

Unique Dive Site

Skookumchuck

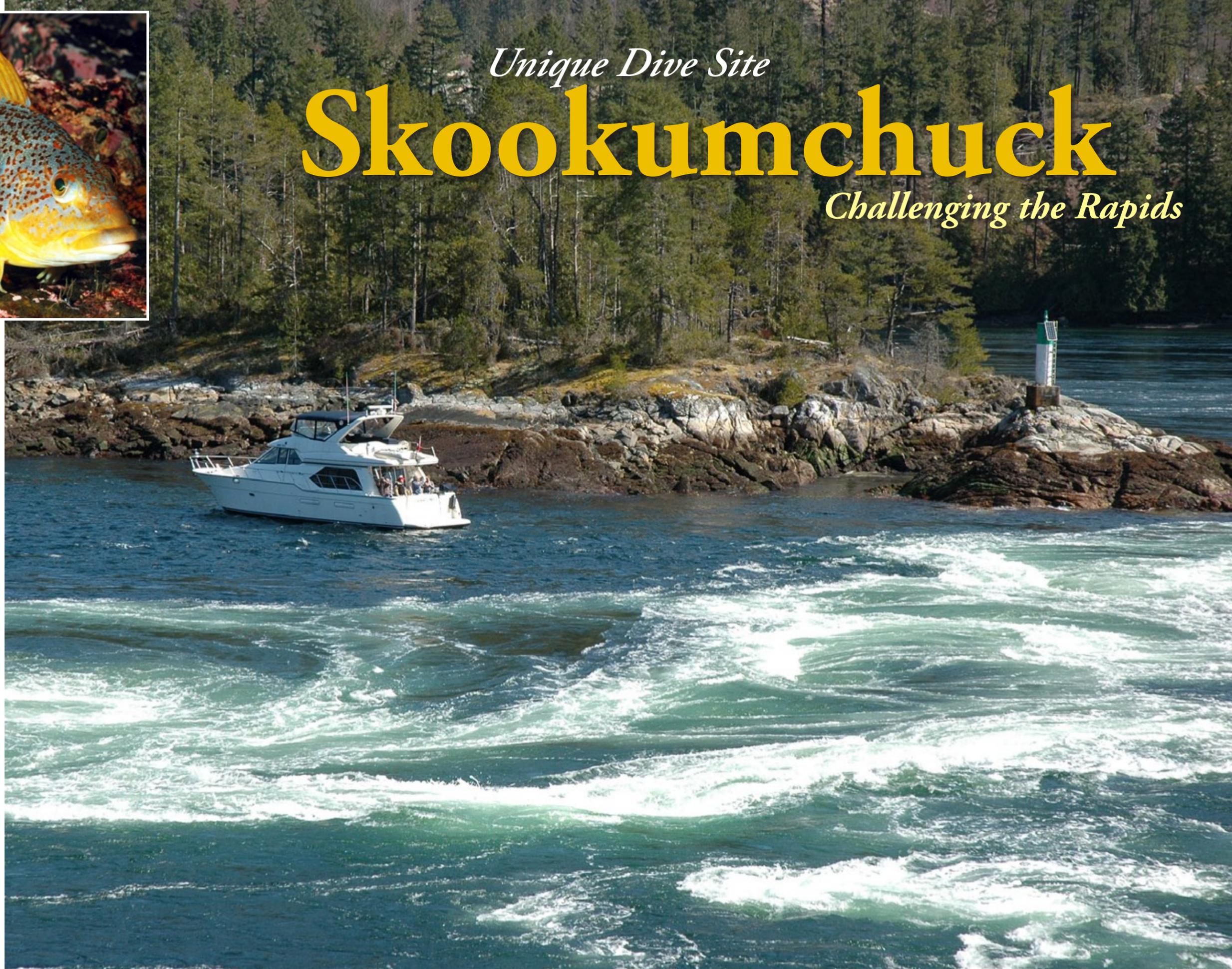
Challenging the Rapids



Female Kelp greenling (above)
Dive boat on Skookumchuck (right)

