

Nanaimo Natations

Natation n. (literary) - Act or art of swimming - f. L natatio (natare swim)

In the final part of her three centre dive tour of Canada Alison Fish visited yachties' hang out and divers' mecca - Nanaimo. Being the last leg of her holiday she was hoping for plenty of underwater action and photo opportunities to choose from and that's just what she got. ..

THE LAST port of call during our Canada trip was Nanaimo, a two hour drive north of Saanich Inlet. Nanaimo lies on the east coast sheltered by a string of small islets, including the appropriately named Protection Island. On the banks of a perfect natural harbour, Nanaimo plays host to an embarrassment of yachts and pleasure boats stacked neatly in expensive-looking marinas, stretching for miles along the waterfront. Shops, restaurants and pubs crowd along the main drag to snare well to do yachties as they stroll into town.

Nanaimo has a rich and varied history; a traditional gathering place for the Coast Salish First Nations people, a port for the Hudson's Bay Company, a coal mining and sandstone quarrying area. Today the city has an active logging and pulping trade but local and international tourism appears to be Nanaimo's main industry for the 21st century.

Styling itself the 'Harbour City', Nanaimo has an attractive waterfront area and provides a gateway for the whole of Vancouver Island with ferry, air and seaplane terminals close to the town centre.

A short hop across the Straits of

words & pictures ALISON FISH

Georgia from Vancouver, British Columbia's provincial capital, Nanaimo has a thriving scuba diving industry and attracts divers from Canada, the USA and further afield. The area's fame as a diving destination is due to the fantastic underwater environment and a lot of hard work by Project Reef Nanaimo.

Project Reef Nanaimo (PRN) was set up by local dive operators and interested businesses to develop an 'underwater adventureland', whilst conserving the outstanding natural habitat. Since 1994, helped by the Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia, PRN have successfully placed three wrecks on the seabed close to Nanaimo: *HMCS Saskatchewan* in 1997, *HMCS Cape Breton* in 2001 and most recently the *Rivtow Lion* which was deliberately sunk in February 2005.

"Hang on to the rope and pull yourself to the buoy, the others will be there in a minute!" says Skipper as I step into the Strait of Georgia. A warm sunny day in mid September and I'm hanging onto the marker buoy of the world famous *HMCS Saskatchewan*. Brian, my better half, and Eric, dive buddy for the day, drop off the back of our diminutive dive boat and swim toward the buoy. Together we deflate our wings and slowly descend into the gloomy green waters off Snake Island.

At 5m the vis is disappointing, very gloopy, a bit like Bass Rock on a bad day. At 10m the marine fog clears and the bridge comes into view below us. *HMCS Saskatchewan* an ex-Canadian Navy, destroyer escort vessel, is a large wreck some 112m in length. She lies upright in 40m of water with the bridge at 20m and the deck at 29m. Hovering over the bridge I can see the aft deck and a section of the foredeck. Now is the perfect time for a wide angle lens - if only I owned one!

The water is dark but crystal clear as we swim slowly down to the aft deck, past the towering funnel and accommo-

modation access, towards the rear guns and mortar bay. Orange and white plumose anemones drape themselves around the wreck, a living feather boa reaching out in all directions to snare a passing meal. Rockfish accompany us in a stately promenade round the deck. Disturbed, a metre-long ling cod squirms lazily from its lookout beside the handrail as we gaze over the edge to see scallops flapping away into the distance. A quick look to my left reveals Eric is enjoying every minute of this, his last dive on the *Saskatchewan*, before he leaves for home later in the day.

Dropping over the edge we follow the handrail to the foredeck, behind us the superstructure soars upwards, an imposing sight against the deep emerald green of the water. We're heading for the bow and make it as far as the forward gun before we need to turn back. Brian and I opted for nitrox but Eric is on air and starting to rack up deco penalties. We execute an unplanned, but precise, synchronised U-turn and swim slowly back towards the shot line. Giant featherstars sway back and forth in our wake, each clinging to the handrail with the desperate intensity of drunken sailors.

Patrolling rockfish follow us to the very top of the wreck, we're off their patch now and our finned escort visibly lose interest, gliding back down to their usual beat. A last look back and the *Saskatchewan* is laid out below us glowing ghostly pale in the unnatural light, a submerged playground, patiently waiting for the next divers to come along.

Aboard the *Seastar*, a tiny 7m *Campion*, it takes just 15 minutes to get back to base, change over cylinders and head off for lunch. Ocean Explorers are a well established dive operator with premises a few minutes from Nanaimo's Departure Bay ferry terminal and next door to a couple of pubs that do excellent

lunches – perfect product placement! Ocean Explorers insist on a two hour surface interval which makes for civilised diving.

