

Gateway to the Wilderness

Prince Rupert Expedition

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The day dawned with the sun attempting to fight its way through the morning mist, the dense trees lining the shoreline appearing as dim shapes through the thick, wet fog. Absolutely everything seemed to be dripping – the result of both the mist and heavy rains the night before. The piercing shrieks of a pair of bald eagles broke the silence – perhaps a “lovers’ spat” over a choice piece of salmon – but otherwise all was silent except the soft lapping of the waves against the hull, and the sound of my steady breathing into my Classic KISS CCR as I pre-breathed it in anticipation of the dive. Everything was as I had envisioned it in my mind’s eye, and I grinned in anticipation at my friend and dive buddy, Josh

Left: Tucked into a secluded island anchorage, Bold Spirits, a tough and practical former fishing vessel, was the ADM team’s home base during the expedition.

Below: Its bright blue color in vivid contrast with surrounding orange anemones, a male Kelp Greenling, *Hexagrammos decagrammus*, stares back at the camera lens as the author floats by in the current.





Smith, sitting opposite from me with his COPIS Meg CCR. No trace of civilization was visible; it was as though we had gone back in time and only the wilderness beckoned. We were waiting for slack water at a site named Watt's Narrows, a thin channel of water where the current normally runs between four and five knots. Earlier we had asked our hosts, Mike and Almudena Miles, about this site and had received the exciting answer, "We don't know. As far as we know, no one's ever dived it. But from what you told us yesterday about what you were looking for, we thought this might be a good one, eh?"

Laden with gear, I staggered clumsily towards the stern and watched as the last of the tidal swirls faded – an indication that slack had arrived. From behind me, I heard Mike say, "Anytime you're ready, John." With a quick giant-stride, I plunged down through the surface. Mike passed me my camera system; and soon, with a loud splash, Josh joined me in the water – both of us feverish with anticipation. In places, Watt's Narrows is only about 100 to 200 feet across yet has depths surpassing 100 feet. In the Pacific Northwest when such a site is combined with a constant influx of nutrients brought by high currents, the probability of a colossal amount of invertebrate life is extremely high.

The moment I put my face into the water, I knew that we were in for a wondrous dive – even near the surface the rocky face of the wall was literally coated with color and life. As we descended the wall, the invertebrate life became thicker and thicker – almost seeming to be in layers. Giant acorn barnacles were present in large numbers, their tendrils fanning out into the now fading current. Huge swaths of bright orange plumose anemones appeared like giant stripes between patches of their fluorescent white "cousins" – reminding us of the pattern seen in the orange/white creamsicles we enjoyed as children. Yellow, red, orange, and white patches of encrusting sponge covered the rocks, making the scene look like a haphazard quilt. Through all of this "stationary" color darted tiny hermit crabs and shrimps of various species, their rapid scurrying movements catching my eye as we slowly descended down the wall and moved further up the Narrows, the slight current sweeping us along. As my eyes swept the ledges, the bright fluorescent red, orange, and blue colors of a Puget Sound king crab suddenly burst into view when the beam of my light touched it. I managed to get off a quick portrait shot of it before the current carried me away.

We hit the bottom of the channel at approximately 110 FSW and, to our surprise, discovered a huge sunken tree, its roots splayed out into the current. Clustered amongst the root structure was a bright school of shiner perch glistening like gold in the beams of our lights. While pausing at the sunken tree, we began to feel the current subtly switch directions. Turning to allow it to sweep us along on our "return trip" down the wall, Josh signalled me to follow him across the base of the channel to the opposite side – the thought of a completely "new" wall was impossible to resist!



As we slowly ascended this second wall, we discovered huge clusters of northern feather-duster worms, their bright blue and purple plumes dancing in the slowly increasing current. A shiny gray and blue male kelp greenling nestled on a ledge surrounded by bright orange anemones glared at me as I drifted past. A species normally shy of divers, this one didn't know what to make of me with my "silent" CCR, and I was able to get off a couple of good shots before he slowly swam away into the current. Josh shot his bag at 50 FSW to let our surface support know where we were, and slowly we moved away from the face of the wall into mid-channel for pick up. Even from mid-channel, we could still catch glimpses of the walls on either side of us as we drifted along, the fluorescent white of the plumose anemones shining in the gloom. Ambient light made the water a rich emerald green as we neared the surface. As we burst into the gray daylight, both of us shouted out loud whoops over what we had seen. The rain had picked up again and splattered the surface of the water as we clambered up the ladder into the covered area of the boat. Even before we began doffing our gear, we began to excitedly tell Almudena and Mike about the raw beauty of this site as they grinned from ear to ear...a new site...just one of many that await discovery....

