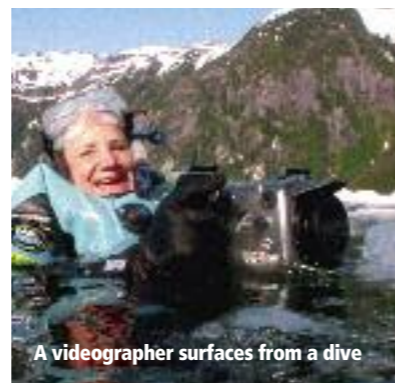


Grizzly bear encounters, humpback whales, sealions, kayaking and hiking, as well as some of the world's best diving. Would all this really be possible in just ten days? Welcome to British Columbia and Alaska... Text and photographs by **MARIA MUNN**

THE LAST WILDERNESS?



A videographer surfaces from a dive

Anyone who's met me knows that after diving in drysuits, my next biggest fear is diving in cold water. So when Mike Lever, the owner of the Nautilus Explorer, invited me to sample Alaskan diving, which has been described by Jacques Cousteau as second in colour and diversity to only the Red Sea, I whizzed down to Swanage for a drysuit dip, packed my woolly socks and thermals in the middle of June and headed to Vancouver Island to join the vessel for a ten-day cruise taking in the very best dive sites of Canada and Alaska.



The Nautilus Explorer

The Nautilus Explorer is a vessel which operates to various destinations out of Vancouver and is truly of the pampering kind, with a homely welcome, a sparkling-clear hot tub and a bar with over 35 kinds of beer, 11 types of scotch and over 50 different wines. It has a custom-designed 11.5 metre dive skiff especially designed for the kind of diving that this part of the world offers, and makes every diver's life easier as well as lots of fun. The great part about this

particular trip was that it offered a real mix of every kind of adventurer's dream - up-close and personal experiences of swimming, sliding and kayaking with icebergs, hikes through the rainforests and bathing in hot springs next to waterfalls, as well as opportunities to see killer and humpback whales as well as grizzly bears, among numerous other wildlife. Would it really be possible to experience all of this in just ten days as well as world-class diving?

Cruising up the Strait of Georgia just before sunset, leaving the port of Vancouver behind us, within an hour we had the company of a group of northern right whale

dolphins joining us for some bow-riding and surfing antics. It was definitely a great appetiser for the journey ahead, with the next morning bringing us glimpses of killer whales in the distance in Johnston Strait, one of the world's hot spots for encounters with these gypsies of the sea.

A gentle reminder of the briefing bell reminded me that I was about to have my first adventure in a giant kelp forest before heading to the famous dive sites of British Columbia. Half of the species within the Pacific Northwest area are endemic, with no other region in the world having so many species of sea stars - there are an estimated 96 kinds in these waters. Shaking from fear but still smiling as always, I nervously plunged into the emerald-green water and as soon as I saw the kelp under the water, my fear was overtaken by a rush of enthusiasm to explore. Being careful to avoid getting tangled in the mass, my Divemaster Sandy went through some skills, as well as giving me a taster of cold-water marine life and the colours that lay beneath the waves. Within

minutes I was already beginning to start enjoying diving in my drysuit.

North America's 'number one dive site' was next on the agenda, Browning Wall. As the name suggests, this is in Browning Pass and is often referred to as the 'Mecca of cold water wall dives'. The wall actually starts at 30m above the water line and its depth varies from about 54-70m and is covered with an absolute carpet of the most beautiful marine life you will ever see in all shapes and shades of the rainbow. Giant plumose anemones which can grow up to one-metre tall resembling powder puffs make their home on the walls. Sponges, soft corals, urchins and starfish, all surrounded by deep reds, oranges, yellows, purples and white being the most common of all colours. Red Irish lords peek out in between the sponges, with king crabs and octopus all being seen on the wall. Longfin sculpins and different varieties of rockfish (cold-water cousins of scorpionfish) can also be found among the never-ending marine life. The longer I looked at a patch of coral, the more marine life that emerged from it within minutes.

Nearer to the surface during the safety stop, the topography changed to include bull kelp attached to the rocky ledges, huge green surf anemones mixed in with huge red and purple sea urchins. I'd never seen so many different colours before on just one dive. The only known enemy to this dive site are divers' fins and, fortunately, due to its' remote location, few divers in comparison to the Red Sea can access this pristine place.

