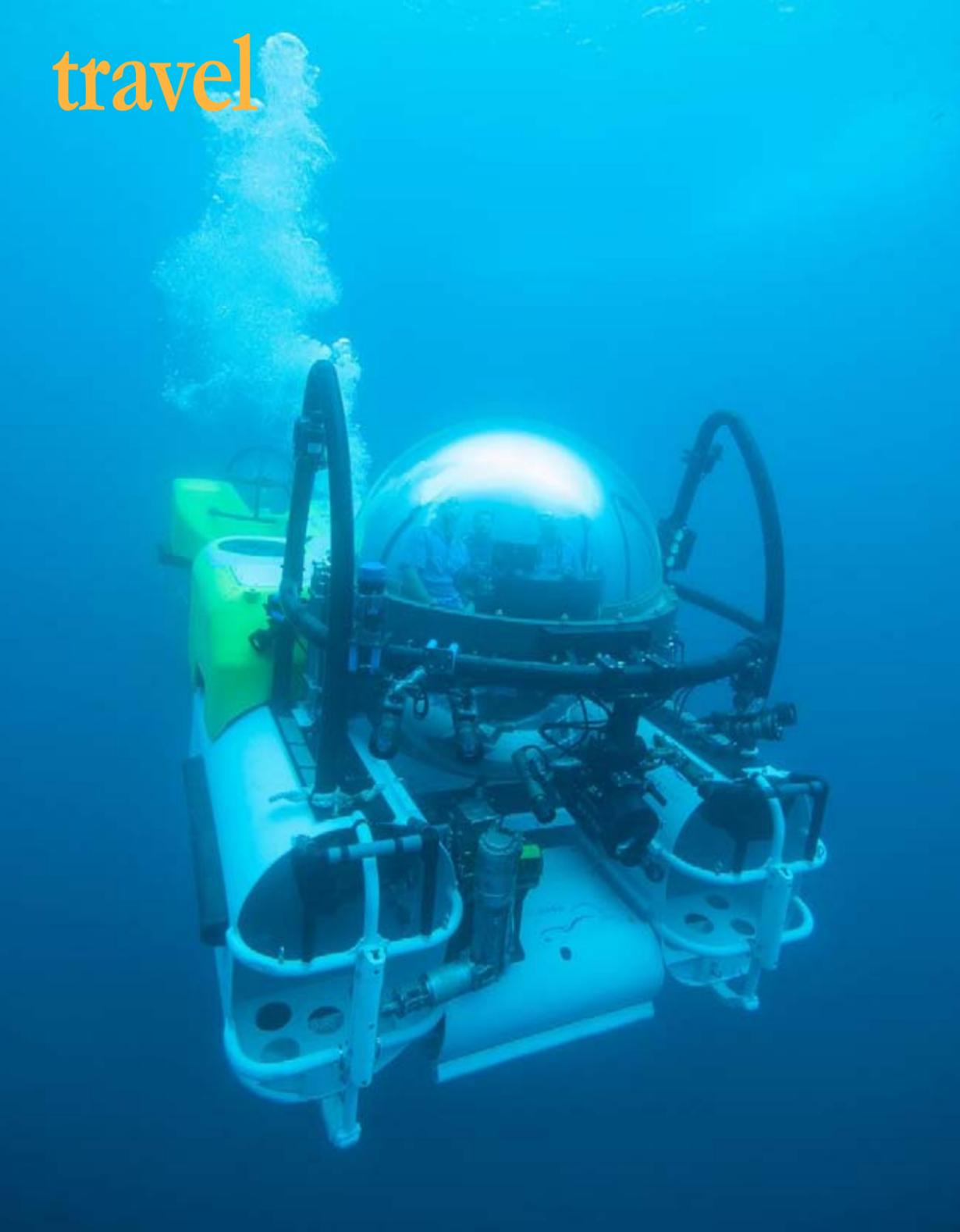
THERE WERE MEN WITH BRILLIANT IDEAS, DREAMS, INVENTIONS, STORIES, EMOTIONS, ADVENTURES AND AMBITIONS... AND A LEGEND WAS BORN.