In the afternoon Eric has disappeared, he's replaced by two divers visiting from Spain; they didn't bring any kit so they're in wetsuits – brave lads. The destination is Clarke's Rock, a pinnacle rising to within 3m of the surface where the ocean floor slopes gently up from 30m. Skipper tells us this is the place to see Wolf Eels and Giant Pacific Octopus - excellent.

Brian and I kit up quickly and head off. The mooring block is at 20m on a sand and mud bottom. It looks uninspiring at first glance but as we swim toward the pinnacle we pass plenty of nudibranchs and anemones going about their daily chores; nudibranchs eating anemones, anemones trying not to get eaten by nudibranchs.

The sand gives way to rock and boulder as we reach the pinnacle proper - and bingo - our first wolf eel den. Wolf eels are bizarre to say the least, an oversized head attached to a snake-like body and two fins that stick out at right angles make it look, well, odd. The body is smooth and quite beautifully patterned but the head . . . let's just say there may be plenty of them but they're not the best looking fish in the sea.

Ten minutes of coaxing and bribing with local bivalves produces nothing except a reproachful glare, so we move on along the reef. Brian gesticulates wildly – either he's seen something interesting or he's reliving the horrors of his recent wetsuit experience. Moving round a patch of kelp I come face-to-face with the reason for his outburst – a 2m long wolf eel, sporting large pointy teeth, slithering along the seabed toward me. Discretion being the better part of valour I get out of his way and snap a few shots as he slinks on by.

We encounter more wolf eels squeezed into nooks and crannies, between boulders and under rocks. Rockfish and kelp greenlings review our progress with a hint of amusement as we fail to see even the tip of an octopus tentacle. Leaving the pinnacle behind we swim back

toward the mooring block and stumble onto a ratfish, or chimera, resting on the seabed. A snub nose, big eyes and smooth skin make these pretty little fish one of the Wolf Eels better looking relatives.

Brian and I did two dives a day for three days with Ocean Explorers and visited four dive sites; *HMCS Saskatchewan* and Clarke's Rock were so good we visited each twice. The final dive of our holiday was exceptional and definitely one to do if you find yourself in Nanaimo.

Dodd Narrows is a sound between Mudge and Vancouver Islands. Part of the busy north-south shipping route into Nanaimo harbour, the channel is a svelte 100m wide and 20m deep. In full flood, currents of up to 15 knots hurtle through the slender gap, making the strait impassable to shipping. Slack lasts for a few precious minutes until the tide turns and races back in the opposite direction. Leading up to slack tugs and loggers, yachts and pleasure craft form an orderly queue to motor through the sound before boils and overfalls make it impassable again. Divers on the other hand queue up to dive the narrows whilst shipping

thunders through overhead. Timing is critical; miss slack and you miss the dive.

Brian and I are sat in the dive boat whilst Skipper paces up and down the *continued from Page 11*

pontoon. We're off to Dodd Narrows and have to be underway by 13:00 at the very latest. Just one snag, the group of American divers who desperately want to dive the Narrows today are nowhere in sight and missed the early ferry. With five minutes to go Uncle Sam's finest drive up and start discharging dive kit onto the pontoon. Waivers are signed, weights and tanks distributed in double quick time and kit loaded onto the boat. It's all going well until Skipper spots someone fiddling with a camera rather than climbing into their drysuit – big mistake!

"We're leaving in two minutes; anything not on board isn't going". And a little later "We're leaving in one minute, anything not on board isn't going – that includes you. Get on the boat if you want to dive." And as he's untying the painter "We're leaving, anyone ashore stays." The diver finally takes the hint, throws his yellow suit



Clockwise from top left: ratfish and vermillion star at clark's rock; rockfish and orange fingers on HMCS Saskatchewan; ling cod on the same wreck; purple sun star at dodd narrows





Nanaimo Natations

onto the boat and climbs aboard himself.

Motoring across the harbour the boat is in chaos, kit everywhere, and people climbing into other peoples' suits, then swapping for their own and climbing into that. Brian and I edge towards the bow to get out of the way and Skipper waves us over. "I'll put you two in first, we should be there in time for you to get a decent dive."

