

# Vancouver Proves Special Dive Destination

WORDS/PICTURES

Alison Fish



*copper rockfish*



*vermillion rockfish*



*lou de mer at brentwood marina*



*cloud sponge and longhorn decorator crab*

THREE DAYS and six hours after boarding the 32-car, trans-Canadian railway train in Toronto, Brian and I stepped onto the platform at Pacific Central Station, Vancouver, British Columbia. The rail journey could hardly be called a success. We got off to a good start with fantastic views of the CN Tower as we pulled out of the station. But things started to go wrong when we reached the outskirts of Toronto and had to reverse for a mile or two because the train had been sent off on the wrong line. This event was the harbinger of doom.

To start with the air conditioning went off and stayed off. Then the electricity supply gave out and we spent hours in a siding surrounded by thick forest counting the pine needles. Somewhere around 10pm the Canadian slouched into the tiny town of Capriol, which could've been the set for Northern Exposure, all it needed was a moose. Capriol was definitely closed; there was no-one around and no lights in any of the houses. An hour later Pizza Hut pitched up with a carry out for the whole train, apparently the staff ordered fried chicken too but the restaurant thought it was a hoax. Not an auspicious start to the second leg of our holiday.

Our destination was Rockfish Divers, based in the village of Brentwood Bay, on the sheltered shores of Saanich Inlet, Vancouver Island. Saanich Inlet is a fjord and Slartibartfast must have had divers in mind when he drew up the plans. The venerable Magrathian planetary designer may have won an award for Norway but he did a grand job on Saanich too.

Mountains protect the inlet on three sides and the massive bulk of Saltspring Island stands guard at its mouth. Thickly wooded mountains drop vertically into the rich, temperate waters of Canada's pacific coast. Vancouver Island sits in the rain shadow of the mainland, so the weather is dry and sunny during the summer

In the last edition of **SCOTTISH DIVER** Alison Fish filled us in on the first leg of her multi-centre diving trip to Canada; this time she recalls the second leg of the trip, where she and husband Brian were keen to see some marine life after the wrecks of Tobermory. As you will read, the dive sites of Saanich didn't disappoint.

months. There is only one dive operator based in Saanich Inlet - so no queuing to get in the water, or floundering around in diver soup once you've taken the plunge.

Jonathan Grant met us at the home of Rockfish Divers, a smart new marina below the exclusive Brentwood Bay Lodge - so exclusive that Bill Gates and Meg Ryan have stayed there, although Brian and I didn't.

Jonathan's dive boat is a flat-bottomed, aluminium craft with space for eight divers. Jonathan told us he'd named her *Lou de Mer* (French for wolf fish) because she is long, grey and ugly, but as dive boats go, she did the job well. With a sturdy kitting up bench, storage space for kit and spare cylinders, and a small cabin with a heater and marine head, *Lou de Mer* has pretty much everything you need on a day boat. We were the only divers onboard for most of the week so we had plenty of space, but I imagine it would be quite cosy with a full complement of 8.

Fred Peters, our divemaster, soon had us sorted out with weights and tanks, and Jonathan spent a bit of time asking about our particular diving interests and background. After the spectacular wrecks of Tobermory (**SCOTTISH DIVER** Jan/Feb 2006) we were looking for lots of marine life, as a contrast, and hopefully something a bit different to the stuff we see at home. Jonathan's face lit up - as we discovered over the next few days Saanich does different rather well.

For our first dive Jonathan took us to Senanus Island which sits just offshore in Brentwood Bay. To the north of the island a dome of rock juts up from the seabed at 250m to within 20m of the surface. Senanus Island is well known in the area for its Cloud Sponge gardens, *Aphrocallistes vastus*. Cloud Sponges are very different; they grow up to three metres in diameter and over a metre in height. Despite their size the structure is brittle and easily damaged, 90% of their dry weight consists of silica, in other words glass. These strange creatures are found in a number of locations around the world but Saanich Inlet is special because they are found in relatively shallow waters and are accessible to divers.

Fred led the dive; the vis wasn't too good near the surface and the light disappeared quickly. From the mooring

block on top of the dome we pursued Fred over the drop off. It felt dark and claustrophobic at first, after the vast open spaces of Lake Huron, but the visibility improved as we went deeper and we soon settled down.