Left page top: A *Flabellina verrucosa nudibranch* slowly makes its way across a rocky wall, seeking its next meal.

Left page center: A Basket Star, *Gorgonocephalus eucnemis*, extends its hundreds of arm branches, gathering food from the passing current.

Left page bottom: A Scalyhead Sculpin, *Artedius harringtoni*, darts among a tiny forest of billowy white plumose anemones.

Background and History

"Where Canada's Wilderness Begins"....definitely a phrase designed to catch your interest. It certainly caught mine when I first began exploring the possibilities of diving the waters around Prince Rupert in Northern British Columbia. Wilderness has always had a special appeal to me, and any opportunities for travel and diving at locations off the beaten path have lured me like a moth to a flame. Contacting the department of tourism for Northern British Columbia, I asked them for contacts and suggestions for diving in Northern BC, with heavy emphasis on marine biology expertise. With their assistance, the first steps were taken for an adventure-laden trip that left us awe-stricken with the raw beauty we encountered, both above the surface and beneath the area's rich green waters.

Centuries before the arrival of the first European explorers and traders, the Northwest coast was among the most densely populated areas of North America, with a huge variety of rich and vibrant cultural traditions. The city of Prince Rupert is, in fact, located within the traditional domain of the Tsimshian First Nation. Well before European contact, what is now the harbor at

Above: A group of Humpback whales, *Megaptera novaeangliae*, feeding using a tactic called "bubble-netting". The whales will get beneath a huge school of herring and then circle them from below while releasing bubbles from their blow-holes. The bubbles then form a "net" around the herring, scaring the prey toward the surface. The whales will then come up all at once together with their mouths open, swallowing thousands of herring within moments. This method of feeding has only been observed in the frigid waters of British Columbia, Alaska and the Arctic.



Prince Rupert was the most densely populated area to be found anywhere in North America north of Mexico. The archaeological record, as well as oral tradition, indicates that there has been continuous occupation of the Prince Rupert area, specifically by the Tsimshian First Nations people, for almost 5,000 years – and that there have been inhabitants there stretching back for almost 10,000 years. Other First Nations peoples in the area are the Nisga'a, Gitksan, Heiltsuk, and Haida, each with its own distinct language and traditions, many of whom reside in Prince Rupert as well as in a number of small traditional communities found along the coastline. The famous monumental art of their cultures, exemplified by majestic Totem Poles, is widely recognized around the world. Their art reflects a firm belief in the natural interconnectedness of all things, as well as the great strength of their individual families and clans. Often during our adventure, we found ourselves completely stunned by the overwhelming beauty of their art as well as its clear and obvious linkage with the natural world surrounding it.

What is now the Prince Rupert area came to European attention during the great "Age of Discovery," during which the major European powers constantly competed with each other and tried to expand their control of sections of the Pacific coast. It was the fur

trade that brought them into direct and long-term contact with the First Nations peoples, with British and American ships in particular arriving regularly to trade for desirable and luxurious sea otter pelts for which there was a worldwide demand. The Hudson's Bay Company eventually established several permanent trading posts in the area, greatly expanding their influence, and the European "development" of the area had begun.

The city of Prince Rupert was named after Prince Rupert of the Rhine, a cousin of King Charles II of England. The prince was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Because of his family relations, he was named as the first governor of the Hudson's Bay Company...even though he never managed to ever set foot in Canada! Now approaching its centennial, the city was incorporated in 1910 and started life as a construction camp for what eventually became the Canadian National Railway. The city's founder was Charles Melville Hays, general manager of the railway. He was filled with grandiose ideas for the future of Prince Rupert, amongst them the construction of huge berthing facilities for ocean liners. Perhaps it is the height of irony that his plans for Prince Rupert as a great passenger ship terminal died along with him when he lost his life at sea as a result of the Titanic disaster in 1912.

