

Bob's Trip Reports

Port Hardy - Six Days in the Rain

September 3, 2008

About 375 miles northwest of Seattle ... just off the northern tip of Vancouver Island ... lies heaven. Or at least, there lies my vision of what heaven could be like.

Ever since I got certified in 2001 I've heard that the best cold-water diving on the planet is in Port Hardy – or to be more precise, in the straits and islands that lie about an hour's boat ride northeast of that town. And although I've been to several places on Vancouver Island – Victoria, Nanaimo, Barkley Sound, Quadra Island, and Hornby Island – I'd never managed to make it all the way to Port Hardy. I was determined that 2008 would be the year I would go. And so a few months ago I contacted John DeBoeck, who owns a place called “The Hideaway” which is located near some of the most well-known dive sites in that area, and made arrangements for a six-day trip in late August.



Our original plan included myself, Cheng, and our friends John Rawlings and Valerie Lyttle. Unfortunately, a family emergency required John to drop out of the trip. So Cheng, Valerie and I piled six tanks and enough dive gear to outfit a small army into my Honda Element and off we went.

Now, Port Hardy is not the easiest place to get to. From the Seattle area you have to make your way across the border into British Columbia, board a ferry for Nanaimo, and drive five hours north to Port Hardy. So the best way for a working stiff like me to plan a trip like that is to dive mid-week and use the week-ends on either end of the trip for travel. Although it's possible to make the entire trip in a long day, it's much more practical to do it in two. We left around mid-morning on Saturday, made the trip to Nanaimo, and then drove north for a couple hours before finding a motel room in Courtenay for the night. The next morning we would still have a 3-hour drive over the mountains to Port Hardy, where we were to meet John DeBoeck for a scheduled 1 PM departure to The Hideaway.



When we awakened the next morning the weather had turned rainy and cold. Despite that, we had an absolutely beautiful drive up over the mountains to Port Hardy. We got an occasional break in the weather and even a gorgeous rainbow at one point to highlight the mountain scenery. Along the way we encountered a bear and cub grazing by the roadside.

Note to self ... next time, don't pack the camera in the luggage.

We rolled into Port Hardy a bit early, and decided to go sight-seeing in town. After checking out the strip mall, both intersections, and the few B&B's along the waterfront, we decided to return to the marina ... it seemed to be where all the action was in Port Hardy anyway.



John showed up while we were having lunch at a local pub called The Quarterdeck – I can personally recommend the seafood chowder – and told us he had some shopping to do. So we unloaded the car and piled all our gear on the boat ... and waited. We met another guest of the Hideaway – Jett Britnell, a professional underwater photographer. An hour or so later, John returned with what seemed like a couple hundred pounds of groceries and Lisa, who would be preparing our meals for the week. I realized that up here, hundreds of miles away from the bustle of civilization, “island time” means exactly the same thing it means in the Caribbean ... our 1 PM departure happened closer to 4. But finally, we were off for the hour-long boat ride to The Hideaway.

The ride – even in cold, blustery, rainy weather – was stunning. Eagles, heron, seals, sea lions, deer, and other critters are readily visible along the shoreline of the rocks and islands that dot the coast of northern Vancouver Island. As we turned in between a couple tiny islands, a hand-painted sign proclaimed that we were entering “Clam Cove” ... an inlet that offers sheltered anchorage for boaters, and is home to The Hideaway.



As we approached The Hideaway, my initial thought was “So THIS is where Spanky and the gang went when they grew up” ... thinking back to an old TV show I used to like when I was a kid. The Hideaway is a collection of what looks like home-made buildings perched atop a series of docks, floating a bit away from shore ... a tiny, rustic floating enclave encircled by natural beauty. If one is looking for creature comforts, this is not the place to go. But it offers shelter, warmth, a clean bed, good food, great company and it's an easy 10-minute boat ride to some of the most spectacular diving to be found anywhere on the planet. This place is built for divers, not tourists.

And as the week played itself out, I also discovered that John DeBoeck is the perfect person to be running the place ... a classic jack-of-all trades whose knowledge of the dive sites, when they were diveable, and what to look for, bespoke someone who has spent endless hours exploring the very places people come here to seek out.

I also found out right away that John and I share similar priorities. We pulled into the dock, met John's other two “crew” ... Ness and Farrell ... and one other guest, a woman from Florida named Carol. We offloaded the boat, set up our dive gear, loaded up the skiff, and within an hour of arriving we were off on our first dive, to a place called Eagle Rock.



Despite the nasty weather, as soon as my mask hit the water I knew we'd picked a great week ... 50 feet below me the top of the wall was clearly visible, and looking

down the wall I could see as far as the ambient light would reach ... easily 100 feet. John had told us to follow a kelp stem to the bottom to avoid getting blown off the wall (the bottom of the wall is far below recreational depths) ... but with this visibility there was no possibility of losing our way. We plunged down into the cold, clear water with abandon ... giving each other signs of pure delight at this kind of visibility.

The wall was a massive expanse of colorful anemones, sponges and soft corals dotted with basket stars, orange-peel nudibranchs, and other visual delights. It was sensory overload in a way that a camera would never do justice to. We spent about 45 minutes on the wall, and then headed for the kelp in the shallows, which provided its own delights with schools of juvenile yellowtail rockfish, lovely brooding anemones, and a literal jungle of bull kelp.



Eventually we headed up for our safety stop, only to find the upper layers thick with several different kinds of jellyfish. Swimming around in mid-water, we spent several minutes taking pictures of jellies before finally surfacing ... 64 minutes after we had descended. I haven't experienced an hour underwater like that since returning from Indonesia ... and only on a few dives there had I seen the abundance of life that we'd seen on this dive. Clearly the accolades I'd heard about these dive sites were not an exaggeration ... this place is the Holy Grail of cold water diving.

