

# Diving My Way 'Round Vancouver Island

THE NAUTILUS EXPLORER'S NEW ROUTE

BY YVETTE CARDOZO

The goal was to go completely around Vancouver Island on the *Nautilus Explorer* live-aboard, something that had been done only once before — the previous fall by this same boat. Most dive boats stay on the Inside Passage along the east coast of this Florida-size island, where the diving is relatively easier.

The important word here is “relatively.” We are talking cold-water diving with all the drysuit gear this requires, and there are tricky currents since it’s the rush of water that brings nutrients to support the world-class marine life.

Scurrying up the east side, we stopped briefly for a dive to see Texada’s cloud sponges. At 100 feet, they hung off the wall in three-foot yellow clumps, each clump a ball of tubes, each tube with its own critter: a shrimp here, a crab there and little golden faces of the juvenile quillback rockfish peering back at me.

We came up to a ledge at 40 feet and saw a rainbow nudibranch with its crown of translucent waving tentacles. We felt lucky to have spotted it, and then we saw a second, a third, a fourth. There were dozens upon dozens scattered among the pebbles. And this was only our first dive.

From Texada, it was up to Brown-ing Wall — the gold standard of Pacific Northwest diving — located on the northeast corner of the island. On a dive named Al’s Baby we found broccoli stalks of plumose hanging all over the place ... a forest of branching white, separated by groups of crimson and green anemones, barnacles, 20-armed sun stars, a huge king crab, a baby Pacific octopus and much more. As we climbed from the water, an eagle soared overhead in a cloudless sky; and as we headed off, a school of Dall’s porpoises sliced through

the water around our bow, leaving white streaks of foam in their wake.

The fact that we were doing this from a live-aboard dive boat was something of an achievement. Diving in this region has come a long way since the days, barely 10

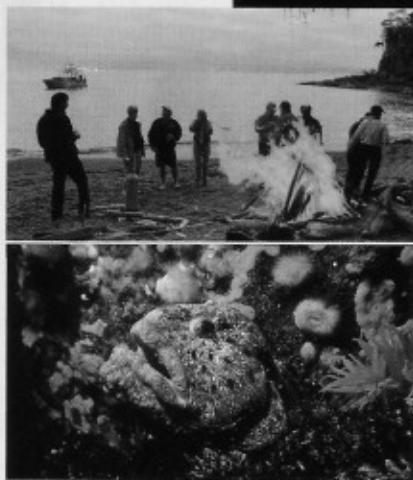
panied us on this trip), fish ID courses run by experts from the Vancouver Aquarium and trips that focus on nondive activities (kayaking, hiking, visits to First Nations/ Native American villages).

What allows this is a boat big and fast enough to cover the distance and house its divers in comfort. The *Nautilus Explorer* is 116 feet long and has beds for 24 divers. The boat cruises at 10 knots and, if pushed, can do nearly 13. On our round-island trip, we covered 600 miles.

It was a good group. Northwest divers tend to be a tight-knit bunch thanks to bonds



FRED BAVENDAM / MINDEN PICTURES



YVETTE CARDOZO (2)

years ago, when a live-aboard meant communal toilets and getting dressed on an open, unprotected deck. Today, divers have many of the amenities folks have had for years in warm-water destinations: terry robes, housekeeping, cups of hot chocolate and cinnamon buns handed out when you get back from the dive, even divemaster guides if you wish.

Plus, there are all sorts of clinics: photo workshops run by top underwater photo-

**ELEMENTAL** Top: The giant Pacific octopus is a prized find when diving the cold waters off Vancouver Island. Left, top: A bonfire, a remote beach and damp air that feels like silk — this is BC. Left, bottom: A wolf eel is another unique find.

forged by conditions that require dedication to the sport. Dedicated ... definitely. We hit the village of Tahsis (population 400) and several went to dive mud, hoping for six-gill sharks. The rest of us drained the town of its entire stock of margaritas. To the last drop.

The west coast is Vancouver Island’s wild side, where North America’s storms come ashore. One of the world’s largest recorded waves — 98 feet — came ashore here. What are considered hurricane winds and scurry-for-cover conditions in the Ca-

ribbean is normal winter weather here, which makes the diving quite different.

"Storms scour the outsides of islands, so you have to look for life in protected niches and on the backsides of pinnacles," Mike, our divemaster and the owner of the *Nautilus*, said. The life is not as thick and it has to be harder — sturdy anemones, abalones and flat metridiums rather than delicate sponges and broccoli stalk plumose.

"You need to think about what you're doing," Mike said in his briefing. Current and surge can combine for a rock-and-roll ride. The trick is to let the surge push you, then hold onto something while it's trying to suck you backward, and then let it push you forward again. "And when you come up," Mike warned, "stay away from the rocks. The surge can easily carry you 30 feet up or down."

We were diving places that had been dived only once or maybe not at all. We named a few. (My suggestion, "Bashing Rocks," was voted down.) Besides the killer surge, this site had great macro.