Hovering over the drop off we felt, rather than saw, the rock wall falling away to the seabed 250m below us. The ghostly pale shapes of Cloud Sponges came into view; bizarre forms reaching out into the water column. One individual looked just like an over-sized human spine, complete with knobby vertebrae and pelvic bones at the base. The sponges' wide open oscula provide desirable high-rise residences for crabs, shrimp, squat lobsters and small fish; a genuine marine life metropolis. Around the sponges we found an astounding variety of life, dozens of brightly coloured starfish, monster nudibranchs and mournful rockfish.

Rockfish are very engaging; they can live to be 125 years old and vary in colour from patchy cream and brown to vivid vermillion. Swimming around at a stately pace, rockfish have the air of an aged maiden aunt who might suddenly launch into a lecture on etiquette if you offend them. An impression totally at odds with their appearance, with spiky dorsal fins and down turned mouths they look more like moody, teenage punk rockers than Great Aunt Edna. I particularly liked them because they endured being photographed with a stiff-backed condescension; they clearly tolerated me in the same way you'd treat an eccentric guest - polite but wary.

During the surface interval we motored south to our second dive site at McCurdy Point where we moored up and tucked into hot drinks and cookies. McCurdy Point is a rocky outcrop which shelves down in short, steep giant strides from sea level to very deep. That afternoon we saw more cloud sponges, a few languid ling cod, beautiful oversized nudibranchs (macro lens not required), colourful anemones and a Giant Pacific Octopus - jammed into a crevice - with suckers the size of tennis balls. Jonathan and Fred were certainly giving us the diving experience we'd asked for.

Diving conditions at Saanich were similar to Scotland with good visibility (15 to 20m or more) and water temperatures between 10-12°C. We experienced significant current on just one or two

dives - our depths ranged from 19 to 35m - although there was plenty of opportunity to go deeper or stay shallower.

We soon settled into a routine of 9am starts and leisurely surface intervals, returning to the marina by mid afternoon, leaving us plenty of time to explore the surrounding area. Surface intervals included hot drinks, increasingly elaborate muffins or cookies and lots of chat about diving. Jonathan and Fred are enthusiastic divers, underwater photographers and conservationists so we had a huge amount in common and thoroughly enjoyed diving with them.

Each day Jonathan took us to a site with something new, different and interesting to discover. From the wreck of the *GB Church*, where we found a Sailfin Sculpin to watching a family of otters, with a tiny baby, playing in the shallows at Octopus Point or spotting a snake swimming across Genoa Bay, we were treated to a whole new world of marine life.

We had terrific dives every day but one day in particular stands out from the others - that morning we did a shallow dive in exceptional visibility at Arbutus Island to the north of Saanich Peninsula. From the moment we entered the water we knew it was going to be a great dive, the sun was shining, visibility over 20m and the site was quite literally teeming with life.

We met Giant Barnacles; football-sized purple sea urchins with long, sharp spines; and a Grunt Sculpin - a bizarre little fish that shuffles and hops along the seabed on its fins rather than swimming. The nudibranchs and sea cucumbers were out in force and we even found a few orange seapens in a sheltered spot - all new acquaintances.

In the afternoon Jonathan promised us something very different, in fact so different, that National Geographic had filmed an underwater documentary at the site. Wain Rock is covered at high water and lies close to the mouth of Saanich Inlet. Seals lounged in the sun and watched us lazily from the rock as we moored up for our second dive of the day.

Jonathan was positively twinkling with excitement and Fred grinned broadly as we drank tea and munched our way through plant-pot sized white chocolate and banana muffins. Finally Jonathan decided it was time to kit up, we were going to meet the hooded nudibranchs of Saanich Inlet.

Dropping onto a gently sloped seabed at 10m, in perfect visibility of around 20m, I settled down to get the camera sorted out. Two seconds later I felt a tug on my suit. Fred was pointing at a leaf of kelp just a metre away with not one, but six hooded nudibranchs perched on it.

