

Barkley Sound always brings to my mind thoughts of good visibility for underwater photography, excellent natural wreck exploration opportunities, unlimited kayaking routes and incredible family-time possibilities. Add this to swimming with six-gill sharks, encountering huge giant Pacific octopuses and multiple sightings of wolf eels, and you have the ingredients for an unforgettable experience.

Located within the boundaries of the Pacific Rim National Park on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Barkley Sound has always been a favorite "hot spot" among divers. This unique, wild coast wonderland is easily accessed by boat from Port Alberni via a narrow, 25-mile (40 km) inlet. A 56-mile (89 km) gravel logging road from Port Alberni to Bamfield is another access.

Before contact was established with European explorers, the Nuu-chah-nulth people inhabited this vast area in numbers exceeding 3000. Their scattering of villages and fishing sites were spread throughout the Broken Group and Deer Group Islands. In the late 1800's Bamfield became a bustling outpost for fur trading and fishing. Today, Bamfield's population is a mere 200, but Northwest Dive News August 2005

offers visitors a selection of quaint galleries, tasty restaurants, comfortable accommodations and enjoyable hikes.

Diving is possible year-round with several dive charter operators offering both day-boat excursion and multi-day, all-inclusive packages. Rental dive gear can be obtained in Port Alberni at the Dive Shed, a full service store that also operates an outpost in Bamfield for air fills (consult their web site for hours). Tanks and weights are available at the Bamfield location, with Nitrox and mix gas to be offered later in the year (currently available in Port Alberni).

"I started diving here in 1974 with the Bamfield Marine Station," states marine biologist and medical doctor Curt Smecher, owner of the Bamfield Dive Shed. "I have not found a better place to dive."

Smecher opened the Bamfield Dive Shed a little over a year ago and is currently in the process of outfitting a 34-foot boat to offer dive charters in the spring of 2006.

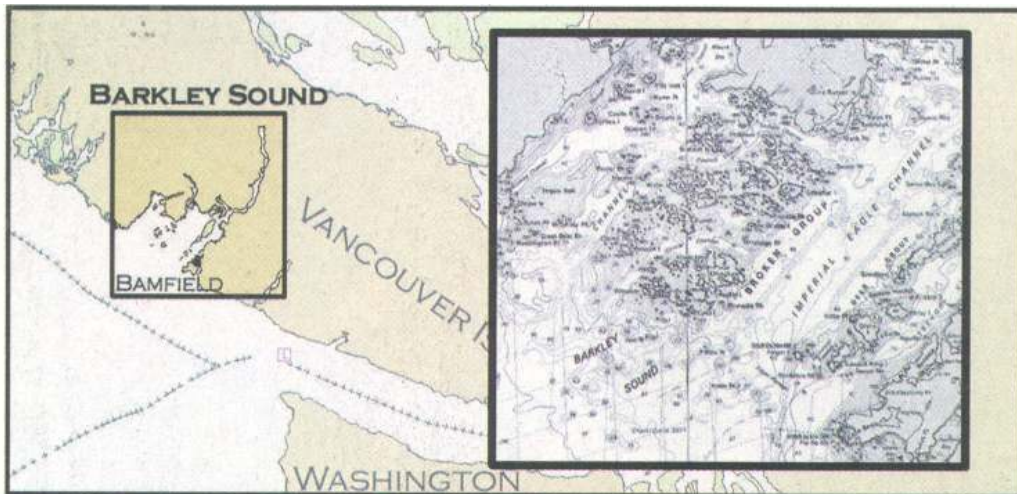
"I will be using this season to work the kinks out so I can be sure to offer a service that exceeds everyone's expectations."

In addition to the 16 Barkley Sound dive locations listed on Smecher's website, he explained how some of the Port Alberni

residents like to swim with salmon in the fall: "We run the river from Great Central Lake to Stamp Falls, or Stamp Falls to the Paper Mill Dam. Each of these runs is about 4 hours long, but shorter runs are also possible. There are numerous rapids to run and pools of migrating salmon to see. This hasn't been developed into an event, but for us, it is a great autumn activity."

With over 100 islands in the Broken Group alone, it's easy to find a dive site to suit any need. *Chup Point* is a favorite of mine for macro photography, night diving and being able to spot over five different species of rockfish! On many occasions I have taken my daughter Tallen here because of its shallow depth and lack of currents. She always enjoys seeing the colorful assortment of nudibranchs.