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© Wayne Levin





a short walk to the back of the mother ship, *Argo*, and a simple step into the cockpit while *DeepSee* floated on the surface in her protective U-shaped cut-out of the hull.

The submarine is unique in that it can operate as a boat on the surface and a sub underneath, but for longer surface journeys the support boat, *TopSee*, tows *DeepSee* out to the intended dive site. A second pilot on board *TopSee* helps to guide the submarine during the dive and communi-

DeepSee submarine venting air bubbles to control its buoyancy, as it resurfaces (left), and docking with its transport, the mother ship, *Argo*, (above); From the sub, a grouper is spotted along a wall at 600-1,000ft (right)



left simply to marvel at the 360-degree views of the pelagic passers by that wandered over for a curious look.

The *DeepSee* submarine holds two passengers and a pilot and is capable of diving to depths of 1,500 feet (450m). Created by Avi Klapfer, the founder of the Undersea Hunter Fleet, and Steve Drogin, real estate developer and passionate underwater photographer, *DeepSee* required three years of design and development in order for their vision to become reality.

outfitted with an official cotton jumpsuit (imagine a cooler version of The Life Aquatic uniform, but without the hats) and comfy socks to protect the bottom half of the sphere from scratches. Then it was

Manufactured in San Diego, the submarine first began diving at Cocos Island in 2006. *DeepSee* is fully outfitted for scientific exploration with an articulated, manipulator arm capable of sample collection and instrument retrieval. It is also outfitted with an external HD video camera, digital still cameras and an assortment of 8 HID lights. In addition, passengers are able to use their own still and video cameras from inside the submarine.

The adventure started with a pre-dive briefing covering the functions of the submarine, safety procedures and the dive parameters. Next, passengers were



Support boat, *TopSee*, approaches *DeepSee* submarine, before towing to dive site

DeepSee submarine

Another exhilarating way to see the undersea world at Cocos is in a submarine. Locked securely inside a four-inch thick acrylic sphere, I took the plunge and embarked on one of the most amazing experiences of my trip—a dive down to 1,000 feet on board the *DeepSee* submarine.

As we dipped below the surface, the confines of the sub melted away, and it was as if I was now part of my ocean surroundings. The optically corrected sphere had a refractive index that nearly matched the water, and it disappeared from view once fully submerged. As the submarine descended, I lost all perspective of depth in the blue water and was



