

# Raptures of the Emerald Deep

## British Columbia's Diving Wonders

by Jett Britnell

In his best-selling book, “The Silent World”, Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau waxed poetically about his intrepid 50-fathom dives into the zone of rapture, that precarious depth where...“divers become like drunken gods”. Cousteau was recounting his early experiences diving under the mind-numbing effects of nitrogen narcosis. He described these intoxicating seizures as “l’ivresse des grandes profondeurs” which when translated means “rapture or intoxication, of the great depths”. “Raptures of the Deep” is an evocative phrase that I always felt accurately described the dizzying underwater grandeur of British Columbia’s Emerald Sea.

Widely regarded as having some of the best cold water diving on the planet, British Columbia’s current-swept channels are renowned for its fascinating array of diving attractions. These luxuriant plankton rich waters support a diverse population of over 350 species of fish, 500 marine plants and thousands of marine invertebrates. No less than a dozen species of sea mammals including stellar sea lions, harbour seals, Pacific whiteside dolphins, grey and minke whales and a resident pod of killer whales frolic here. Some of the more popular critters for diver interactions are the giant



*Descending upon a large cloud sponge*



*Wolfeels are a favorite subject*

***Jett uses a Nikon D200 in a Sealux housing with two Inon Z240 strobes, Ikelite strobes & a Nikon SB 800 in a Sealux strobe housing. Scandisk CF cards. In British Columbia, the workhorse lenses are a Nikon 10.5 fisheye and a Nikon 60mm macro lens although, he will sometimes use a Nikon 105 macro for certain subjects.***

octopus, muppet-faced wolf eels, and six-gill sharks.

With a year-round diving season, divers of all experience levels are sure to find undersea adventure in British Columbia's Emerald Sea. No matter whether you're a recreational diver, tech diver, underwater photographer, wreck diver, there seems to be something here for everyone. While there are literally hundreds of different dive sites on Canada's west coast to choose from, the following dive sites are places that I feel offer something special in the way of attractions and overall diversity of marine life. These are the dive sites that I feel are most worthy of being named one of British Columbia's diving wonders.

### Skookumchuck Narrows Sechelt Inlet, Sunshine Coast

Separating the Sechelt Peninsula from mainland British Columbia, Skookumchuck Narrows hailed as being one of British Columbia's fastest saltwater rapids. When the current turns in this narrow passage, the raging tidal flow can churn from zero to 16 knots within minutes! The Skookumchuck Rapids are quite literally a shallow rock-strewn bottleneck for the voluminous tides that ebb and flow daily between Sechelt Inlet and Jervis Inlet. It has been estimated that during 3-metre tidal exchanges, 200 billion gallons of salt water flushes through Skookumchuck Narrows. In turn, this mighty movement of water stirs up the nutrient-laden plankton broth that sustains Skookumchuck's rich bounty of sea life.

"Skookumchuck" is a Chinook First Nations word meaning "turbulent water". Yet despite the seething whirlpools, foaming eddies, and standing



*Diver and giant octopus at Argonaut Wharf*

waves, a shimmering collage of sessile marine life stubbornly clings to the rocky substrate. Yellow and white encrusting sponge, purple sea stars, and a multicoloured assortment of sea anemones covers the bottom. Mosshead warbonnets, sculpins, calcareous tubeworms, giant barnacles and nudibranchs thrive in this seemingly inhospitable