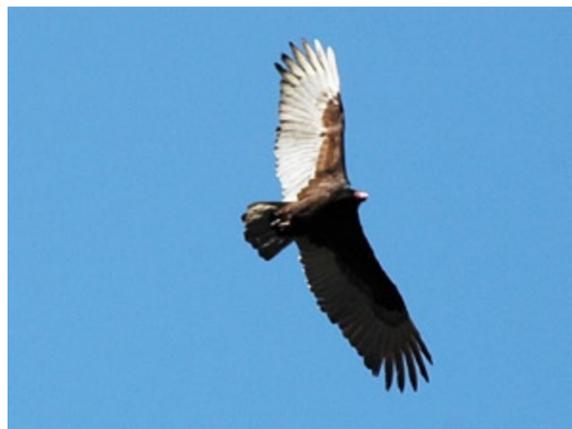
Text and photos by Barb Roy

Viewing a torrent of flowing liquid turmoil while safe and dry on shore is enough to make anybody hesitate about signing up for a dive charter in the Skookumchuck Narrows. This is also the place where rushing tidal currents commonly reach impressive speeds of 14-16 knots (30 km/hr)! Looking down at churning whirlpools strong enough to challenge 30-foot boats (9m) might make any diver question if it's even possible to pierce this witch's cauldron. Yet hundreds of divers travel to British Columbia's Sunshine Coast every year to take on the "Skook" and test their dive skills for a look beneath. With the help of a professional dive charter operator, the Skook might be tamed long enough for a quick look or a fun exploratory ride.





Purple ochre sea stars and painted anemones



Soaring turkey vulture at Egmont (above)
View of the Skookumchuck Narrows (left)

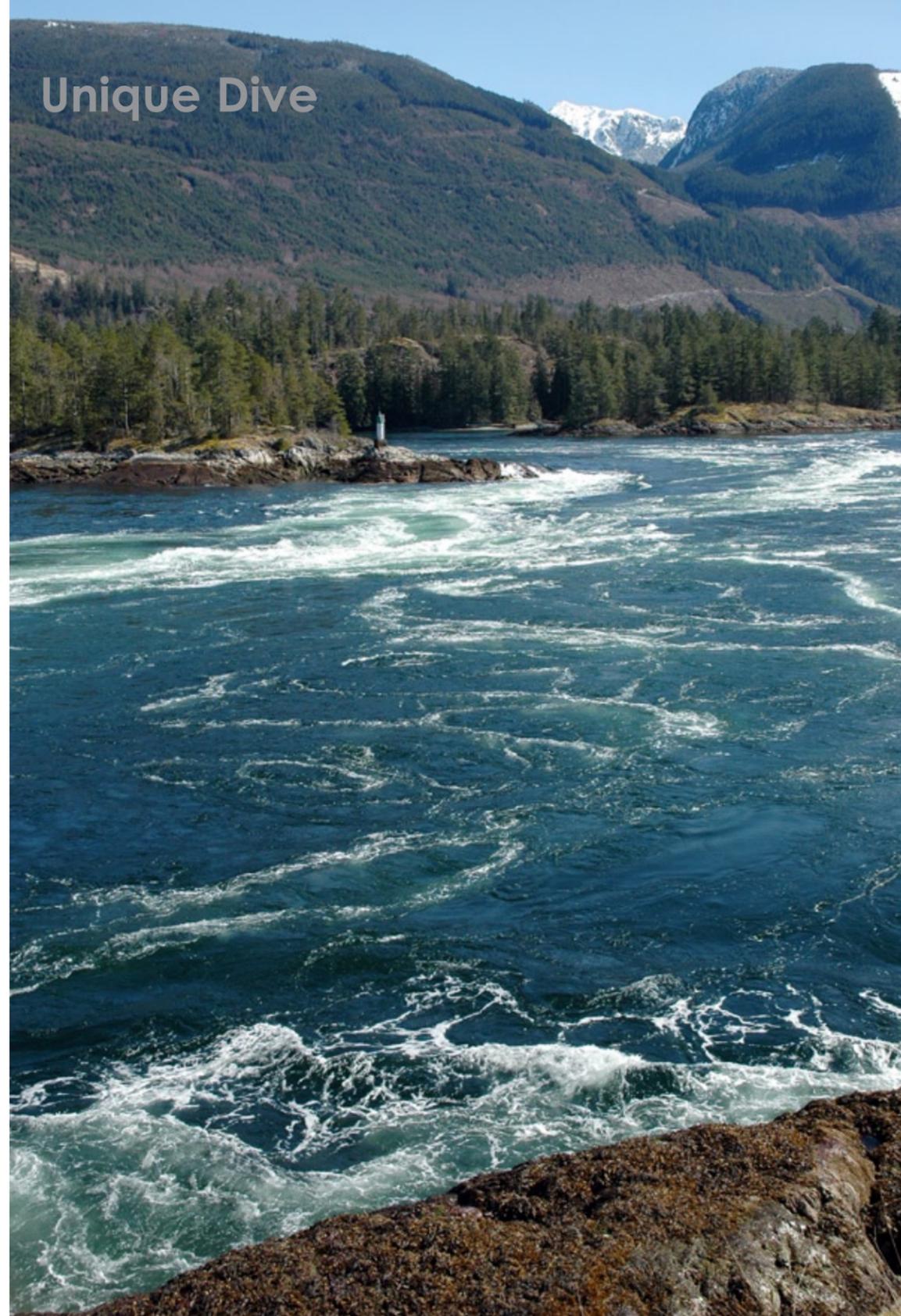
Also known as the Sechelt Rapids, Skookumchuck Narrows consist of a 500 meter (1640 feet) wide passage connecting Sechelt and Jervis Inlets on the inside part of the Sechelt Peninsula. The area is part of Skookumchuck Narrows Provincial Park, established in 1957 and managed by Parks Canada. Topside viewing of the Skook is possible from shore, accessed down a four kilometer trail off the main road to Egmont.