But the best of all was Hot Springs Cove Pinnacle. "Probably the best example of what a pinnacle dive should be," Mike said. It's a 300-foot-wide rock sitting in 100 feet of water. Affected by current and a bit of surge, it gets both the harder surge life and the hungrier soft invertebrate life. Down at 50 feet the rock was completely covered: metridiums, purple flowering tube worms, stars, tunicates, barnacles, sponges, stalks of plumose, hundreds of fish.

Better yet, there were staghorn bryozoans, animals that look like miniature tropical finger coral, each about two feet across and holding an entire universe of life. There were tiny brittle stars smaller than a fingernail, near-microscopic anemones, fish, shrimp and filter-feeders along with multicolored worms that wrapped themselves around the bryozoan fingers. The whole thing writhed with life.

And then came the crowning touch: three wolf eels stacked one atop another and, hardly a yard away, a huge octopus wedged into a long, deep crack.

Between dives, we visited a Nootka Indian village with crumbling bits of overgrown, century-old totem poles. When you go to a museum everything is nicely lit and has signs, but here, it takes bushwhacking through brush to find half-buried poles. Any log you step across might be a bit of history. The birds are singing, and it's as if you're the first

person to be here in decades.

Another day, we visited Friendly Cove. There are dozens of similar coves along the coast, but somehow, every early explorer managed to land here, including Vancouver, Cook and Spaniards Galiano and Valdez. Today, what's left is a lighthouse, a church with Mowachaht/Muchalat carvings, a memorial cairn to Cook and a Mowachaht/Muchalat couple with their incredibly friendly cats.

When we moved on to Hot Springs Cove, we found a boardwalk made up of 1.5 miles of planks, many of them carved with the name of a visiting ship. The path winds through a glorious old-growth forest crowded with giant cedars, some 10 feet in diameter. At the end of the walk is a series of rock basins filled with steaming thermal water. We all squeezed into the small pools and watched ocean waves crash on nearby rocks while some chap with a guitar serenaded us with '70s ballads.

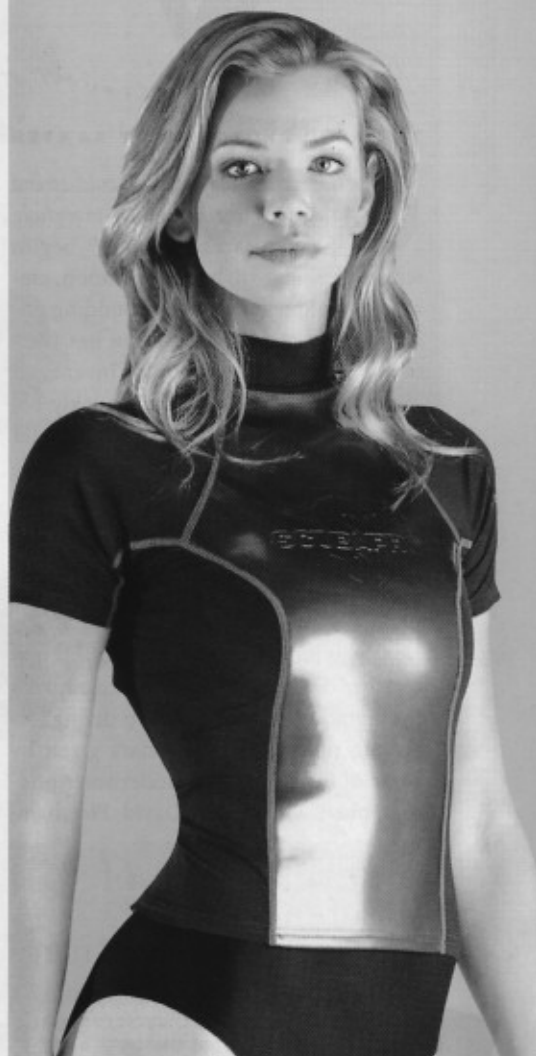
During our last days we rounded the southern end of the island, stopping to visit Bamfield, where we toured the Marine Sciences Centre, a research and study facility. They have their own ROV for deep-water research — it's seriously cool.

Then we came into Victoria, where we docked at the foot of the Empress Hotel and dived the breakwater. It started out really ho-hum ... lots of rocks, kelp, scallops, barnacles, jellies. Then these giant kelp greenlings showed up. One bruiser had to be three feet long, and he just sat there, posing for pictures.

Then, out of nowhere, a wolf eel nudged my dive buddy, Elaine Field. This is a popular dive site, and the big guy obviously expected a handout. He swam into Elaine's arms, sat for 10 minutes of pictures — one of the other divers even kissed him — and finally settled into my arms before slithering off.

On our last night, Berkley put together a show of our photos. The quality was breathtaking ... the eye of a red Irish lord so close you could see the red flecks across his pupil, a moon jelly with kelp against a glowing sun, nudibranchs of every description and color. Each image was magazine quality — a perfect record of the changing underwater life that rings Vancouver Island.

The *Nautilus Explorer's* next circumnavigation of Vancouver Island will be in June 2006. For more information, go to [nautilusexplorer.com](http://nautilusexplorer.com).



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