



It is no secret that Canada's Vancouver Island offers some of the best diving in the world; it is a place I have long dreamed of visiting. But there had always been one rather large obstacle that had nothing to do with me living an ocean and a continent away: I was not a cold-water diver. I didn't own a drysuit and had never dived in one.

Articles about the Pacific Northwest don't normally start with such an admission, but I know that there are many of you in exactly the same boat as I was – experienced in the tropics, curious about temperate waters, but unsure of how much is involved in expanding your horizons. This article is for you.

Scuba diving is the most competitive non-competitive sport in the world. Gather two or three divers together, and they will spend their time trying to prove who is best; who has dived the deepest, the longest; who has the most qualifications, the oldest kit, the most expensive toys or camera. And being a cold-water diver will almost always ensure you are one up on your peers. Folks even leave their drysuit inflator hose on their regs – just so you'll know! It soon degenerates into an aquatic version of Monty Python's Four Yorkshiremen sketch. "You have to cut a hole in the ice to dive? Luxury! When we dive down t' mill, the water's frozen right to the bottom."

Knowing that Canada would be serious undertaking for a tropical paddler like me, I bought my drysuit the summer before, giving myself plenty of time to build up my skills. Wary of dealing with cold waters and strong currents – the main reason Vancouver Island supports such rich marine life are the massive tidal movements that supply food – I wanted to have logged at least 50 drysuit dives before the trip. As it turned out, the skippers in Port Hardy are so skilled at predicting the tides, we never dove in appreciable current.

I took my first plunge into the dry on a camera-less dive with a good friend in the shallow, protected bay in the UK.

First impressions: restricted movement from being so bulked up, particularly around the shoulders and neck. Otherwise, the novelty of dry diving was a bit of a non-event. Once underwater, the drysuit felt much more similar to my 7mm shoulder-zip semi-dry wetsuit, than the semi-dry does to a thin tropical 2mm wetsuit. You feel the water through the suit, so you don't really notice being dry. Adjusting buoyancy was straightforward, and I could do a handstand or somersaults and right myself without a problem. I was already regretting leaving my camera on the boat. I made a second dive, this time with my Subal and without a buddy. I am not suggesting that you follow my example, but it makes the point that for a reasonably experienced diver, it does not take long to adapt.

One of the great things about this modern digital world is you have dive buddies everywhere, even if you have never met them in person. Although this was my first time in either the Pacific Northwest or Canada, I was with friends I knew through the forums on Wetpixel.com. Todd Mintz, who organized the trip, liked the idea of having some fresh British blood alongside regulars John Davies and Rand McMeins. The guys were incredibly welcoming, even sacrificing some of their own photography time to point out critters to me. That said, being the newbie wasn't all smooth sailing: jumping into the frigid waters in my underwear, as my initiation to the group, left an indelible memory!

We were on the liveaboard M/V Mamro operated by Captain Dan Ferris. It is not a luxury liveaboard; indeed, it is one of the few boats to make Jim Abernethy's Shearwater feel spacious by comparison. But we wanted for nothing, laughed more than any dive trip I can remember, and had arranged our return even before the week had ended.

It was hard to know what to expect from the diving. Everyone tells you Vancouver offers the best cold-water diving in the world, but best in what way? I had seen photos, but couldn't really translate that into an experience.



As we pull out of Port Hardy and motor up towards Browning Pass, where we will be diving, my sense of anticipation is intense. The sun is shining, but the dark, glassy-smooth waters reflect the trees, sky, and clouds, revealing little of what lies beneath. The area is rich in wildlife. We had already seen black bears just outside Port Hardy, and as soon as we leave the dock a bald eagle glides by with a large fish gripped in its talons. Seals

and sea lions are common, and along the shore, otters and deer and regular sightings.



The landscape is carpeted in beautiful, thick forest that comes right to the water's edge. The guys explain that the forest is managed for timber, although a crop of pine trees is hardly an eyesore. In a funny way, the scattered, tree-covered islands, with little sign of mankind's heavy hand and surrounded by smooth current ravaged waters, remind me of the southeast Misool area of Raja Ampat, half a hemisphere away on the

far side of this great ocean.

Our first dive in Browning Pass is a revelation. The plan is to drop into a small bay and drift slowly downstream, enjoying the wall. I roll backwards and head to the reef. The visibility is about 40 to 50 feet, giving me a clear sense of the environment. Immediately, I spot an aeolid nudibranch; it is bright orange and white and about two inches long, so noticing it is not great achievement. Right next to the slug is a splendid red decorator crab. Above, the stripes of bull kelp stretch to the surface. One of the fastest growing plants in the world, kelp can add 200 feet in the course of a summer.

Almost every inch of the wall is covered in large white plumose anemones, interspersed with shocks in yellows, oranges, pinks, and reds. I swim closer and see critters everywhere. The yellow sponges are crawling with shrimps and hermit crabs, and a cluster of red coral is covered with hundreds of golden sea spiders. I pull my camera to my eye and get cracking. One subject leads to another. Rand points me to a young Giant Pacific Octopus wedged in a crack, immediately followed by a decorate warbonnet. He jokes later that he has already used up his spotting karma for the week.

After 45 minutes, I finally remember to think about the cold. Yes, the water is chilly, but I'm not. As the week goes on, I do feel it more, but I never feel the need to switch over to my dry gloves. It is important to make an effort to warm up after each dive – hot chocolate works quite well – and I think a week is about the right length of time to visit without a break. Better to come twice for a week than stay for two; our energy and enthusiasm levels were definitely tailing off by the seventh day.

Concluding my initial dive, I head up to five meters and continue to find subjects until our hour is up. We have a

gentlemen's agreement that dives should be an hour, so nobody gets too cold waiting (although, if you are shooting something exceptional, you are allowed to extend!). I surface and realize I am still in the bay I started in. Back on the boat, Todd teases me for not even making it to the main part of the dive site. He has a point, but it is hard to imagine what more I could have seen.

Over the course of the week, the diving only gets better as I learn to see more. We make three dives a day and most are quite shallow, generally less than 18 meters (60 feet), and there are subjects right up to the surface. We use 39% Nitrox, but choose to dive on air profiles as an added safety factor in the cold water. Browning Wall is our favourite, and we dive it once a day. Here, on the vertical rock face, the colourful sponges and anemones completely take over from the white plumose. It is also the best place to see our favourite macro critters; warbonnets and grunt sculpins. On several dives, Stellar sea lions treat us to flybys and we see wolf eels at the wreck of the Themis, but we are denied any really special encounters with either.

If I tried to summarize the diving here in one word it would be "density". Every available surface is plastered with life: encrusting sponges, anemones, and corals. These in turn teem with critters: crustaceans, nudibranchs, and benthic fish. However, the diversity does not match that of a coral reef, and once you have learned your sculpins, gunnels, rockfish, and warbonnets, you are pretty much set. But what is lacking in species richness is more than compensated for by the abundance of life. Without a doubt, I have never dived anywhere with so many subjects to photograph in such a small area. This is underwater photography for the non-swimmer!



It is hard to compare the diving here to a tropical reef, and that is exactly what makes it so compelling. It is such a different experience. The vertical walls, the colour, the creatures are all equally spectacular, but the lower visibility makes the scenery harder to appreciate. Conversely, in the gloom and illuminated by your light, the colours are even more intense than they are in the tropics. Yet it is the rarity factor that makes the diving feel special. You get the

sense that you are seeing things that not everyone has. Seeing such a profusion of life, colour, and photographic potential in these chilly waters transformed my perspective of the oceans. Suddenly, my world of diving is so much bigger.