Dillon Rock is another dive site which is rated as highly as Browning Wall. The Imax team have spent five weeks filming here, drawn by the abundance of life as well as guaranteed encounters with numerous wolf eels, two-metre-long cousins to the UK's wolf fish, giant Pacific octopus, which can weigh up to 73kg, and lots of other marine life. I'm not sure who was scared the most when a wolf eel popped out of a hole to see what was going on when I started taking pictures! The setting is both pristine and tranquil, set



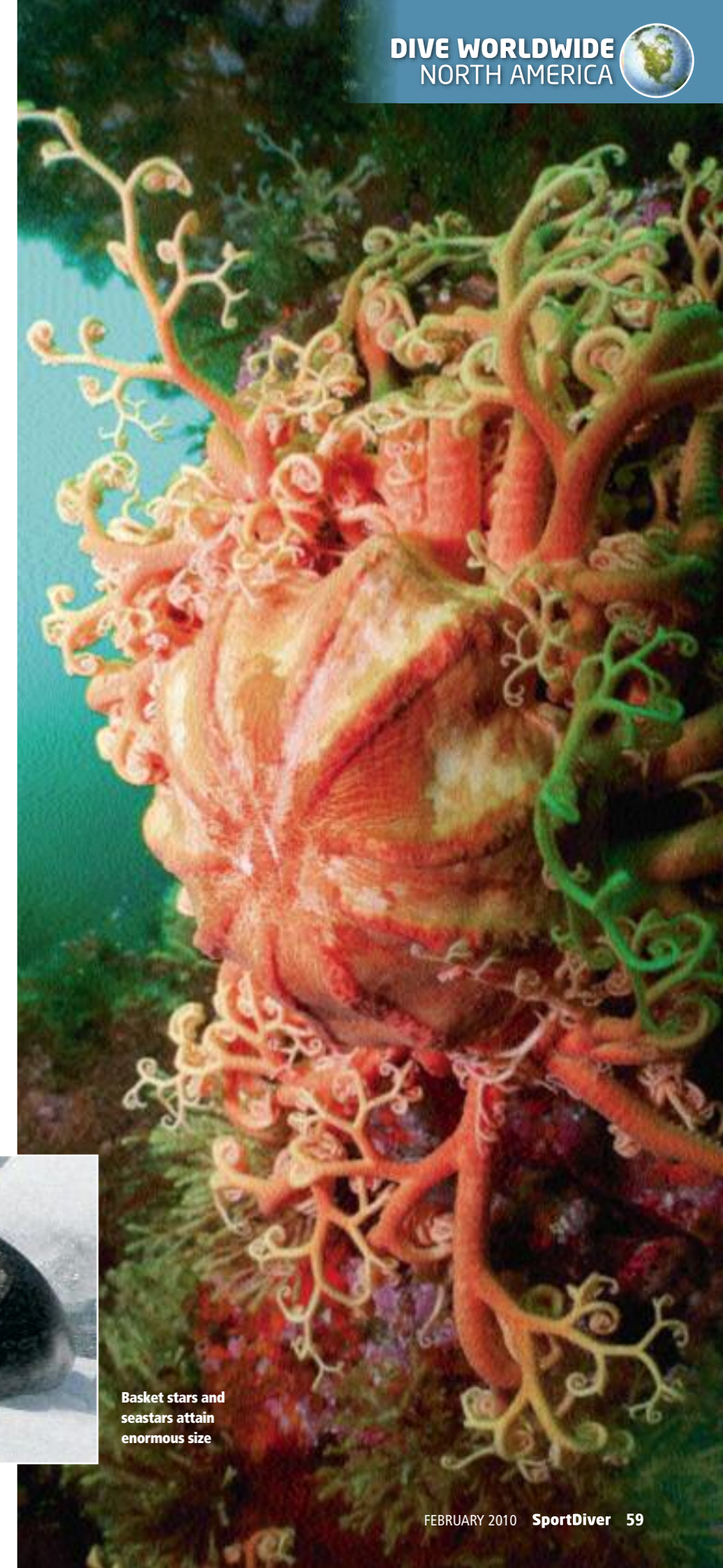
Black bear and her cubs



Sea otter chilling on the surface



Seal out on the ice



Basket stars and sea stars attain enormous size



Snowball fight, Alaskan style - a diver has fun during a surface interval

in the midst of Shushartie Bay, the home to various black bears and their cubs. As soon as I surfaced, a sow and two cubs were walking along the shore. The adventure really was just beginning and I had to pinch myself that I was seeing all of this on just day number two.

Moving further up the BC coastline we arrived at Princess Royal Island, which was to bring even more spectacular opportunities for both divers and non-divers. Wreck divers weren't disappointed either, with the opportunity to explore the Transpac. Captain Mike says that this is his favourite wreck dive ever. The ship is so unusual in that it is practically upright against a wall, with the bow of this wreck sitting at 33m and the stern perched on a ledge at 86m.

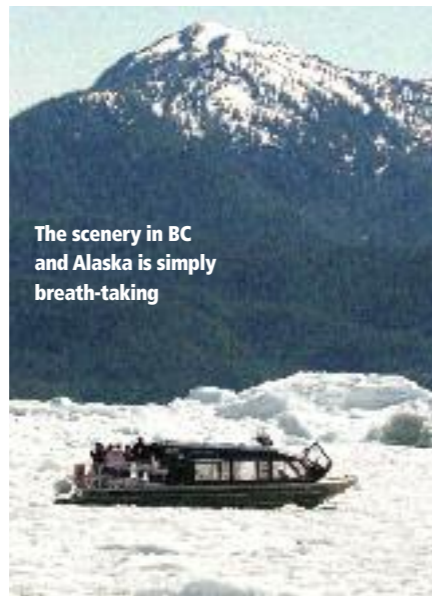
Finally we arrived at Alaska, clearing customs in Ketchikan, and the moment that everyone on the boat had been waiting for - the winding journey up the narrow waterways of Wrangell Narrows for the journey to Le Conte Bay for our iceberg encounter. The bergs were much larger than had ever been seen before. Seals on bergs with their pups were everywhere and the blue of the ice glistened in the morning sun. The contrast between the deep ice blue and the evergreen of the forests that we were passing through left me completely speechless - a difficult feat at the best of times! But it wasn't just me that was unable to talk, all of a sudden all of the American and French guests had also lost their voices and we all just soaked in the noise from the calving glaciers themselves, watching them