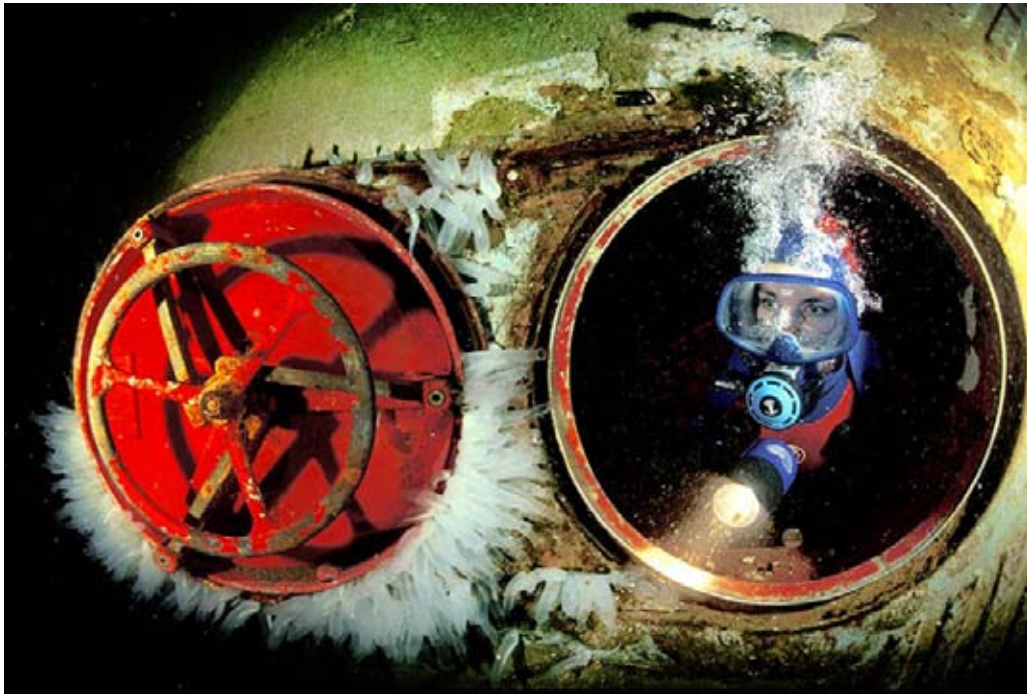


*Hooded nudibranchs*

environment.

The periods of slack water here may last anywhere from few minutes to three quarters of an hour, depending upon the daily tidal exchanges. Hence, any diving here is conducted from a "live boat". After your descent here, you'll likely encounter other divers relaxing on the balcony of





*Divers can safely penetrate the interior of the HMCS Chaudiere*



*Kelp forest*

Egmont's Backeddy Pub. The rustic marina-style pub overlooks the water and boasts a scenic postcard view of the nearby Sutton Islets and the snow-capped Coast Mountains.

### **HMCS Chaudiere Kunechin Bay, Sunshine Coast**

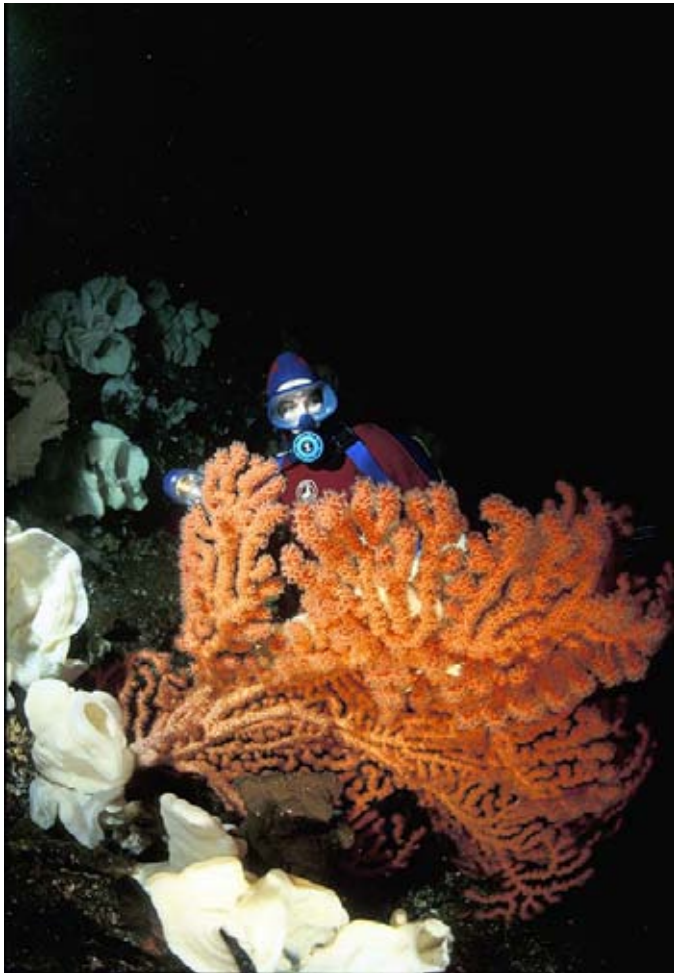
The HMCS Chaudiere was purposely sunk as an artificial reef on December 5, 1992 off Kunechin Point in Sechelt Inlet. Commissioned as a destroyer escort and submarine hunter in 1957, this vessel was destined for

the scrap yard until Canada's then Minister for Defense sold the war ship to the Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia (ARSBC) in 1991 for the nominal sum of one-dollar Canadian (plus tax). Since the 1980's, the nonprofit ARSBC has been making retired Canadian Forces warships diver-safe and sinking them to enhance the marine environment by providing a habitat for marine life on an otherwise featureless bottom. To date, they have sunk six decommissioned naval ships in BC waters...

