



where the wild things are
 where the wild things are

: JETT & KATHRYN BRITNELL

QUEEN CHARLOTTE STRAIT'S OCEAN FRONTIER

Soaring in out of nowhere, a massive Steller sea lion burst onto the scene. She was a magnificently large specimen that I estimate would tip the scales at about 340kg. Twisting and pirouetting, the playful pinniped made several close passes before departing as suddenly as it had appeared.

Queen Charlotte Strait lies between the 'top end' of Vancouver Island and the mainland. It is an immense waterway with narrow, constricted passages, fjord-like inlets, large islands and a tangled maze of scrawnier weather-beaten islets. Seasonal upwellings combined with extreme tidal water movement produces an enriched planktonic soup that supports a lush profusion of exotic marine life and more than 350 species of fish. These waters also support a healthy population of marine mammals and are deemed to be one of the best places on earth to observe seals, sealions, dolphins, porpoise, Minke whales, grey whales, humpback whales and a resident pod of more than 100 killer whales.

My encounter with the sealion occurred in current-swept Ripple Passage, one of Queen Charlotte's signature dive sites. Topside, Barry Islet appears as nothing more than a desolate, guano-crowned, granite rock. However, underwater it assumes an entirely different character. The subsea terrain is strewn with living tapestries of colour and diverse and unusual species of marine life. Pink and orange brooding anemones grow in such profusion they practically conceal the amber holdfasts of the giant bull kelp plants. Fist-sized orange peel nudibranchs were foraging amid the giant barnacles and patches of soft coral. Mosshead warbonnets were plentiful and easy to photograph. Also obliterating the rocky substrate are lacy basketstars, nuggets of canary-yellow sulfur sponge, purple ring-top snails, and several different species of sculpin, shrimp and crabs.

The kaleidoscopic reeftop quickly becomes a sheer dropoff plunging to depths well beyond 30m. Thickly encrusted with invertebrate life forms, the vertical wall is overgrown with a living rainbow of pink soft corals, clumps of feather duster tubeworms, billowy white plumose anemones and colonial ascidians. Florid bouquets of yellow finger sponge mantle the dropoff like candelabras. The precipice eventually



> BLUSTERY WEATHER HAS CHALLENGED ME ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION DURING MY DIVING CAREER, BUT THIS PARTICULAR DAY WAS NOT ONE OF THEM. QUEEN CHARLOTTE STRAIT WAS GLASSY CALM. UNDERWATER THE VISIBILITY WAS GIN CLEAR AS I SWAM OVER A FIELD OF GORGONIAN CORALS AT A DEPTH OF 30 METRES. SHOOTING AT AN UPWARD ANGLE, I FOCUSED MY CAMERA LENS ON ONE OF THE CORAL PATCHES. I WAS UNDERSTANDABLY SURPRISED WHEN I NOTICED A LARGE BROWN FURRY TORPEDO LOOMING IN THE DISTANCE.



Previous page:

- Up close with a giant Pacific octopus.
- Candy striped shrimp.
- A swimming scallop.

This page:

- Diver on the look out for critters amongst the soft corals.
- A decorated warbonnet.
- Wolfeels are a favourite subject for photographers.
- A sculpin.

slopes out into a seascape of huge boulders and broad ravines festooned with orange and white deep water gorgonian corals. Sparsely distributed in local waters, these fragile gorgonians are thus far known to occur in only three places along the BC coast.

We routinely book our dive charters with Browning Pass HideAway Lodge, an all inclusive dive resort on Nigei Island. The resort is owned and operated by John DeBoeck, an easygoing host who's been leading dive charters in British Columbia since 1980. Arguably one of province's most knowledgeable dive charter captains, John knows these northern seas better than anyone, and his contribution towards introducing British Columbia to the world's diving stage is immeasurable.

The daily diving routine involves three to four dives scheduled to capitalize on the most optimal current, tide and weather conditions. Flexibility is key, with the dives subject to change whenever killer whales, dolphins or humpback whales are in the vicinity.