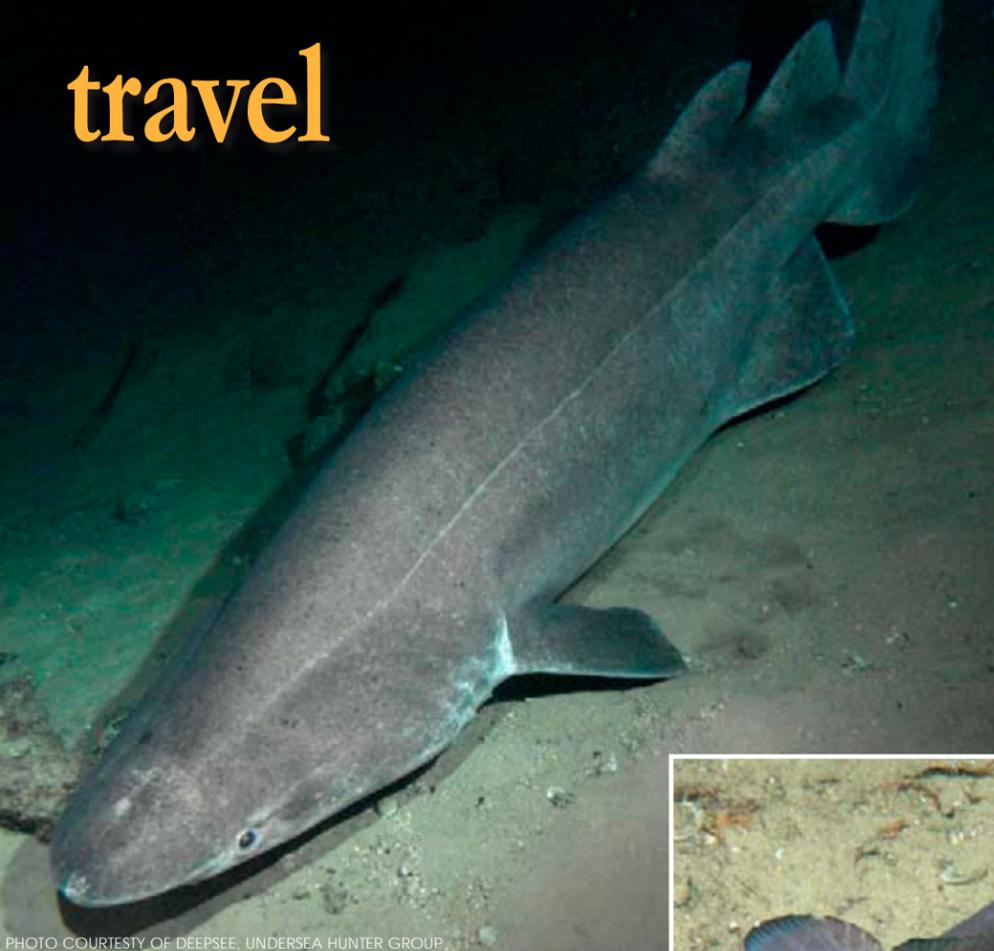
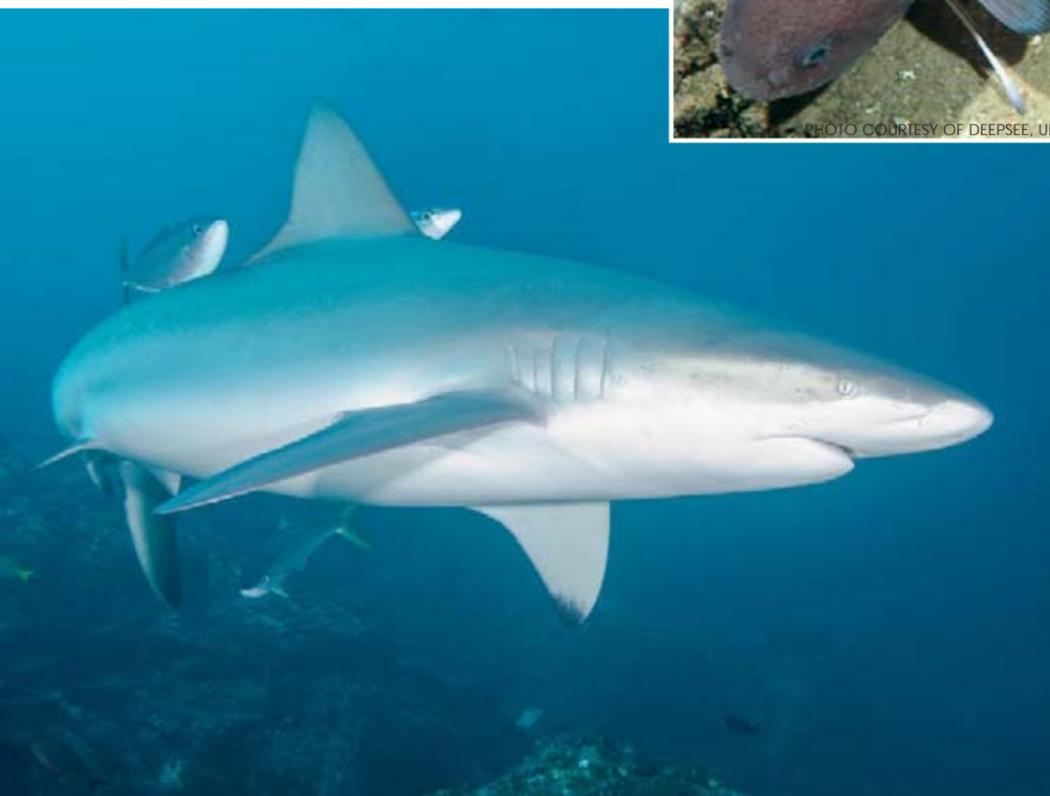