The sunflower star can reach weights in excess of five kilogrammes

“ They are the largest seastar on the planet, measuring up to one metre across ”

crash into the crystal-clear waters beneath us. Bald eagles soared overhead and gulls caught a lazy ride up to the Bay itself. Mike did an absolutely sterling job in navigating us through the narrowest spaces imaginable right to the hugest glacier some five times longer than the vessel itself so that we could almost touch it, and then we all celebrated with Bucks Fizz before jumping in for an



The scenery in BC and Alaska is simply breath-taking

afternoon swim with the bergs themselves. Some took the remaining champagne with them, I took a magazine to read on the ice (photography one, of course), others simply jumped into the ice water with just bikinis on and, needless to say, jumped out again far faster. Trying to balance on the ice in a drysuit is a knack to be mastered, and everyone kept sliding off the bergs faster than they could get onto them. Only the ones who chose to kayak were safe. This was definitely the icing on the cake to the trip and what everyone had been looking forward to. Back onboard and a quick zodiac tour around all the icebergs at sunset ended a spectacular day before heading on up to Icy Strait for some more really cool cold water diving at its best.

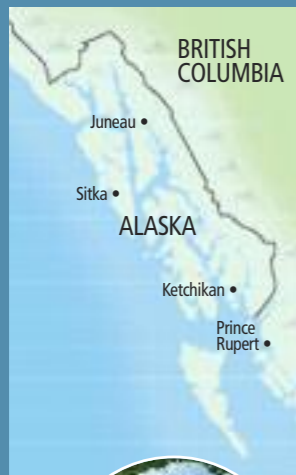
And so we arrived at our final destination, Baranoff Island. Mike had warned us that the diving we were about to experience was even better than Browning Wall and what he truly considered to be North America's 'number one dive site'. All around us were a colony of sea otters - these guys

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

BC and Alaska North America

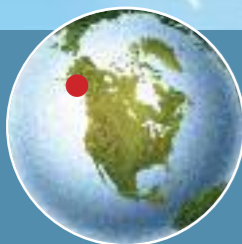
Where is it

British Columbia and Alaska lie on the northwest coast of North America.



How to get there

Trips board from Sitka, Vancouver, Ketchikan or Juneau, connect daily from Seattle. Vancouver and Seattle have direct flights from the UK.



When to go

The best time for viewing humpback whales is July-September.

Colourful anemones and sponges adorn the rocky reefs



“A wolf eel popped out of a hole to see what was going on”

Entry requirements

Visitors must fill in the ESTA form available online

Currency

Canadian dollar (£1 = CAD\$1.75)

Where to eat

Ludwig's Bistro in Sitka has a cosy and friendly atmosphere

Where to meet

Head to Ernie's Old Time Saloon in Sitka for pool and darts and friendly hospitality

SPORT DIVER VERDICT

British Columbia and Alaska offer some of the most spectacular cold-water diving in the world, as well as the chance to see all manner of other wildlife as well

are the cutest, lying on their backs having lunch. Their fur is the thickest in the animal kingdom, I guess it would need to be living in Alaska year-round! They curiously checked us out as we got ready for our final day's diving at Inian Wall, but quickly disappeared when we entered the water. Descending with my buddy Meryl from California, I quickly realised that Mike was absolutely right - Inian Wall was even more full of colour than I'd ever imagined possible in one place. Soft pink corals, white corals and deep crimson colours surrounded a nudibranch lover's paradise. And here the nudibranchs were truly huge. I never thought in my life that I would need a

fisheye lens to photograph one, but here the orange peel ones can grow up to one metre! My passion for ocean experiences with big animals was quickly replaced by these colourful sea slugs and I even turned down a photographic opportunity with a Stellar sealion that was eyeballing me. And just when I thought that underwater life couldn't get any larger, I saw a sunflower star. Not only are they the world's largest seastar - up to one metre across and five kilos in weight - but they are also the fastest.

During the ascent, twirls of burgundy kelp swayed in the sunshine with coloured shells in their midst. Upon surfacing and waiting for the skiff to pick us up, I almost passed out when I noticed movement in the forest on the other side of the bay. A grizzly bear decided to take a lunchtime stroll along the beach. How many dive sites in the world incorporate the chances of seeing these creatures during a dive? This really is what makes BC and Alaska incredibly spectacular places.

Quite simply it was the best diving of my life. I got over my fear of green water and drysuits as well as finally falling in love with nudibranchs. Blue water diving will never be the same again! ■



Whale breaching in Icy Strait