We arrive just in time and ease past tugs and yachts lined up, awaiting starter's orders, for the race through Dodd Narrows. Skipper brings us close to the wall and I step off *Seastar* into a calm eddy. Brian and I stick together, descend the wall and swim towards the strait. For a couple of minutes we're wafted along gently. I'm just beginning to think, "What was all the fuss about?" when we hit the main flow and are catapulted forward along the wall.

The water is gin clear. I can see sunshine streaming down, above us the gravely seabed at 20m, the rock wall to my left and a good way out into the channel on my right. We're moving fast; the water forces us up and down, round rocks and over boulders. The wall flashes past in a blur. Now I can see why this is Nanaimo's top dive site! The rock of Mudge Island is a patchwork of

colour, great splodges of red, orange, white, green and purple.

Above us bull kelp clings to the wall, fronds streaming straight out behind them, caught in the current like ribbons in the wind. The first few minutes are an adrenaline kick, a roller coaster ride. Brian has his hand

to his reg keeping it in place because he's grinning so much. Five minutes on and we're slowing down, the patches of colour resolve into individual animals; anemones, worms, barnacles and algae. Then all at once we're stationary, as if a giant tap has been closed the current stops dead.

I feel the deep, bass throb of a tug passing overhead followed by the high pitched whine of a yacht engine then another and another. Surfacing in the narrows is a non starter! Here is my opportunity to get some photos; the painted anemones are especially beautiful with their sturdy red and yellow trunks giving way to delicate pastel coloured tentacles.

Hundreds of short plumose anemones cluster together, their bright orange colour broken only by the deep velvety maroon of an occasional feather duster worm. Along the rock wall anemones are replaced by clusters of barnacles clothed in a soft, mossy bryozoan the colour of ripe, golden peaches.

A chubby purple sunstar stretches its arms, reaching for the sky. In the shallows elegant green and white anemones rule the wall. It's a photographer's dream – but a short one. Our adrenaline levels are just about back to normal when the tide turns. The giant tap is turned on and the anemones slip away to our right. The current starts slowly, like a steam engine struggling away from the station, gradually building up momentum until it's careering along at full speed. The grin is back on Brian's face and I'm hanging on to his BCD so we don't get separated, my left arm and the camera trailing along behind.

Pushing us past a bulge in the rock the current finally spits us out into an eddy – the same one we started in! Picking divers out of the water at Dodd Narrows is an art form. Fortunately Skipper is a capable chap so we're soon safely onboard and helping to round up our American buddies. The conditions with



wolf eel at clarke's rock

wind against tide are tricky and unfortunately one diver had a bit of a surface swim – a diver in a yellow suit!

ABOUT OUR TRIP

We dived with Ocean Explorers (www.oceanexplorersdiving.com) a friendly dive outfit based on the waterfront at Stewart Avenue, Nanaimo. Ocean Explorers provide boat charters for groups and a walk-on service for lone divers and buddy pairs, they'll take out a boat for just two divers. Two dives a day cost \$110 per diver (approximately £55). The diving is varied with wrecks, drifts and scenic sites within 30 minutes of the quay. Non divers can snorkel with the seals at Snake Island.

The Buccaneer Inn (www.thebuccaneerinn.com) is a short walk up the road from Ocean Explorers and the Departure Bay Ferry terminal. Proprietors Dave and Marlene run a diver friendly, self-catering motel

complete with kit rinse station, indoor, controlled access drying rooms, separate towels to take on board the dive boat and post check-out shower facilities for anyone leaving after a dive. Our suite was well equipped and comfortable; it consisted of a kitchen-dining-lounge (including a massive fridge, TV and telephone) and a separate bedroom with ensuite facilities. The autumn rate per room, based on double occupancy, was \$99 (about £44) or they provide a 2-dive a day package, in association with Ocean Explorers, including accommodation at \$160 per person (approximately £80 per diver per day). There are plenty of places to eat close by, or a pleasant 45 minute stroll along the waterfront path takes you into the centre of Nanaimo. Public transport is plentiful if you don't fancy the walk or don't wish to drive.

We enjoyed our 3 days diving in Nanaimo, most of the time there were just a couple of other divers on the boat with us and we had a daily discussion on where to dive. During the height of the season Nanaimo is very busy and visitors may not get as much say in where they want to go.

Nanaimo is well placed for travelling to other parts of Vancouver Island, but it's a big place! Brian and I visited Tofino on the west coast, what looks like a short way on the map is in fact a 250-mile round trip, but well worth the effort to visit the Pacific Rim National Park and see the magnificent ancient forests. There's plenty to do for non-divers in the area especially if you enjoy the outdoors. The west coast is a well known surfing destination.