The Chaudiere rests on her port side at depths between 20 to 40 metres. The three permanent mooring lines that are attached to the ship help divers orient themselves to the wreck and also serve as descent and ascent lines. Visibility on the wreck can be exceptional or poor depending upon the season. During the winter months it can reach 40 metres or more, whereas in the summer it will average between 10 to 20 metres. Apart from the fish that congregate here, the vessel is festooned with sea squirts, encrusting bryozoans and thick

clusters of white glassy tunicates.

As shipwrecks go, the Chaudiere is a safe one to dive. This is due in large part to the countless hours of extensive clean-up work provided by numerous volunteers who, under the direction, prepared the ship for her watery tomb. Large entry and exit holes have been cut into the ship at various points to permit easy access to her 4 available decks and 67 diveable rooms. The Chaudiere promises to get even better as more life forms adhere to her imposing metal super-structure.



*Cold water gorgonian coral*

### The Coral Agamemnon Channel, Sunshine Coast

Most people are not aware that British Columbia's Emerald Sea has gorgonian coral fans. That's understandable since you must descend to 160 feet in just the right places to see these fabulous brick-red coral fans (*Paragorgia arborea*). When seen during a dive on a cold winter day these



*Orca*

majestic red sea fans, that are more often associated with warm tropical oceans, do tend to make our local waters feel that much warmer.

The earliest known discovery of gorgonian coral in British Columbia occurred one hundred years before when some fisherman snagged a branch with their nets in about ten fathoms of water. An identical specimen of coral was retrieved from the Gulf of Alaska in 1915. Until then, this species of coral was only known to inhabit Norwegian fjords. For many years the precise location of the coral dive remained a relative secret amongst a few local divers. In part this was due to the extreme depths at which this coral lives. Since this dive falls into the realm of being a decompression dive, it is for experienced divers only.



*Clown shrimp*

### Race Rocks Strait of Juan de Fuca, Vancouver Island

Situated just six kilometres off the southern tip of Vancouver Island, Race Rocks is a forbidden-looking group of exposed current-swept islets. Aptly named for the awesomely strong 4 to 10 knot rip tides that sweep a perfect race around them, they are the stuff of local diving legend. Unpredictable seas and violent seas have driven numerous ships aground here over the last century and tales abound of divers who were swept away by the treacherous tidal flow. Which begs the question, "Why are so many eager to dive here?"

The answer is simple. Race Rocks is renowned for being the most exciting diving area on the whole southern half of Vancouver Island. A palette of natural wonder entices divers to brave Race Rocks during slack tide intervals. Places





*Race rocks*

like West Race Wall are emblazoned with a flourishing array of marine invertebrates such as, yellow sulphur sponge, lacy basket stars, deep purple and bright pink hydrocorals, softball-size barnacles, colonial ascidians, small clusters of pink soft corals, king crabs, purple, red and green sea urchins, and over 65 species of hydroids. Sea anemones are quite plentiful and include painted tealie, crimson anemones, striped brooding anemones and sporadic patches of strawberry anemones. Divers are often entertained underwater by frolicking seals and sea lions.

### **Renate's Reef** **Barclay Sound, Vancouver Island**

Considered to be one of Barclay Sound's highlight dives, Renate's Reef (named after Renate Christie of Rendezvous Dive Ventures fame) is the top of an open water seamount that ascends from the depths to within 10 metres of the surface. The jagged peak of this ocean pinnacle is comprised of two separate ridges that are marred with crevices. Wolf eels are seen on just about every dive and the reef's rocky terrain is peppered with thick clumps of yellow staghorn bryozoans. Underwater



*Six gill shark*

photographers are certain to capture some fish images here since Renate's Reef is refuge to no less than 10 different species of rockfish.

Strewn all over the colourful seascape are clusters of ghostly white plumose anemones, dinner-plate sized fish eating tealie anemones and various colourful nudibranchs adorn the reef. Descend deeper over the over the drop off and one never knows what they might see? In the sand channels that cut through Renate's rock canyons, you may see several ratfish patrolling over the bottom.