Browning Passage, a remote current-swept channel situated off Nigei Island, is one of Queen Charlotte Strait's diving jewels. There are numerous dive sites in this channel that feature rocky ledges embroidered with colonies of pastel-pink soft corals and bloated clumps of encrusting sulfur sponges. Each site offers something a little different in the way of diverse subsea terrain and unusual marine life.

Browning Wall is a dive site that covers a distance of approximately 275m. The wall's sheer rock face starts about 30m above the water line and plunges steeply to a boulder and rubble strewn sea floor

that bottoms out at about 40m. The drop off is pockmarked with undercuts and crevices that are jam-packed with a living tapestry of multi-colored sea anemones, spiny red sea urchins, feathery hydroids, lacy basket stars, deep purple hydrocorals and colonial ascidians, prehistoric-looking kelp crabs and gigantic sea stars. Seemingly as unstoppable as a tank, football-sized Puget Sound king crab brandish their powerful mottled-orange pincers as they trample across the reef.

Breathtaking encounters with iconic Emerald Sea reef inhabitants, such as the Pacific giant octopus, occur on just about every dive at Browning Wall. Normally these shy and retiring creatures seek shelter in cracks or crevices during the day, only to emerge after dark to forage for food. While specimens that weigh nine to 22kg are not uncommon, most of the Pacific giant octopus that I've met range between five and 18kg. Though impressive in size, they need not be feared in the wild. They are shy, intelligent, gentle and harmless creatures, and local divers consider an encounter with these beguiling cephalopods to be the highlight of any dive.

Probe beneath the sheltering tentacles of the crimson anemone and you'll likely see some neon-veined candy-striped shrimp munching on the pink soft coral's delicate polyps. These translucent colored shrimp escape being devoured by its voracious anemone host by coating themselves with mucus from the anemone's body. Countless numbers of sea stars, some as big as car tyres, litter the rocky substrate. Also the diversity and abundance of bizarre-looking nudibranchs, or sea slugs, is simply stunning.

BROWNING PASSAGE IS ONE OF QUEEN CHARLOTTE STRAIT'S DIVING JEWELS, EACH SITE OFFERS SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT IN THE WAY OF DIVERSE SUBSEA TERRAIN AND UNUSUAL MARINE LIFE.

Schools of widow rockfish fill the water column adjacent to the wall, while friendly kelp greenlings and the beautifully speckled China rockfish perch on sponge outcroppings, lying in wait for some tender morsel to drift their way. Occasionally, large jellyfish materialize and drift aimlessly with their long stinging tentacles trailing behind. The fish with kaleidoscope eyes, the red Irish lord sculpin, blends effortlessly into the background with its cryptic camouflage. Another strikingly colored sculpin, the grunt sculpin, has a peculiar long snout, stout body and long pectoral fins. They rarely swim, preferring to move in a hopping fashion. The eel-like decorated warbonnet is a 25 to 30cm long creature that is usually found with its branching head protruding from behind a crevice or sponge.



SACRED BURIAL SITES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FIRST NATIONS

Sport diving in British Columbia's remote regions occasionally places divers in some rather unique and privileged locations. The off the beaten track coastal areas that some local dive charter operators frequent are often within the traditional or modern-day territory of the west coast First Nation's peoples. While making impromptu shore visits, it is not unheard of to stumble upon ancient First Nation burial sites. Although most First Nation Reserves are marked with an 'IR' on marine charts and most recreational maps, there are hundreds of 'unofficial' sites that are not clearly marked on maps. Some of these sites may be in close proximity to the deteriorating cedar remains of long abandoned villages.

Traditionally, west coast First Nation tribes employed different methods to intern their dead. Some clans constructed burial boxes to hold mortuary remains and favoured possessions above ground by placing them on stilts or in trees. Other bands used burial caves, canoe burials, or placed the bodies on secluded rock ledges or outcroppings that looked out over the water. The burial ledges are quite fascinating, as you often cannot see them from water level, yet there is usually a clear view of the ocean when you're standing up on the ledge.