PHOTO COURTESY OF DEEPSEE, UNDERSEA HUNTER GROUP



PHOTO COURTESY OF DEEPSEE, UNDERSEA HUNTER GROUP

LEFT TO RIGHT: Prickly shark; The bottom-dwelling, deep sea jellynose fish; View from inside DeepSee submarine of two Galapagos sharks overhead at nearly 600 feet; Galapagos shark with rainbow runner fish at Dirty Rock (below)



cations are maintained between the surface and the sub at all times.

As we reached the sea floor nearly 600 feet down, the precise hover and maneuvering capabilities of *DeepSee* were put on full display. Eight electric thrusters, which move the submarine up and down, forward and

back and horizontally left and right, controlled the propulsion.

Our pilot guided us over the sandy bottom to the edge of a sheer, vertical drop called The Wall. Here several mobula rays, feeding in the deep ocean currents, soared above us, as we peered down into the abyss. Breaking our gaze, *DeepSee* deftly pivoted to face the wall, and we began our exploration down to 1,000 feet.

No sunlight reaches these depths, and the creatures down here have all adapted to living in total darkness. Hiding in the crevices, we saw colorful anthias, several species of crabs, groupers slowly hunting in our lights and the bizarre looking jellynose fish. Sadly, we

did not get to see a prickly shark. This deep-water species is often encountered on The Wall at depths below 800 feet.

As our journey back to the surface began, we were treated to a school of tuna swimming overhead, followed by several Galapagos sharks in silhouette against the faint daylight above. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I was sad to see it come to an end. Fortunately, there were many more epic diving adventures around Cocos Island, and I looked forward to getting back in the water.

Island life

Cocos Island is covered in lush greenery, tropical forests, mountains and waterfalls. It is perhaps the most beautifully, rugged landscape I have ever seen.

Park rangers give presentations on the



School of Moorish idols on reef, with a school of Pacific creolefish overhead





Whitetip reef sharks (left) near a cleaning station at Alcyone; Common dolphin (above) porpoising across Pacific Ocean at twilight; Red-footed booby soars with rainbow over Cocos (right); Mantled howler monkey feeding in the trees, Ocotal, Guanacaste (lower right); Yellow trumpetfish on reef at Submerged Rock (below)

island's history, ecosystem, topography, World Heritage Site status and their efforts to protect its wildlife both above and below the surface. Land tours are possible with coordination by the rangers and offer a great chance to explore this tropical oasis.

The routine while on the live-aboard boat includes three to four dives daily, with meals and snacks in between. Surface intervals are spent prepping camera gear, exploring the island's coastline by skiff when available and relaxing

on deck. Bring a good book and take advantage of the opportunity to make some new friends.

Costa Rica

I would highly recommend including a mainland Costa Rican side trip to your Cocos Island adventure.

There is something for any outdoor enthusiast, and the Costa Rican people are incredibly warm and friendly.

Costa Rica offers a wide array of tourist activities, and the country has a diverse geography including mountains, volcanoes, tropical rain forests, cloud forests and beaches. The Pacific coastline offers world-class surf-



ing and scuba diving, while the Caribbean coast boasts gorgeous tropical beaches.

Costa Rica is world-renowned for its birdwatching and butterflies, including numerous species of hummingbirds. Walking tours are available in both the tropical rain and cloud forests. For the more adventurous, there are canopy tours and ziplining excursions. The areas around the volcanoes offer secluded resorts, yoga retreats and mineral hot springs. Whatever you choose, your Cocos Island experience will be enriched with the extra time spent.

