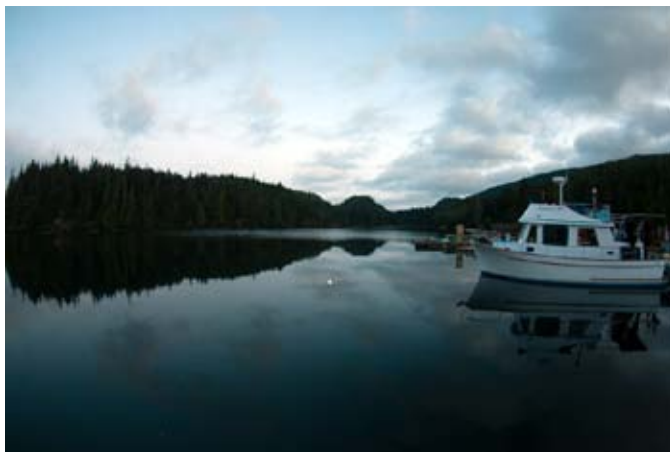


Port Hardy

by Lucas Price

Anyone who talks to cold water divers inevitably hears about Port Hardy, British Columbia. Many consider the area to be the best cold water diving in the world. After years of intending to go, I finally made the trip to the Browning Pass Hideaway in late August 2009. The Hideaway is a 60-90 minute boat ride from the town of Port Hardy. It consists of several small buildings built on rafts in Clam Cove and is just a few minutes away from world-famous dive site Browning Wall and many other equally high quality sites. Clam cove is extremely protected and almost appears to be a small mountain lake, but it is connected by a small passage to the Queen Charlotte Strait. The resort is owned and run by John DeBoeck. John has many years of experience running dive boats in the area, and that is more important here than in some other destinations. The underwater currents can be very strong and dangerous. John is very experienced at understanding exactly when slack will hit the various sites in the passage and picking sites where dangerous currents won't interrupt the dive. A few times we would pull up to a site on the boat and John would notice that the current was still running. Based on his visual observations of the first site, he could identify another nearby site that would be ready at just the right time for us.

The surrounding landscape is rugged and beautiful. The area is teeming with wildlife both above and below water. At this time of year, black bears can be seen plucking salmon out of the river