### **Flora Islet** **Strait of Georgia, Hornby Island**

Flora Islet's claim to fame is it is one of the few places on earth where sport divers can swim with seemingly docile six-gill sharks. Considered a primitive shark species, the six-gill shark, *Hexanchus griseus*, most distinguishing characteristics are that it has no central dorsal fin and six-gill slits whereas most sharks have the telltale shark fin and only five gill slits. A sluggish, slow moving species, six-gill sharks can attain lengths of over six metres, though specimens in the range of two to four



*Red Irish Lord face detail*

meters are more common.

Six-gill sharks have been fished off Portugal at depths of over a mile. Curiously, they are often hooked in deeper water toward tropical latitudes and shallower depths toward colder latitudes. While these deepwater pelagics are known to inhabit depths reaching 2500 metres, in British Columbia these sharks are observed at depths as shallow as ten metres. The appearance of these sharks within



*Wolf eel*

sport diving depths at a few specific dive locations within British Columbia remains a mystery. Marine biologists speculate that these sharks ascend from their deepwater environ and move into shallower water during the summer months to either mate or take advantage of more abundant food sources.

The diving season for six-gill sharks runs from approximately June to September, with the summer months being the most opportune period

to see two or three different sharks on a single dive. While Hornby Island is perhaps best known for its sightings of six-gill sharks, as many as 28 other dive sites here offer a wide assortment of marine invertebrates and crevice reef dwellers. During the winter months, stellar sea lions haul out at Norris Rocks, providing divers with some thrilling encounters.

### **Row and be Damned Discovery Passage, Quadra Island**

Row and Be Damned is a steep rock precipice that slopes almost vertically into the current-swept waters of Discovery Passage. Gigantic boulders in 12 to 21 metres of water are coated with pink strawberry anemones, sponge, and other forms of marine life. Giant octopus, wolf eels, king crabs and fish are also in abundance.

Diving here is only possible from a boat during the brief respite of a slack tide interval. The sea floor is embroidered with clumps of yellow sponge, scallops, colonies of hydroids, and a lush terrazzo of pink strawberry anemones. Moving in and out of Row and Be Damned's jagged crevices are tiger rockfish, red Irish lord sculpins, kelp greenlings and some rather large lingcod. Octopus and wolf eels are here, but they are sometimes not easy to spot amid the riot of colour that is Row and Be Damned's undersea terrain.

### **Browning Wall Browning Passage, Nigei Island**

Situated off the north end of Vancouver Island, this popular current-swept wall will completely change any negative thoughts anyone may harbour



about cold water diving. Nothing can ever fully prepare you for your first jaw-gaping glimpse of Browning's pink soft coral and mustard yellow sulphur sponge studded wall. Indeed, Browning's sheer drop-off is a living kaleidoscope of varying shape, texture and colour.

A dense canopy of bull kelp crowns the Browning Wall's top 5 metres. Beneath this amber awning, the light show of riotous colour begins. Seemingly jammed into every nook and cranny of Browning's precipitous rock face are feathery hydroids, deep purple hydrocorals, lacy basket stars, various different species of sea anemones, red urchins and rock scallops. Flame- tipped and orange peel nudibranchs are also quite common.

Schools of widow rockfish swim casually in the open water column. Kelp greenlings, yellow and black China rockfish and the beautifully mottled red Irish lord sculpin sedately perch themselves on sponge covered outcroppings. It almost appears as if they are waiting for the current to spoon-feed them their next tender morsel. Most species of rock fish common to the West Coast can be seen here as well as voracious-looking lingcod, grunt sculpins and the more elusive decorated warbonnets. On a sunny day with 30 metre plus visibility underwater, I would stack

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**Rock fish**

Browning Wall up against any other wall dive in the world!

## Jett Britnell

*Jett Britnell is an internationally published marine photojournalist who has over 29 years of diving experience in British Columbia's Emerald Sea and the tropical oceans. His photography and diving articles have appeared in many diving publications worldwide.*

[www.jettbritnell.com](http://www.jettbritnell.com)



## JETT BRITNELL PHOTOGRAPHICS

### Raptures of the Deep

An internationally published underwater photographer, scuba diver, travel writer, shark fanatic, lecturer, book reviewer, tiger shark attack survivor, marine conservationist, oceanic nomad, song and dance man, webmaster, guitar strummer, aquatic thespian, adventurer, wife whisperer & bon vivant, Jett Britnell specializes in scuba oriented diving editorial for scuba & adventure travel publications. For more information, go to:

[www.jettbritnell.com](http://www.jettbritnell.com)