Save me a spot at the cleaning station

I now understand why people revisit Cocos Island again and again. The big animal encounters are awe-inspiring, and the rush one feels underwater is addictive.

I can still picture the fleeting glimpse I had on my last day of diving at Dirty Rock, as the dozens of hammerheads in silhouette overhead faded into the blue long before I could even bring the camera up to my eye, or the anticipation I felt on the skiff, as we scrambled to get back to the mother ship amidst cries of "Whale shark! Whale shark!" over the radio, only to arrive just as the rest of the divers and crew members climbed back out of the water, stating that we had just missed her.

I know that I will return to Cocos Island one day and hope that you too get the chance to experience this magical place. ■

The author extends special thanks to the Undersea Hunter Group (Underseahunter.com), the crew of the Argo, the crew of the

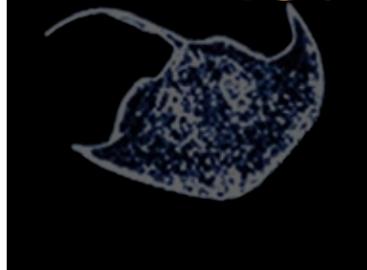
DeepSee submarine and DivEncounters Alliance (Divencounters.com), and Blue Abyss Photo (Blueabyssphoto.com).

Matthew Meier is a professional underwater photographer and dive writer based in San Diego, California. To see more of his work and to order photo prints, please visit: Matthewmeierphoto.com



Green iguana, Isle San Jose

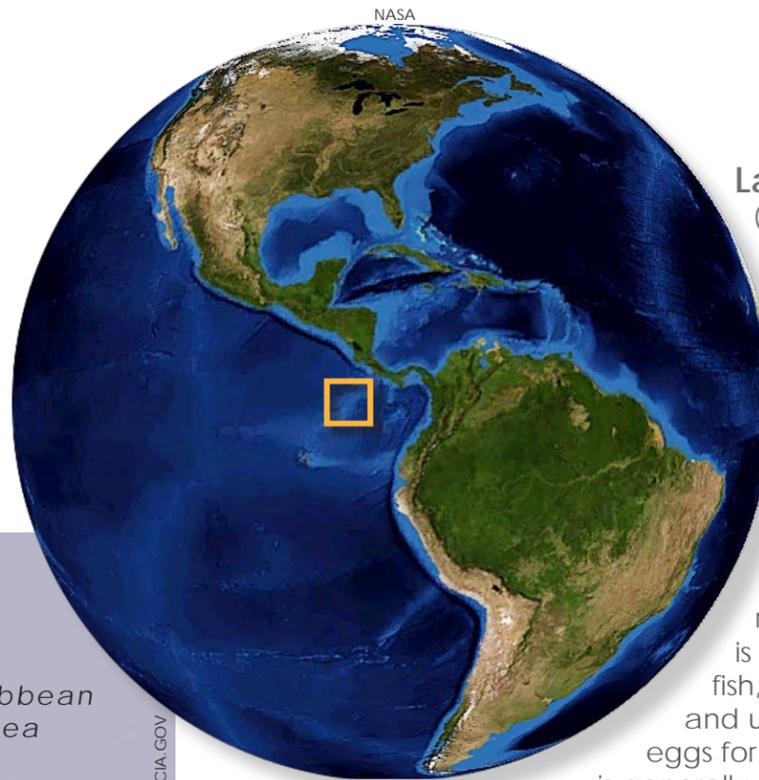
fact file



Cocos Island, Costa Rica



RIGHT: Global map with location of Cocos Island off Costa Rica
BELOW: Map of Costa Rica



Language Spanish (official); English is widely spoken.

Voltage 110 volts, with U.S. standard 2- and 3-prong plugs.

Cuisine A staple of Costa Rica cuisine is black beans and rice (gallo pinto). It is often served with fish, poultry or meat and usually accompanies eggs for breakfast. The food is generally quite healthy and often served with fruit and/or vegetables. Portions are modest, and lunch is typically the largest meal of the day.

