

DIVE LOG:

ALASKA & BRITISH COLUMBIA

A VISUAL TOUR ABOVE & BELOW



Text & Photography By Stephen Frink

NORTH AMERICAN DIVERS don't have to travel halfway around the globe to experience one of the world's greatest live-aboard adventures. Instead of spending 40 hours in transit, as we do to reach Papua New Guinea or Indonesia, last summer our group of underwater photo enthusiasts traveled to Vancouver, British Columbia, to board the 116-foot-long Nautilus Explorer. From there we cruised to a selection of top dive sites in British Columbia and then up the Inside Passage to Juneau, Alaska. Along the 900-mile journey we enjoyed some of the finest topside scenery anywhere on the planet. No surprise there, as I expected majestic landscapes and encounters with whales and orcas. However, I was taken aback by the richness of the underwater experience. The sheer density of marine life cloaking these rocky walls was as intense as any I'd ever seen. And for me, a tropical diver, these were incredibly exotic creatures. We found wolf eels, sculpins, red Irish Lords and dozens of other species I'd never encountered before on every dive. And those were just the vertebrates. The invertebrate life is even more compelling, brilliant in hue and bizarre in configuration.



An orange starfish rests amid metridium anemones in British Columbia's Emerald Sea. Opposite: The Nautilus Explorer approaches the dock at Alert Bay in British Columbia.



The kelp forests of Alaska and British Columbia are lush with marine life.



Sculpins make engaging subjects and are found on nearly every dive. Below: The wolf eel, an Emerald Sea denizen.



THE PEAK SEASON FOR DIVING Alaska and British Columbia is between May and September. The weather is at its mildest during these months, the water temps between 46 and 50 degrees, and vis can be anywhere from 10 to 100 feet. One of the nice things about the live-aboard experience here is that the dives can be timed so that you hit the best sites at slack tide. This is important, as tidal shifts are extreme and current velocity potentially dangerous. But our captain and crew scrupulously adhered to the charts to ensure that sites enriched by tide-borne nutrients were dived at optimal times and in a safe manner. The corollary is that there are rarely more than two dives a day, and they may be spaced several hours apart. For a hard-core, five-dives-a-day enthusiast, this relaxed pace might prove frustrating. But for me, the combination of dive attractions, topside scenery and camaraderie filled the days and nights quite nicely.



The competition for space in TK is intense: sponges, inverts and egg cases often cloak every square inch of the rocky substrate. Below: Humpback whales are common sights in Alaskan waters.



PEOPLE TALK ABOUT the macro photography at Cannibal Rock in the Komodo Islands or Milne Bay in Papua New Guinea, but I've never seen a greater proliferation of macro creatures anywhere in tropical waters than I did at Alaska's Wooden Island. Here, every millimeter of rock face was covered by bizarre anemones, sponges and filter feeders of all description. Amid this vibrantly hued, pulsating carpet we found a huge variety of nudibranchs, sculpins, barnacles and crustaceans. It would have taken me several hours with a fish ID book to realize what I'd seen on this dive, so I was content to know it was colorful and beautiful. Yet this trip was as much about the terrestrial attractions as the underwater life. Just seeing a humpback whale bubble feeding at sunset—that alone was worth the price of admission.



Kayaking in Tracy Arm amid the "berglie bits" of glacial ice.




Bald eagle.



Steller's sea lions.



Harbor seal.

IN A LAND WHERE bald eagles are as common as crows, adventure driven by love of nature is a way of life. You can hike to a waterfall, knowing that grizzly bears could be there fishing for salmon. You can kayak amid the "berglie bits" of a calving glacier near Tracy Arm, 50 miles south of Juneau, or watch orcas cruise the Inside Passage. Or you can photograph a massive congregation of Steller's sea lions along a rocky shore. These, and more, are all part of the Alaska and British Columbia experience. 

GET THERE



For more information

about Alaska and British Columbia, turn to **In Depth**, p. TK, section TK.