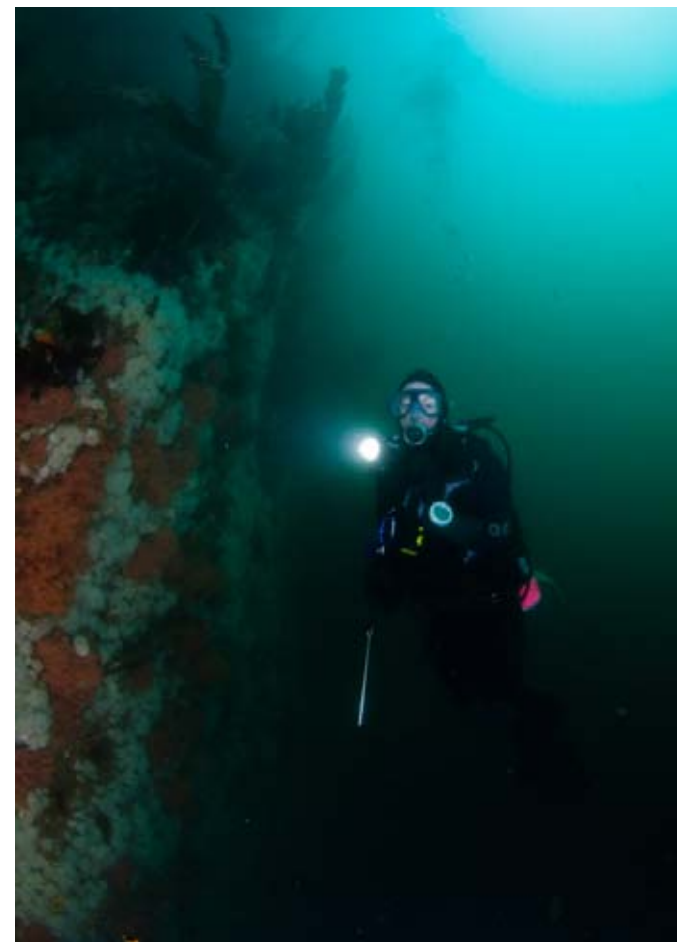


(Top right) The giant plumose anemone (50cm tall) is easy to spot among a seemingly endless carpet of life. Sea&Sea MDX-D300 Nikon d300, ISO 200, 1/8, f7.1, Tokina 10-17FE@10mm, 2 Ikelite ds-160 strobes

(Right) Browning Pass Wall is a 60m vertical drop full of critter hiding spots that is best explored with a light. Sea&Sea MDX-D300 Nikon d300, ISO 200, 1/8, f8, Tokina 10-17FE@10mm, 2 Ikelite ds-160 strobes

just a few minutes outside of Port Hardy. On the boat ride out of Port Hardy to the Hideaway, we spent several minutes watching a breaching humpback whale and saw several stellar sea lions. Bald eagles can be spotted from the dock of the resort and on virtually every boat ride. Another topside highlight was watching a school of dahl's porpoises swimming alongside the boat as we returned to the resort after a dive.

Underwater is equally exciting. Like other parts of Vancouver Island, giant pacific octopuses, wolf eels, and sea lions are among the highlights; but what sets this area apart is the density of life.



The walls are completely covered with plumose anemones, and other invertebrates are interspersed among the walls of white.

When I arrived, it had been over a year since I had been diving in my drysuit. And more importantly I had never dove in my drysuit with my DSLR camera setup. I remember the first time I dove with a DSLR in the tropics, and in a certain way it was like learning to dive all over again. On the first dive I felt very clumsy, and learning to do everything with only one free hand took a few dives. By the third dive I was completely comfortable doing everything one-handed, and having my camera felt like second nature. Now I feel like I am missing something anytime I dive without it. Adding a drysuit to that equation was like starting all over again. In a 3mm wetsuit, I dive with very little weight, 4 lbs is usually more than enough for me. In my drysuit, with all my warm clothes underneath, I need about 35 lbs. Needless to say, buoyancy control takes some practice. Tuning the buoyancy to stay still while shooting macro subjects was the biggest issue, but something I did work out over the first few dives. Using thick gloves with my Sea&Sea housing took a little bit of practice also, but they really didn't create any problems. I had the hang of it within 15 minutes. I also find that my air consumption is faster in colder waters. When in tropical waters, I love the relaxing 70 minute plus dives. But in Port Hardy both my faster air consumption and the cold water made it so that I was usually ready to get back on the boat after about 50 minutes. As John DeBoeck reminded us, the conditions in Browning Pass are more conducive to doing a lot of dives rather than long dives.

At the beginning of my stay, the visibility



*Humpback Whales are commonplace on the boat ride from Port Hardy to the Hideaway.
Nikon d300, ISO 200, 1/1600, f4.5, 17-70 @ 70mm*



Decorated Warbonnets are one of the many interesting macro lens subjects. Sea&Sea MDX-D300 Nikon d300, ISO 200, 105mm macro, 1/200, f11 Ikelite ds-160 strobes



(Above) Varied terrain gives many opportunities for wide angle photography, but proper technique is needed for the sometimes poor viz and light. Sea&Sea MDX-D300 Nikon d300, ISO 200, 1/8, f8, Tokina 10-17FE@10mm, 2 Ikelite ds-160 strobes



The small red dots on this jellyfish are light sensors that it uses to orientate itself in the water column. Sea&Sea MDX-D300 Nikon d300, ISO 200, 105mm macro, 1/100, f13, 2 Ikelite ds-160 strobes

was very poor averaging 2-3 meters. As the full moon got closer, the visibility opened up a bit particularly at the high tide slack. Because of the poor visibility I decided to start off shooting macro subjects. Many people see the green waters of the Pacific Northwest and assume that underwater will be drab and boring. A few photos of macro subjects easily dispel that notion. Colorful anemones and shooting backgrounds abound. Macro life was so dense that

I found it best to look for things that would provide colorful backgrounds, and subjects could nearly always be found on the backgrounds. Shrimp, nudibranchs, crabs, mosshead warbonnets, gunnels, sea cucumbers, irish lords, and jellyfish are just a few animals that make great subjects with a macro lens.