Tipping Tipping is customary. A 10% service fee is often added at higher end restaurants. Tip an additional 10% for exceptional service. Shuttle drivers, dive guides and boat crewmembers are typically tipped at least 10%.

Driving Vehicles travel on the right side of the road. If you rent a car, you may use your home driver's license or apply for an international one. The main roads are in good shape and well paved.

Decompression chamber The nearest hyperbaric chamber is located on the mainland in the capital city of San Jose. There are no chamber facilities on Cocos.

Travel/Visa Valid passport required. Visas not required for most U.S., Canadian, E.U. and Japanese citizens. Departure tax is US\$29.

Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO) in San Jose is the most convenient for travel to Cocos Island. The liveboard dive boats typically provide shuttles from San Jose to Puntarenas, where guests board the boats for their long transit over to the island.

Web sites
Costa Rica Tourism
www.visitcostarica.com
SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK
UNDERSEAHUNTER.COM, WIKIPEDIA.ORG

History Early in the 16th century, Spain explored and attempted to colonize Costa Rica, but was thwarted by several factors including disease from mosquitos, extreme heat, pirate raids and resistance by natives. Eventually, in 1563 in the cooler, fertile central highlands, a permanent settlement in Cartago was established and remained a colony for over 250 years. Declaring independence in 1821, Costa Rica was one of several Central American provinces joining forces to do so. After a brief integration with the United Provinces of Central America, a federation which fell apart in 1838, Costa Rica established its independent sovereignty. Later in the 19th century, two brief periods of violent conflict challenged the developing democracy of the nation. The country's armed forces was disbanded in 1949. Agriculture remains the largest economic sector, but tourism and technology are quickly moving up. Costa Ricans enjoy a relatively high standard of living and ownership of land is widespread. Government: Democratic republic. Capital: San Jose

Geography Costa Rica is located in Central America, bordering both the North Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, between Panama and Nicaragua. Rugged mountains separate coastal plains. There

are over 100 volcanic cones, several of which are major volcanoes. Cocos Island is located roughly 340mi (550km) west of Costa Rica in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. It is accessible only by liveboard dive boats and requires a 32- to 36-hour transit to reach its isolated location.

Climate Cocos Island receives an annual average rainfall of over 25ft (7.6m) and it rains every month of the year. It is less rainy from January to March and again from late September to October. The rainiest season is from July to early September. The air temperature is consistently between 75°F – 86°F (24°C – 30°C) and the climate is tropical and humid. Water temperatures at Cocos Island are on average 79°F – 84°F (26°C – 29°C) and will dip a few degrees cooler below the odd thermocline. A 3–5mm wetsuit is recommended for diving.

Economy Before the global economic crisis in 2007-8, Costa Rica enjoyed steady economic growth. In 2009, the economy contracted 1.3% only to resume yearly growth of around 4.5% in 2010-12. Agricultural exports like



bananas, sugar, coffee and beef remain the staple exports, while expansion into various industrial and specialized agricultural products is broadening trade. In addition, microchips and other high value added goods and services bolster exports further. Tourism is still a big player in fostering foreign exchange, and ecotourism is promoting Costa Rica, with its immense biodiversity, as a key destination. Costa Rica's political stability, free trade zone incentives, and relative high education of its people continues to attract some of the highest foreign investment per capita in Latin America. Even so poverty has

remained at about 20-25% for almost two decades, with an eroding social safety net due to decreases in spending as the government tightens its belt. Other challenges facing the current government include increasing legal and illegal immigration of mostly unskilled labor from Nicaragua, which is weighing down the social welfare system, and impediments in passing needed fiscal reform.

