

# VANCOUVER ISLAND

*Pacific paradise — Canadian style*

BY COLEEN & KEN BONDY

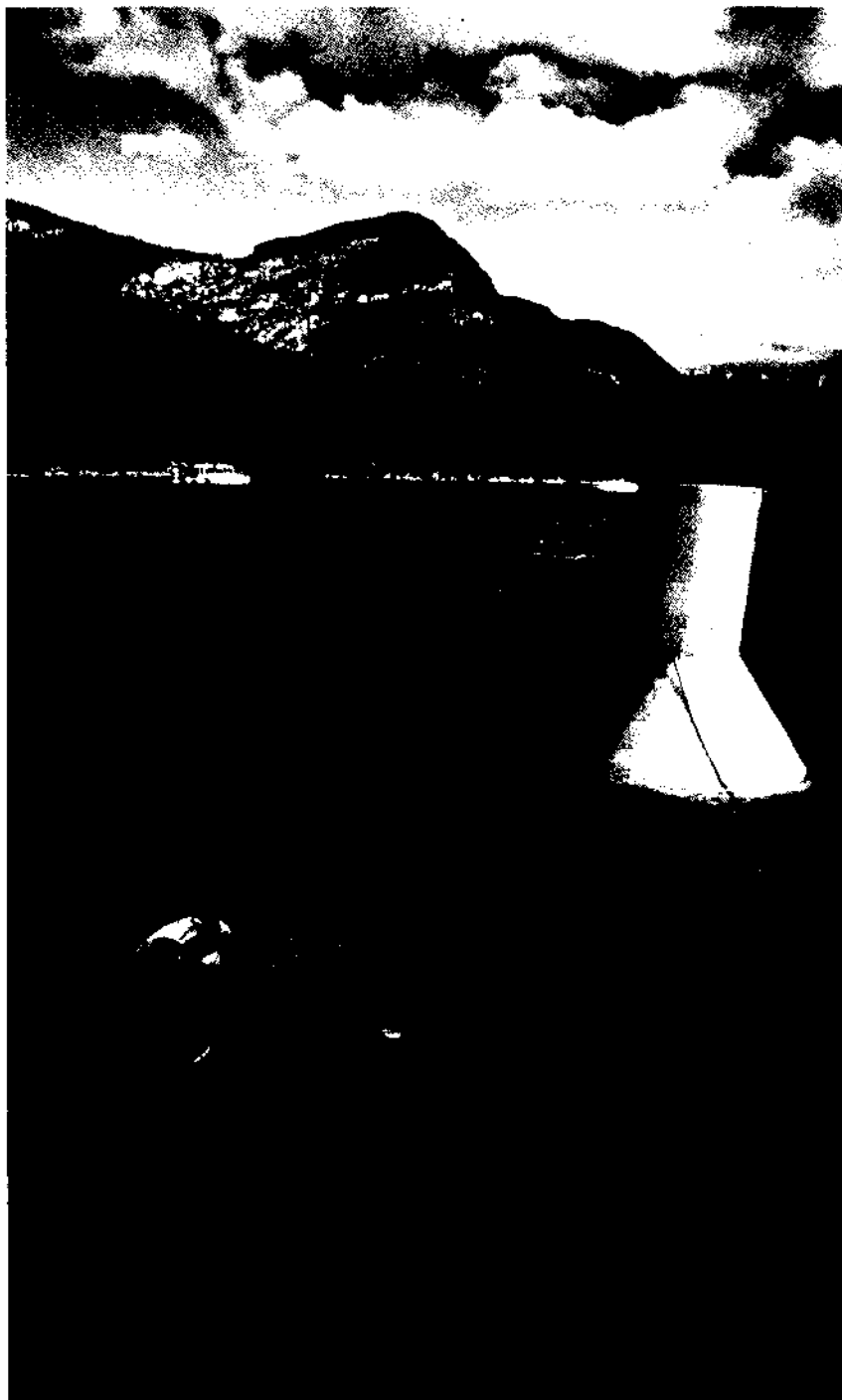
Imagine coming up from an incredible dive, with your head full of images of giant white metridium anemones, huge red Puget Sound king crabs, scallops that break off from their rocky roosts and swim away like false, clacking teeth, and delicate, crocheted-looking basket stars. You think it can't get any better, until you look up. There, in the thick green, coniferous forest growing to the edge of the sea, you spy a majestic bald eagle circling the treetops. Later, you lunch in a deserted cove and watch a river otter slip out of the sea, scale a fallen log and disappear into the pine forest. All around is an untouched, rugged land left the way it was meant to be — without the hand of man to tame it.

Visiting the Pacific Northwest, specifically Vancouver Island, inspires a sense of awe, a feeling that this is the way the earth was in the beginning — natural, powerful, and full of life. It makes people feel small, but lucky to be part of it all. At any moment on the sea a school of Pacific whiteside dolphins may frolic by, or an orca's huge dorsal fin may slice the water, perhaps the precursor to an incredible display, as it leaps out of the water to come crashing back to its watery home.

Though the water is cold and the climate often harsh, this region is lush with life, and abundantly inviting for those willing to endure its extremes.