Both whale and human bones are sacred to descendants so tribal members often tend or look after their ancestral burial sites. Obviously, any human remains or artifacts that one encounters should remain untouched and be treated with an appropriate level of respect and dignity. Divers routinely adopt a code of secrecy and refuse to disclose the precise location of burial sites if one is discovered during a diving expedition. The unwritten code being, "Take only pictures...and leave only footprints."

First Nation burial sites used to be a much more common sight in isolated corners of British Columbia's coastal regions. Unfortunately, these sacred places are increasingly becoming much rarer as many burial cairns now lie empty because they were either disturbed by overzealous anthropologists or ransacked by



scavengers. In some instances, the deceased's remains were exhumed and moved to a different location to be given a 'proper' Christian burial. The Province of British Columbia now protects all archaeological sites under its Heritage Conservation Law that imposes penalties on anyone who damages, alters, digs or removes artifacts. Modern museums have even developed policies and procedures for returning human remains to their place of origin rather than collecting them for study or public exhibition.

The spiritual experience of viewing moss covered human skulls or white skeletal remains bleached by the mists of time makes for a deeply moving find. British Columbia's First Nation burial sites are a cultural phenomenon that I believe is on par with the primitive funeral rites practiced by other aboriginal cultures around the world. One of the best ways we can learn about the west coast First Nation's history is through preserving the physical evidence from the past. In this way, we can keep the mysterious beauty and rich culture of British Columbia's First Nations people alive.



where the wild things are

Yet none of these piscine wonders can hold a candle to partaking in an aquatic waltz with a six-foot long wolf eel. With faces resembling that of grumpy old men, wolf eels are the largest of the eel-type fishes on the West Coast. These ferocious-looking predators crush sea urchins, spines and all, with their powerful well-developed canine teeth. Surprisingly, they seldom, if ever, display aggression toward divers and actually seem to derive some form of pleasure from brief periods of human interaction.

Many years before far-flung tropical diving destinations came up with the phrase 'Muck Diving', we were doing just that while night diving over sandy seafloors in protected shallow bays that were often used as anchorages. Among the nocturnal cast of reef critters were rat fish, sailfin sculpins, sturgeon poachers, giant nudibranchs and broken back shrimp. During one of these night dives I came across a juvenile longnose skate. With a wingspan of no more than 20cm across,

the skate was a perfect subject for my Nikon 60mm macro lens.

Such is the majesty of adventure diving in Canada's Queen Charlotte Strait. An ocean frontier that garners heady praise from diving photojournalists the world over and who regard this corner of British Columbia's Emerald Sea as being the "best temperate diving in the known universe!" Ocean temperatures may be cooler north of the 49th parallel, but so too is diving where the wild things are.



- Diver and giant Pacific octopus.
- Curious Steller sea lions.
- The kelp forest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jett Britnell is an internationally published marine photojournalist who has over 28 years of diving experience in British Columbia's Emerald Sea and the world's tropical oceans. His photography and diving articles have appeared in many diving publications worldwide. For more information, visit www.jettbritnell.com

divetheblue.net

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TRAVEL FACTS

Getting there: Port Hardy is located four hours north of Nanaimo by car on the east coast of Vancouver Island. For ferry schedules from Vancouver to Nanaimo visit www.bcferries.bc.ca

When to go: Port Hardy's dive season routinely runs from April - November. Check with the dive charter operator to determine if they are running trips at other times of the year. Sport divers should wear a 1/4 inch wetsuit or dry suit.

Where to stay & dive: Browning Pass HideAway Lodge, is located in idyllic Clam Cove, a secluded inlet on the east side of Nigei Island, only a short skiff ride to Queen Charlotte Strait's dive sites. HideAway is a rustic looking floating cedar-shake lodge decorated with weathered pieces of driftwood, flotsam and jetsam and Japanese glass fishing floats. It provides comfortable accommodation and hearty meals for up to 16 divers. www.VancouverIslandDive.com
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