Currency Costa Rican colones (CRC). U.S. dollars and international credit cards are widely accepted. Exchange rates: 1EUR=643CRC; 1USD=500CRC; 1GBP=757CRC; 1AUD=524CRC

Population 4,695,942 (July 2013 est.) Ethnic groups: white (and mestizo) 94%, black 3%, Amerindian 1%, Chinese 1%. Religions: Roman Catholic 76.3%, Evangelical 13.7%, Jehovah's Witnesses 1.3%, Protestant 0.7%. Internet users: 1.485 million (2009)



Massive, polarized school of bigeye jacks in blue water at Dirty Rock



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

Together with business partner, Jessie Kunce, Pinnacle Scuba Adventures has been in operation for about three years. Scott also said, "Our most popular dive sites are three separate sites around Race Rocks (Victoria area). The first site and probably the most well known is West Race Wall. This site is an amazing wall covered in macro life—from sponges and soft corals to basket stars and sculpins. It is an amazing dive site with almost limitless life and is comparable to popular sites like Browning Wall in Port Hardy or Row and Be Dammed on Quadra Island in Campbell River.

"The second site is Helicopter Rock. This is the best place to experience sea lions in all their glory! You can dive other parts of Race Rocks for encounters but Helicopter really is the best. It is a shallow dive with a huge kelp forest, at times with more than a hundred sea lions! It's all about the interaction between them and the divers. I constantly refer to them as big puppy dogs—playful and inquisitive. It's hard for me to describe the feeling I get after years of being in the water with them. When I take someone, or a group of divers with me and we are bom-

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."



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



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

British Columbia



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



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

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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 Norte's* 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

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UNIQUE DIVING
IN THE WORLD



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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.

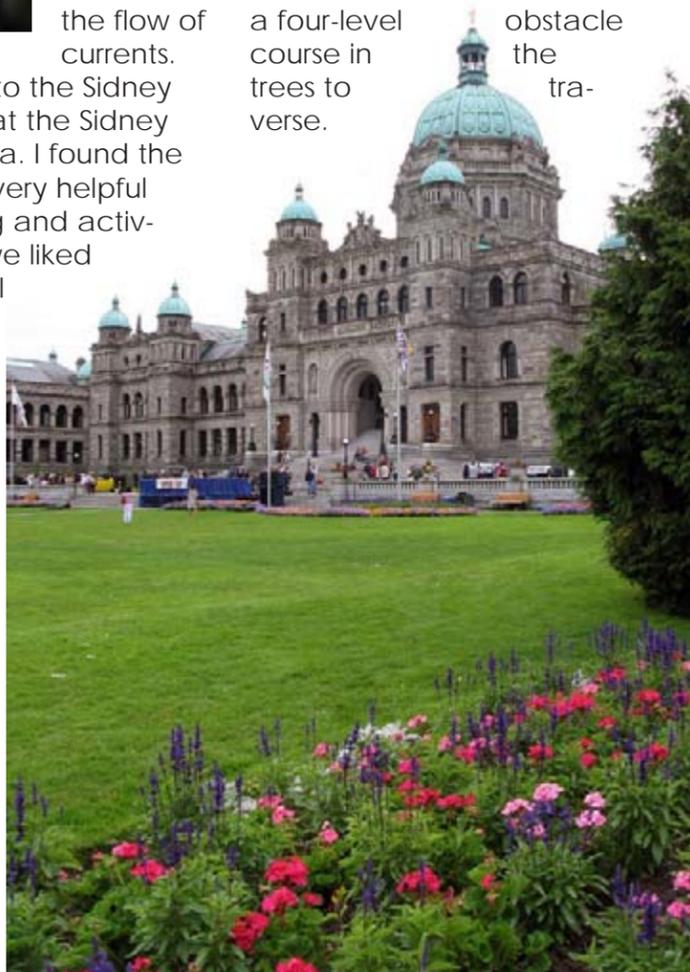
The 366-foot *Mackenzie* was scuttled in 1995 and rests upright in 50-105 feet of water off Rum Island. We have experienced currents on several dives here, causing us to select calmer slack-current dive times (when the water stops to change direction). As with the Nanaimo reefs

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.