I have always thought *Renate Reef* should be nicknamed "wolf eel city" because of its numerous long, gray residents of varying length and age. It's a rare occasion that I am not able to photograph at least five on a dive at this site. Wayne Grant, my dive buddy, decided to take a scooter on our last dive to see how many he could spot. He reported two out in the open and four in separate dens, along



Barb Roy



Barb Roy

with a watchful lingcod.

Tyler Rock has waterfalls of white plumose anemones cascading over steep slopes, terrific for wide-angle shots. Ratfish, orange sea pens, octopus and sculpins can be found at depth in a sandy valley between Tyler and another submerged reef. A mixture of smaller marine residents like to hide in the jagged crevasse on top of the reef, sheltered by fronds of kelp. At one time schools of six-gill sharks once traveled through this valley in great numbers. I remember seeing eight individuals on one dive back in 1989. Since then their decline has been staggering.

Fortunately, recent sightings have been frequent and at additional locations according to PADI Master Instructor Peter Mieras, co-owner of Rendezvous Dive Adventures with Kathy Johnson, also a PADI instructor.

"Last year we had a group from Anacortes who had six gill shark sightings on three consecutive dives at three different locations," informs Mieras. "We have also had divers spot six gills on two occasions right off our dock! Generally, the best time to see the six gills is June to September."

When I want to see octopuses, I usually prefer *Kyen Point*. There is depth, shallow

areas, rocky outcroppings, ledges and great hiding places everywhere! During a previous dive with technical dive instructor trainer, Ron Akeson, we set out to find octopuses for Akeson to photograph. There was one small one after another, two huge Puget Sound king crabs and a couple of wolf eels. Finally, I spotted several white, silver-dollar-size sucker cups gleaming from beneath a ledge. I knew this was going to be a big one as I watched Akeson try to squeeze his camera and strobes into strange shapes for a shot. I then got the bright idea to go around behind the rocky shelter and try to encourage it to exit so Ron could get his photo. Little did I realize Akeson must have had the same thought because before I could duck, the enormous creature came flying out at me! Yes, I was surprised, and all I could do was think about all the movies I had seen where curious octopus always pulled the wary diver's mask and regulator away. Needless to say, I closed my eyes and bit down on the mouthpiece. But oddly enough it slowed as it reached me, briefly covering my entire body, as if to taste my attire. In a flash it pushed away and swam off. This was one of those encounters that leave you in awe, realizing later how lucky you really were.

There was no ink, no red color or skin texture change, just the desire to depart and leave us slow bubble-blowing things behind. At that point Akeson was partially in the den so I decided to follow the octopus. It didn't take him long to figure out we were leaving. When he caught up, the octopus was spread out on a section of reef. I felt very tiny next to this majestic being, but it tolerated my fixation and Ron's camera long enough to acquire some excellent images!

With water temperatures varying between 43 F and 59 F from winter to summer, a dry suit or thick wetsuit is a necessity in Barkley

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Sound. Be sure to wear a light jacket and sun hat or rain gear during the summer, and pack plenty of sun block and mosquito repellent for hiking. Kayak rentals are available from Broken Island Adventures in Bamfield, who also offer accommodations and dive charters from their 27-foot boat and air fills.


Another service Broken Island Adventures offer is a taxi service for transporting paddler and kayak out to the islands for a day of fun. Divers who are feeling adventurous are encouraged to take your personal dive kayak and scuba gear, with picnic lunch and snacks, out for a day. They will drop you off early at a sheltered place to do your dive.

Afterwards, have a picnic lunch on the beach, go on a leisurely afternoon paddle and check out the wildlife. Snorkeling is also great fun. In the evening they will return and transport you back to Bamfield.

Rendezvous Dive Adventures still offers use of kayaks and with advance notice, can provide limited Nitrox tanks, usually 32 percent. There are currently over 40 sites Rendezvous frequents, and they have another 30 available for exploratory groups. Johnson reports a new batch of recipes and an upcoming *Rendezvous Cookbook!*

"Our website is now available in four

languages," adds Mieras. "We have a new, fully-equipped class/recreation room for visiting dive stores to use; a large holding tank with a jet pump to improve water pressure; a powerful 18kw, 3-phase generator; and are offering a variety of specialty dive courses."

Please remember that when visiting Barkley Sound, as with most areas in British Columbia, the taking of marine life while diving is frowned upon and not permitted by most operators. Enjoy nature's cold water paradise as a respectful visitor, because it will take you more than ten return excursions to see a mere portion of Barkley Sound's underwater wonders. 



Travel Information:

Rendezvous Dive Adventures

www.rendezvousdiving.com
877-777-9994
250-735-5050

Bamfield Dive Shed

www.dive-shed.com
877-723-4837
250-723-3483 (Port Alberni)
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