Hooded nudibranchs are fascinating, if odd looking, beasts; four or five inches long with a distinctive, large oral hood and a double fringe of tentacles which gives the animal its other common name, the lion nudibranch. To feed, the tiny sea cats attach themselves firmly to a kelp frond and sweep their hood downward through the water column to catch prey. When disturbed they swim – in the loosest possible sense of the word, it's more like a distorted twist, but they do move through the water.

It took a while to drag me away from these amazing little creatures but it was worth the effort, the dive just got better and better. We found lots of other nudibranchs in all shapes and sizes from the outrageously flamboyant Giant Dentronotid, to the sleek and sophisticated Leopard Dorid.

Rockfish chaperoned us for the whole of the dive and thousands of tiny Coonstripe Shrimp galloped along in front of us in herds of 20 or 30 constantly changing individuals. The underwater scenery was outstanding, a great gully in the rock that drew us down to about 22m before we turned round and ascended though giant boulder fields and occa-

sional sandy plains.

Late in the dive we came across a pale pink cloud, hovering about a metre from the sea bed, which followed the contours of the rock perfectly. On closer inspection the underwater haze was made up of thousands of tiny shrimp-like crustaceans. We'd wandered into a shoal of krill. Wain Rock was a wonderful dive. In the end I'm not sure which I was more pleased about seeing; the krill or the hooded nudibranchs.

The following day we dived the *GB Church*, a 53m long coastal freighter, built in England in 1943 and deliberately sunk by the Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia in 1991. The wreck lies just off Portland Island and sits upright in 27m of water with her mast at just 10m. She's been on the seabed for 14 years and is well colonised by marine life.

In any other circumstance the wreck would be an excellent dive but she suffered from comparison with the dives at Arbutus Island and Wain Rock the previous day. In the whole of our time at Saanich, the *GB Church* was the only site we shared with other divers.

During the surface interval we beached *Lou de Mer* on Portland Island. This beautiful little island was presented to Princess Margaret in 1958 to commemorate her visit to British Columbia. In 1967 the princess returned it to the province and a marine park has been created around it for the benefit of all.

We ate our muffins on a 3,000 year old

shell midden, basking in glorious September sunshine and debating where to dive next. Jonathan had plenty of ideas for us but we opted to revisit Wain Rock, this time to circumnavigate the pinnacle. We weren't disappointed, the visibility was better than the previous day and this time the seals came out to play.

We called in on the hooded nudibranchs, bumped into a Great Sculpin and a Grunt Sculpin hiding inside a disused barnacle. At the end of the dive we came across a baby Giant Pacific Octopus curled tightly into a rock, he was about the same size as an adult of either species found in Scottish waters; when fully grown this chap could have a wingspan of 9m!

All of our dives at Saanich Inlet were dazzling, Jonathan and Fred worked hard to give us the experience we wanted and easily exceeded our expectations. We found Rockfish Divers by chance, using an internet search engine. It is a small, eco-friendly operation that goes for quality of dives rather than quantity of divers.

Both Jonathan and Fred had an easy, friendly manner that made diving with them a real pleasure. It probably helped that we had so many interests in common but the overall standard of the operation was five star and I would highly recommend Rockfish Divers to anyone travelling in that area. In my experience of dive resorts they are quite simply exceptional; I'd even risk another trip on Via Rail to dive with them again.

#### ABOUT THE TRIP

Vancouver Island is a two hour ferry crossing from Vancouver, or a 20 minute flight. It is a popular destination with both Canadians and foreign visitors, and has a multitude of attraction for divers, non divers and families. Outdoor pursuits including trail walking, kayaking and whale watching are particular favourites.

Brian and I stayed B&B at Honey-suckle Cottage, Deep Cove booked online through BBCanada.com. Our accommodation was superb, a one bedroom cottage with everything we could possibly want to make our stay comfortable and filling home made breakfasts brought over from the main house.

We used Rockfish Divers: [www.rockfishdivers.com](http://www.rockfishdivers.com) and would wholeheartedly recommend them to anyone wanting to dive in that area. We arranged everything in advance via email, two dives cost in the region of \$100 a day (approximately £50).



ling cod



orange seapens



fish eating anemone



giant dendronotid

words and pictures  
Alison Fish