The word Skookumchuck comes from the Chinook language with the word *skookum* meaning "strong" or "powerful", and the word *chuck* meaning "water". Although there are several place names in British Columbia using the word *Skookumchuck*, most refer to it as the area located on the lower part of Sunshine Coast.

Underwater, visiting divers are treated to a collage of vibrantly coloured marine residents at over a half dozen different dive sites within the zone. Each area is quite unique, revealing an array of different fish, anemones, tunicates and even nudibranchs, over a rolling bedrock terrain full of surprises.

"We commonly take only skilled divers to the Skook two to four times a month, all year long," comments Kal Helyar, co-owner of Strong Water Retreat and Porpoise Bay Dive Charters, located a few minutes by boat from the notorious Narrows. "The trick is not only being able to read the water movement, but knowing when to put your divers in and when to safely get them back onboard before the current picks up again. If everyone is ready to go, bottom-time can be any-

Unique Dive



where from 20 to 45 minutes."

I recently had the opportunity to take on the Skook with my husband, and fellow adrenalin dive junkie, Wayne Grant. Actually, we're not really adrenalin junkies, just photographers, although I'm not

sure if there's a difference, because we tend to go where the critters are, be it at 60 meters (200 feet), under the ice or in a high current channel.

Fortunately for us, Kal knew exactly what he was doing and didn't drop

feature

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Dive boats of the Porpoise Bay Charters; Male Kelp greenling; Divers hiking through forest to Skookumchuck

us in a 14 or even a 10 knot current. His timing was impeccable on selecting the proper slack-time (when the water slows to change direction), with no drift felt at all! The site seemed to run parallel to the northern bank for awhile, until we changed direction and headed for deeper water. Our run started in seven meters (21 feet), reaching a maximum of 18 meters (60 feet).

As we swam over the terrain, it seemed deceptively smooth, probably from centuries of pushing billions of gallons of water back and forth. Upon closer observation, however, a thick layer of barnacles added a rough texture to the rock, with small multi-coloured anemones lining every crack and groove, stretching out like branching veins of life. Continuing deeper, we stopped at a garden of critters, all utilizing the shelter of kelp, with most latching tightly to the fingering reef before us. There must have been hundreds of anemones



clustered together in colonies of the same colour. Some were surrounded by purple ochre sea stars, and others surrounded the sea stars. Burrowing sea cucumbers, sunflower stars, sculpins and multitudes of other Skookum marine life thrived in this nutrient rich channel.