## GEOGRAPHY

Vancouver Island is the largest island on the Pacific Coast of North America, totaling more than 12,000 square miles/31,280 square km. It hugs the coast of British Columbia, stretching nearly 300 miles/480 km north and south, with a width an average of 50 miles/80 km. Between the mainland and itself lie the



*Diving around Vancouver Island is a sure way to bring a smile to your face.*

ALL PHOTOS JOHN T. PENNINGTON/SEA-PEN PHOTOGRAPHIC

Queen Charlotte and Johnstone straits, the Straits of Georgia, and a myriad of islands broken off from the mainland. Vancouver Island is the southern end of a partly sunken mountain range, with peaks rising sharply to up to 7,000 feet/2,100 m, and its valleys forming several winding, fjord-like bays.

Part of Canada, Vancouver Island is home to Victoria, the capital city of British Columbia. One of the most populous cities in the province, Victoria is located on the southern tip of the island. The other principal cities include Nanaimo and Port Alberni. The lowest point of the sprawling island dips below the border between the United States and Canada, just off of northern Washington state. To the south and east of Vancouver Island is the Puget Sound and to the east of the island is the city of Vancouver.

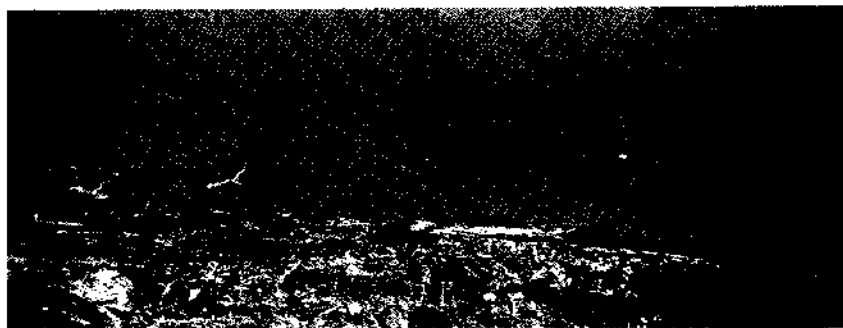
Vancouver Island claims more than 500,000 residents, most of whom have settled on the island because of its relatively mild climate and gorgeous surroundings. The Japan Current keeps the island's wintertime temperatures livable in the southern parts of the island and its summertime temperatures cool, with sunny days. The average winter temperature is 37°F/3 C, and summer temperatures hover around 64°F/18 C.

## HISTORY

The Spanish explorer Juan Perez was the first European visitor to Vancouver Island, landing on its shores in about 1774. But several tribes of Native Americans had already discovered its beauty and resources, including

the Nootka and Makah Indians. The Nootka took advantage of the island's rich stock of cedar trees, and gained fame for their intricately crafted and entirely seaworthy canoes. The Nootka are also noted for their wooden mechanical puppets and masks with movable parts.

James Cook in 1778. Cook named the area with that of his petty officer, George Vancouver. In 1792 Vancouver, commanding a separate British Navy vessel and crew, recharted the area and claimed it for England. The island was later claimed by the United States, but



*Bald eagles are commonly seen around the island.*

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These industrious Indians used the dentalium shell as their currency, and the practice spread among other Pacific Northwest tribes. Indians are thought to have inhabited the island since the time of the last ice age, about 7,000 to 10,000 years ago.

The next European explorer to visit the shores of Vancouver Island was

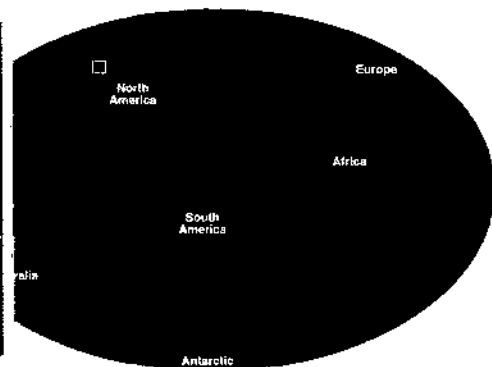
was relinquished as part of the Oregon Boundary Treaty in 1846.

The first people to settle on Vancouver Island came in 1843, when Hudson's Bay Company built Fort Victoria. Shortly after, the island became a British colony. It later was united with mainland settlements to form British Columbia, the westernmost and third-largest province of Canada.

The English and Indian influences are still felt throughout the island. Native American art and architecture is found in nearly every one of the island's towns. English influence is evident in the province's governing body. The parliamentary system of England, with a 55-member legislature elected from districts throughout the province, is observed. The premier is the leader of the party which elects to office the most representatives. Elections are held every five years. Government services are provided by the civil service, which has its headquarters in Victoria.

Vancouver Island's main resource is its coniferous trees — fir, cedar, and hemlock. Logging is its chief industry now, and the island bears several large pulp mills, sawmills and plywood plants. Commercial salmon fishing, mining, and transportation (sea, air, and rail) account for a large percentage of the province's economic activity. Tourism is

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also an important facet of the local economy, as British Columbia is one of the most popular vacation destinations in North America.

