

Deep Inside The Passage

A DIVING EXCURSION FROM VANCOUVER TO ALASKA

The first instalment of a three-part series detailing yacht exclusive dive sites around the world.

SHAPED by the carving of massive glaciers millions of years ago, the Inside Passage is an astounding region of deep fjords, glaciers, majestic mountains and forests, which uses the thousands of islands and the mainland to form a pristine protected waterway. Yachts often cruise on this route, and when I was offered an opportunity to dive in these waters, I leapt at the chance. With no roads connecting the towns, the best way to travel is by boat or air. Like the coastal Indians who once paddled cedar canoes along the Inside Passage waterways, modern sea travellers still travel port to port seeking trade, camaraderie and adventure.



Our journey began on July 7th, as we embarked upon the *Nautilus Explorer*, a 116-ft (35-m) vessel specifically designed for this type of cruising with divers. The size of *Nautilus Explorer* allowed for a much more intimate interaction with the guests and environment, and with 20 guests and eight crew we were treated like royalty. Captain Mike Lever is a passionate diver and conservationist; we learned much about the delicate, yet declining, balance of wildlife in this once hearty ecosphere. We knew this was a unique opportunity, and something our children might not have a chance to see in the future due to the threatened situation of many of these once-plentiful eco-systems.

As we headed north, our first days of cruising and diving were in British Columbia (see travel log on page 121). We stopped at several First Nation villages to see ornate totem poles, traditional art and friendly faces. The scenery is stunningly beautiful, so much so that you catch yourself taking the twentieth picture of yet another waterfall or forested outcropping.

The mild climate and deep waters provide a prime habitat for humpback and orca whales, sea lions and porpoises, while the lush rainforests provide a haven for bald eagles, moose and bear. For any enthusiast of nature, this is something to be seen first hand. Whether diving or cruising, the awesome sense of a wild and untamed nature is omnipresent, while the midnight sunsets gave us plenty of time to view the spectacle surrounding us.

The diving, like the raw wilderness, offers an exhilarating experience with occasional challenges. The water in the summer averages 48°F (9°C) and the visibility varies depending on the algae and plankton 'bloom' in the water, which occurs during the warmer summer months. This bloom is usually on the top layer of water and visibility improves deeper. On this trip, we saw many of the sea creatures famous in these colder waters: wolf eels, stellar sea lions, humpback and orca whales, and numerous species of nudibranch.

As one would expect, the underwater sea life offered along the Inside Passage is unlike any experienced in warm water. Wall diving is common, as the fjord walls are alive with hundreds of species of saltwater flora and fauna. At one particular dive site, Wooden Island, over 200 species of flora and fauna were present.

One unique dive was with endangered stellar sea lions, which can grow to 2,000 lb, off of Yasha Island. Law dictates you keep 300 feet from these animals on land, but they will freely interact with divers in the shallow, kelp-rich waters of the island. Their grace underwater quickly reminds us of who is the visitor in their world.



We also dived at the wreck of *Princess Sophia*, which sank in 1918 while heading south to Vancouver carrying freight, gold, mail and over 360 people. She struck Vanderbilt Reef in high winds and freezing seas, resulting in all lives lost on board, and entering history as the worst maritime disaster on the Pacific Coast. She rests on a sloping ledge to a maximum depth of 130 feet, her deck timbers still intact.







Another wreck dive was the Transpac, a fishing vessel that headed for shore after she was struck amidships, but sank just short and slid stern first down the steep wall finally lodging on a short shelf. She now sits vertical on a ledge, the bow pointing straight up at 110 feet with the stern reaching to a maximum depth of 265 feet.

Cold-water diving is much more pleasurable with a dry suit and proper insulation, including a thick hood and three-finger gloves. I was also using my Evolution rebreather, which would warm the air I was breathing and minimise any decompression issues I might have encountered. Post-dive amenities such as a hot tub, hot shower or a steaming cup of hot chocolate also did wonders!

Travel Log of Nautilus Explorer covering 1,000 miles over 11 days from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Juneau, Alaska

- Day 1: Noon departure, transit Seymour Narrows
- Day 2: Stubbs Island, Telegraph Cove, evening run to Browning Pass
- Day 3: Morning dives at Browning Pass and Shushartie Bay
- Day 4: Morning arrival at Hakai Pass
- Day 5: Morning arrival at Butedale. Dive on Transpac
- Day 6: Morning arrival Ketchikan, afternoon arrival at Meyer's Chuck
- Day 7: Morning arrival at Wooden Island
- Day 8: Morning run to Yasha Island, Baranoff Hot Springs
- Day 9: Morning arrival at Tracy Arm. Full day in the ice
- Day 10: Morning arrival at Vanderbilt Reef, dive of the *Princess Sophia*
- Day 11: Afternoon arrival at Auke Bay, Juneau

A wonderful port of call was at Baranoff Island, unique in that it features geothermic hot springs in conjunction with a glacial lake, all set within a rain-forest. The locals have built a raised wooden path that connects the harbour to the hot springs set aside in the glacial waterfall. Quite an impressive experience as they welcome yachts in their secluded harbour and large state-owned dock.

We knew another special day was ahead when we awoke to see icebergs slipping past our window. Slowly working our way up the 30 miles of Tracy Arm Fjord, the ice became increasingly denser in the water. The Nautilus Explorer expertly manoeuvred to within 500 yards of the Tracey Arm glacier, where we stood on deck and heard the boom and crack of massive ice sheets as they calved into the water. On our exit from the fjord heading to Juneau, we took a long lunch, swam, and kayaked with the seals and icebergs.

There are many places to see and experience in the world, especially from the deck of a vessel, and the Inside Passage is the latest addition to my favourites list.

Hopefully one day you will add it to yours.

Sean Dooley
Nautilus Underwater Systems

Our next trip is to Revillagigedo Islands, 250 miles south-west of Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. This protected archipelago, consisting of four volcanic islands, is widely regarded as the most likely location in the world for diving with giant manta rays in addition to whale sharks, humpbacks and several other shark species.