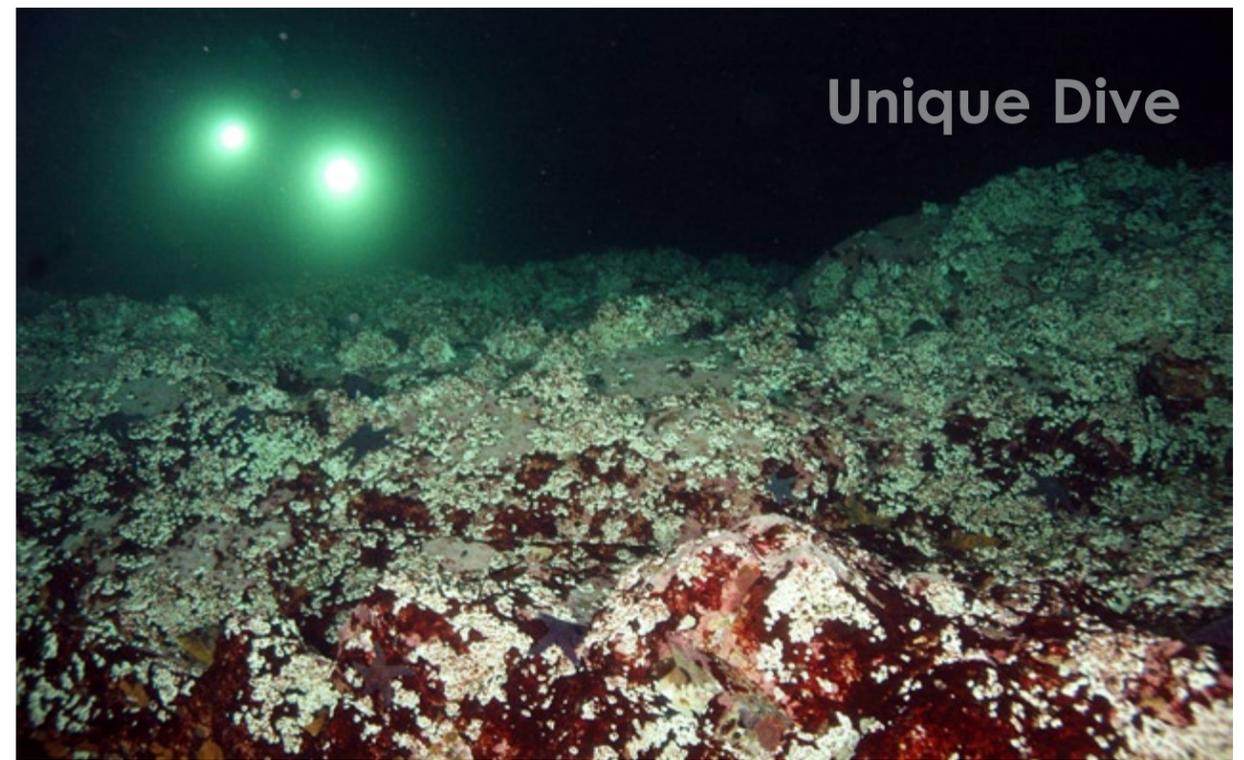
Kelp greenlings (fish) also braved the slack water, as they darted about looking for food and very curious of our presence. Brilliant blue males and bright yellow females didn't shy away when I photographed them. Throughout the dive, more came to investigate us. Tiger and quillback

rockfish even took advantage of the calmness to search for tasty morsels.

Once finished with the reef, Wayne and I headed for the depths of "Glory Hole", a crater-like indentation in the bedrock. I remembered watching from the shore how immense whirlpools formed in this area. Now, I felt very strange, knowing this will soon be the center of so much chaos. Yet noticing a blanket of yellow, orange and tan sponges covering huge boulders distracted my thoughts. Moving more into the center, it looked as if an explosion of invertebrate life had occurred.

I have seen walls in British Columbia with a similar abundance of life, but never like this, or on the ocean floor, with such intensity. Needless to say, when the Skookumchuck permits a slack time of this length (40 minutes), both wide angle and close-up (even macro) video or still photography is possible. We truly enjoyed our experience and recommend the adventure to any skilled thrill-seeking dive junkie, or underwater photographer! Just remember: when the dive operator gives you a maximum bottom time or tells you to be at the surface at a certain time – BE THERE!!!!