## DIVING

Diving around Vancouver Island is as varied as the island is large. In its unique way, the diving here compares favorably with any location in the world. Aside from very cold water, there are some constants which the diver can expect on virtually every dive, and one of those is spectacular color. Providing much of this color are anemones (uh-nem-o-nee-z), which blanket the underwater terrain around the island. Aggregate and plumose anemones come in endless color schemes: reds, greens, yellows, blues, peaches, pastels. Think of a color and you can find a Vancouver Island anemone that has it.

The real trademark of diving here — the "logo" of Pacific Northwest diving — is the large metridium anemone. They are mostly pearl-white, although occasional orange or gold individuals are not uncommon. The stalks of these unique animals can be over 3 feet/1 m long. Looking up at a vertical wall of giant white metridiums extending almost to the surface and to the limits of horizontal visibility rates among diving's finest experiences.

Aside from the anemones, invertebrate and fish life is rich and varied, and photographers will find these waters extraordinary. California divers will see lots of familiar animals: shrimp, nudibranchs, seapens, and crabs of every va-

riety, from tiny hermits to the big kings. However, everything here seems two to three times bigger than the same species in California waters. A two-foot ling cod is respectably sized in California; here, four-footers are commonly seen. The lucky Vancouver Island diver will occasionally hit the jackpot and interact with wolf eels and the giant Pacific oc-

which hug the entire shoreline of Vancouver Island. Tidal currents, commonly reaching 3 to 4 knots, and in some passes an incredible 14 knots, create an awesome display of marine life. These raging currents also limit the "pass" diving to just two one-hour windows per day, each straddling the daylight slack periods (when the tide reverses direction). With precise planning of time and position, it is possible to enter the water upstream of a pass, cruise the dying current through the entire pass in one direction, and then let the reversing current complete the round trip, taking the diver back to the boat in the other direction. Obviously, diving in the tidal passes is advanced and very specialized and should only be attempted after seeking proper instruction and made under the supervision of a guide who is highly familiar with diving these waters.

A good place to get introduced to Vancouver Island diving is through one of several fine dive centers in Victoria or Vancouver. Superb diving can be found just in the Straits of Georgia, no more than 30 miles from downtown Vancouver.

The local dive centers can arrange single or multi-day

island trips through any of the local dive boats for any diving level and to any part of the island. In addition, the dive centers offer a number of courses — everything from an Open Water to instructor-level certifications. Since water temperatures are usually around 45°F/6 C, dry suits are highly recommended.

## TOPSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Diving is only one of the many outdoor activities available on this nature-



*Giant metridium anemones and enormous king crabs await divers visiting the island.*

topus, probably the feature attractions of this area. In the fall, large schools of Pacific whitesided dolphins cruise these waters, notably in the Port Hardy area, and diver encounters with these wonderful animals are not uncommon.

Enjoyable beginner and intermediate level dives can be made in the still waters of the many protected bays and around isolated small islands. The best and most exciting diving, however, is found in the narrow passes separating the network of closely spaced islands

oriented island. There are hundreds of miles of hiking trails that crisscross the island. Along the trails, developed and undeveloped campsites are open to the public. Some of the most popular trails wind through the scenic Pacific Rim National Park, located on the west coast of the island and famous for its extensive tidepools and stunning ocean



*Sea lions rumble ashore just outside of Victoria.*

views, and the rugged forests of Strathcona Provincial Park, located in the center of the island. Angling in the area is some of the finest in North America, with salmon fishing being the most popular. The island is also a popular offing point for sailors, surfers, rock climbers, and spelunkers.

Victoria is a distinctly Canadian city offering the creature comforts traveling divers don't often expect. There are several historic sites in and around the city, along with a number of museums, including the Royal London Wax Museum, (604) 388-4461, and the extremely popular Royal British Columbia Museum, (604) 387-3701, with its informative natural and human history exhibits. Visiting any of Victoria's government buildings and their surrounding gardens is a refreshing way to pass any surface interval.

Though it's not actually on Vancouver Island, the city of Vancouver is a short ferry, float plane, or helicopter ride away. Boasting the title of "Most Beautiful City in the World," Vancouver is clean, cosmopolitan, and home to an enormous variety of activities. Among Vancouver's most popular tourist attrac-

tions are Stanley Park, a combination of natural forest and parklands near the city center; Bloedel Conservatory, (604) 872-5513, with its stunning display of plants and birds; the Vancouver Art Gallery, (604) 682-5621; and the Vancouver Public Aquarium, (604) 682-1118, which features over 8,000 animal species. Two other popular activities for visitors include riding the aerial tramway to the top of Grouse Mountain, (604) 984-0661, or combining a scenic float plane tour with first-class diving through Harbour Air's Fly 'n' Dine program, (604) 688-1277.

Both above and below the water,

Vancouver Island is a majestic and unique diving destination. Whether you live in western Canada or the northwest United States and are just planning a weekend stay or you're from a warmer climate and want to sample some of the finest cold-water diving in the world, this area should be on your list of "to do" diving destinations.



*The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Vancouver's Odyssey Diving's Maurice Lavoie and Karen Puckett with this article.*