In some ways, shooting macro is about the same whether in cold green water or warm blue water, but there are a few important differences.



Black sea bass shot at a slow shutter speed gives a deep green background and some motion blur. Sea&Sea MDX-D300 Nikon d300, ISO 200, 1/8, f6.3, Tokina 10-17FE@17mm, 2 Ikelite ds-160 strobes

Using a focusing light is always helpful, but in dark conditions with poor visibility using a focusing light is crucial. It is also helpful to turn the strobe power down a bit and use a diffuser to create softer lighting—and hopefully reduce backscatter. On Ikelite ds-160 strobes, between -2 and -3 is a good starting point. This requires opening up the aperture a bit. F13 creates a good starting point for close up macro with these strobe settings, but be ready to adjust

from there. On a Nikon d300 with the Nikkor 105mm lens, the depth of field is quite shallow at these settings. This is pleasing in many photos, but it does require precise focusing. Some subjects may require a greater depth of field. Making the aperture smaller typically requires turning up the strobe power. This combined with poor visibility makes strobe positioning very important. When shooting macro, strobes pointed straight ahead—at a slight angle



The visibility remained very poor in less than 30 feet of depth, but it opened up quite a bit below that. Sea&Sea MDX-D300 Nikon d300, ISO 200, 1/8, f8, Tokina 10-17FE@10mm, 2 Ikelite ds-160 strobes

to the subject—is a good starting point, but if that creates backscatter then pointing them a little bit further away from the subject helps. Most underwater strobes have a wide angle of coverage and don't need to be pointed directly at the subject. Strobes create a cone of light, the width of which increases and the intensity decreases as it moves away from the source. You typically want your subject to be towards the softer edge of the cone rather than in the

harsh middle. When close to the subject, putting the strobes close to the camera is not a problem. The farther away the subject is, the more it is necessary to move the strobes away from the camera to get the water column out of the harshest light.

As the week went on, the full moon was approaching which meant larger tidal exchanges. This helped photographic conditions, but it still didn't lead to the 80-100 foot visibility that Port Hardy is known

for. Nonetheless, I didn't want to go home without some wide angle photos. A few of the many wide angle subjects include huge walls completely covered in white plumose anemones and orange sea cucumbers, giant pacific octopi, wolf eels feeding on sea urchins with china rockfish trying to pick up the scraps, black sea bass swimming in kelp forests, and mating Dungeness crab. The visibility remained very poor in less than 30 feet of depth, but it opened up quite a bit below that. This, along with skies that were frequently overcast, lead to conditions where getting wide angle photos without backscatter was possible, but there was very little available light. In such conditions, black backgrounds are very easy to capture; but the deep green backgrounds that are unique to cold water diving require slow shutter speeds. Some don't like their greens to be too deep and strong. I prefer strong greens and this led me to shutter speeds as slow as 1/8s. Even at these slow speeds, blur is rarely a problem when using a strobe. It does occur at times, but it often enhances the photos.

Photography in cold waters is challenging and rewarding in ways that are just a little bit different than tropical waters. It is often said that underwater photography is done at the extremes, either extreme wide

angle for the large subject or extreme macro for the small subjects. Cold water makes that even truer. Finding ways to manage the different lighting conditions and variable visibility inherent in cold water diving will add some proverbial tricks to your bag. The gained knowledge and experience will pay off in both future warm and cold water trips. For those who want to get better at underwater photography, the cold waters are worth it for that reason alone. But, beyond that, the diving and animal life is spectacular and Port Hardy, BC is certainly worth the trip.

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