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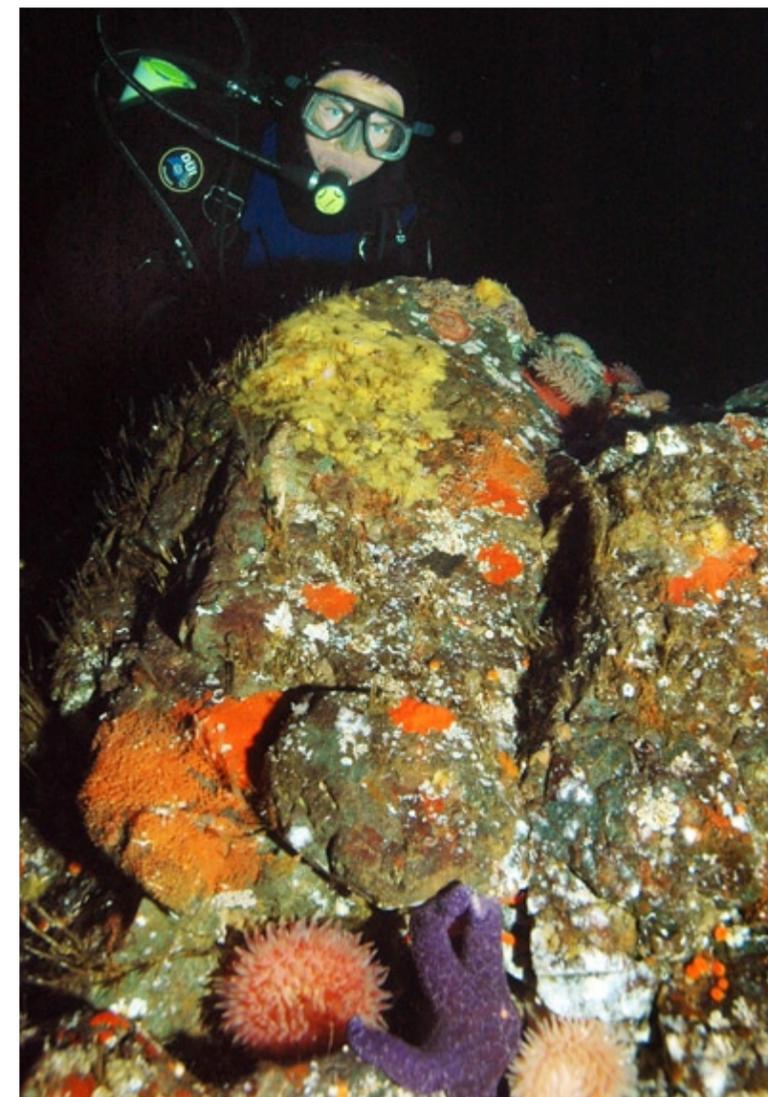
boats provide sectioned buddy-team stations with benches for easy donning of tanks and gear. Both boats are equipped with marine toilets. Nitrox is available with prior notice. Boarding for divers/groups is at the Egmont Government Dock. Since the Skook is a popular location, there are minimum group sizes, with advanced reservations highly recommended. Visit: www.porpoisebaycharters.com.

From Mainland Vancouver, take BC Ferries from Horseshoe Bay to Langdale on the Sunshine Coast. Follow the signs to Egmont on the Sunshine Coast Highway, past Gibsons and Sechelt. Turn right at Egmont Road. The Skookumchuck trail is on the road to Egmont, and the Government Dock is located farther ahead.

Dive gear is available for rent at any of the Lower Mainland dive stores in Vancouver and Surrey, or in the town of Sechelt. For a selection of available stores, check out the website of the Dive Industry Association of British Columbia (DIABC) at: www.diveindustrybc.com

Travel Information

- DIABC www.diveindustrybc.com
- Tourism British Columbia www.hellobc.com
- Sunshine Coast Tourism www.sunshinecoastcanada.com
- BC Ferries www.bcferrries.com ■



Wayne Grant in Skookumchuck; Bed of barnacles (top)

Diving

Diving in the Skook is possible year round with a 6mm wetsuit or dry suit and full body exposure protection. Water temperature ranges from 7.2 – 14.4°C (45-58°F) and although underwater visibility is usually best during winter months, it varies from 9-21 meters (30-70 feet) during the rest of the year.

Strong Water Retreat and Porpoise Bay Dive Charters are operated by Kal Helyar and Ann Beardsell. The husband and wife team have been accommodating divers since 1991. At their current 6.5 acre waterfront property, not far from Egmont, they can handle large and small groups. Accommodations consist of several large yurts, with their dive packages supplying home-cooked hearty meals, tanks and weight belts and plenty of awesome boat diving. Two custom built aluminum dive



Painted anemones (above); View of Skookumchuck (top)