During the Second World War, Prince Rupert began a bit of a “boom time” as thousands of Allied troops and tons of equipment passed through on their way to combat the Japanese first in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska and then throughout the greater Pacific theater. The boom continued after the war as the city enjoyed the benefit of a worldwide need for food, commercial salmon and halibut fishing becoming major industries along with logging. By the mid-1980s, Prince Rupert had two major export terminals and a booming local economy. With this newfound prosperity has come culture and tourism, the city literally being at the edge of the wilderness and providing access to opportunities for sport fishing, whale watching, and wildlife viewing that rival any other location on the planet. With the wonderful combination of First Nations and other cultures from around the world, this small city (population estimated 12,500 – 13,000) has developed cultural and dining opportunities that are world-class and second to none. Trust me on this – ever since we left, our ADM team has been fantasizing about going back to this city that boasts such wonderful food, culture, interests...and diving!

Our hosts at Prince Rupert were Mike and Almudena Miles, owners and operators of Oceanwild Nature Expeditions. Mike has been a commercial diver/underwater harvester for over 27 years and has over 10,000 dives along the British Columbia coast. Almudena holds a biology degree from the University of Victoria and has worked extensively for both Fisheries and Oceans Canada and several First Nations organizations in BC. Almudena has been diving for 17 years in BC and holds a PADI Instructor rating. As a team, they have a huge store of knowledge of the underwater habitat, flora and fauna of Northern British Columbia. Together they founded Oceanwild Nature

Left page: A Fish-Eating Anemone, *Urticina piscivora*, closed-in upon itself, possibly the result of having captured and ingested food. The bright colors of this species are always incredibly striking.

Above right: A beautiful White-Spotted Rose Anemone, *Urticina lofotensis*. Named for its resemblance to a brightly-colored rose as well as the white spots adorning its column, this species is always a favorite for Pacific Northwest photographers.

Above center: A bull Steller Sea Lion, *Eumetopias jubatus*, gathers his harem around him at one of several large rookeries in the Prince Rupert area. The largest of the eared seals, Steller Sea Lion bulls can weigh up to 2,500 pounds and, with a lighter color than other species of sea lions, resemble huge sea-going Grizzly Bears.

Bottom right: ADM Team Member Josh Smith examines an ancient petroglyph laboriously carved by scraping stone on stone. Impossible to date exactly, there are many explanations for what is commonly known as “The Man Who Fell From Heaven”. The story that the ADM team was told was of a young man that had been exiled from his village. He returned days later and told his people that he had journeyed to the sky and observed many wonders and feats of magic. He explained that he could have remained in the heavens forever but instead he had fallen and plunged from the sky. He showed them the crater his body had made when he struck the rock, and the elders of the village were so impressed that he was given a position of honour as their shaman.



Expeditions in September 2008, and specialize in organizing trips that combine diving with whale watching and wildlife viewing of such animals as grizzly bears and wolves. Mike and Almudena own three different vessels that they utilize for their coastal expeditions, each one designed to handle the varied conditions of weather and sea as well as meet the specific needs of clients. The LQ Prevailor is a 22-foot long aluminum vessel; its construction designed to handle such things as the floating logs commonly found in BC waters, and can safely and quickly get divers to all expedition sites. Additionally, Oceanwild Nature Expeditions has a 36-foot live-aboard vessel, the Bold Spirits, for extended expeditions such as ours, along with a high-speed 21-foot zodiac that is utilized as a tender. During our expedition, we had occasion to use each of their three boats and we found them to be superbly functional for our purposes and well maintained. This is virgin territory for divers, and they are constantly seeking new dive sites. The area is known for wrecks – with a history spanning the Age of Exploration, the Fur Trade, the Gold Rush, and the Second World War one can only imagine the possibilities. Our team is already planning a second expedition with Oceanwild in 2010 to the Queen Charlotte Islands...but that will be another story!

Those desiring more information about Oceanwild Nature Expeditions, the city of Prince Rupert, and Northern British Columbia, should contact the following – they won't steer you wrong!

Oceanwild Nature Expeditions

Ph: 250-622-7659 www.oceanwild.ca

Tourism Prince Rupert

Ph: 800-667-1994 www.TourismPrinceRupert.com

Northern British Columbia Tourism

www.NorthernBCTourism.com



Above: A Tsimshian First Nations Chief dances as he welcomes guests to a Winter feast ceremony. Held loosely in place by Sea Lion whiskers, Eagle down has been placed atop his headdress and drifts downward as he dances. Eagle down is regarded as a symbol of peace by First Nations peoples, and its use in ceremonies is an indication to all that even enemies will be welcomed and treated as treasured guests.