The twilight trip back to the lodge was magical, despite the cold rain pelting down on us. There was just enough light to make out the silhouettes of eagles perching in the trees along the shoreline, and herons standing like silent sentinels on the stems of bull kelp in the shallows. Wisps of clouds shrouded the hillside, giving the landscape an ephemeral look of almost unnatural beauty. And there, across the water, the welcome glow of The Hideaway beckoned. The lights on the dock and smoke rising from the chimney had a warming effect on my chilled body, and within minutes I was off the boat, out of my drysuit, and tromping indoors to the warmth of a wood stove, a mug of hot chocolate and a hearty home-cooked meal.

Despite the fact that we were up until well past midnight that first evening ... getting sleeping quarters sorted out, luggage unpacked, pictures downloaded onto laptops, and an early start to a week's worth of swapping diver tales and getting to know each other, I was still up before dawn the next day. Power at The Hideaway is created from a generator, and that is turned off at night ... so electricity from the batteries and inverter is at a premium until the generator goes back on again at 7 AM. I edited pictures on my laptop until dawn, then went out and prepared my gear for the day's three dives. The weather had taken a turn for the worse with a cold, blowing rain and gusting winds.

Note to self ... next time I plan a trip to Port Hardy, bring warmer clothes and rain gear ... even if it IS August.



John said we'd stay pretty close to home today ... which didn't prove to be an impediment at all. We did two dives at a place called North Wall, sandwiching a dive off a tiny island called Seven Tree (which has more like 20 trees on it). Each of these had its own charm. North Wall had some current, and since we did one dive on an ebb and another on a flood, we did a mild drift in opposing directions so it was like two different dive sites.

Seven Tree Island proved to be one of my favorite dive sites of the trip, with a deep wall on the outside of the island and a shallow reef on the inside ... the former featuring clusters of anemones with candy-striped shrimp and the latter just choked with sea pens and orange peel nudibranchs. It was on this dive that I took one of my favorite pictures of the trip ... during our safety stop I found a kelp leaf just covered in beautiful, gem-like brooding anemones.



As it turned out, this was our best weather day of the trip, with occasional breaks in the rain and perhaps 10-15 minutes of sun peeking through the clouds from time to time. During the day John also made a trip back in to Port Hardy to pick up two more guests ... Reine and Tina from Belgium.

Tuesday brought the worst weather of the week ... with periods of heavy rain and high wind. Our first dive was on a pinnacle called Hussar Point. I think John brought us here primarily because it was fairly sheltered and we were able to dive despite the weather. Although it was an interesting dive, with lots of massive Puget Sound King Crabs, it was not nearly as spectacular as our earlier dives.



Still, swimming along a shallow, anemone-covered bottom between the pinnacle and a nearby shoreline was quite nice, and there was a variety of interesting things to see on the pinnacle itself. Since there was a current running, we shot a bag and ascended up the line to end this dive. Once again we were able to entertain ourselves with the thousands of tiny jellyfish infesting the water from about 20 feet to the surface. At the end of the dive, we found a beautiful lion's mane jelly to take pictures of.

Our second dive of the day was the apex, though ... Browning Wall. If I had to choose just three words to describe this site they would be "Oh My God" ... I'd be at a loss to do it justice with any other verbal description. There isn't just life growing on every conceivable surface here ... there's life growing on the life. Barnacles the size of your fist covered with soft corals, sponges, tunicates, basket stars, and just about anything else that could find a place to hold on to.



Forget about touching anything here ... it would be like leaving fingerprints on a Rembrandt. We spent the next 70 minutes just letting a gentle current push us northward, peeking into every available surface to see what wonders it would hold. Grunt sculpins, warbonnets, Red Irish Lords, scaly head sculpins, more kelp greenlings than I've ever seen in one place before, and nudibranchs ... opalescents, flabellinas, dorids, and the ever-present orange-peels. I didn't want to come up, despite the fact that I was cold and my bladder was demanding attention ... and when I did, my first words to John were "Let's please do it again". If there's a diver's heaven on this planet, I'd just found it.

But doing it again would not be an option on this day ... the weather had gotten downright nasty, and we were all glad that it was a short boat ride to Clam Cove and shelter ... and more than happy to dock the boat and make our way indoors to warm up and dry out. There was no evening dive ... no one besides me even wanted to entertain the idea.

The next three days were pretty much a repeat ... although the winds calmed down, the rain was

relentless, and we were not able to make the trek to Nakwakto Rapids that we had hoped for. However, we did get two more dives on Browning Wall, a dive on the Wreck of the Themis, a spectacular dive on a pinnacle called Hunt Rock, and a couple night dives on a wall at a place known as the Rock of Life. Each of these had its own beauty, and all were memorable in their own way. We also had the good fortune to spot a pair of humpback whales feeding in the area on our way back from Hunt Rock. John steered the boat in their direction, and slowed down long enough for us to get a better look, but they never came closer than a hundred yards or so off our port bow.



On Friday, after a final dive on Browning Wall, we packed for the trip back to Port Hardy. We said our good-byes to the crew and guests who would be staying behind, and set sail in a light drizzle. But as I had been predicting all week, as we approached Port Hardy, the sun broke through the clouds. Just about the same time, a pod of orcas appeared in front of us. John changed course, pulled us within a reasonable distance, and shut off the engine. As fate would have it, part of the pod approached us and came quite close to the boat as we sat there with our cameras, enjoying this bonus spectacle.

But eventually, the orcas passed us by and we completed our journey to Port Hardy. Our journey home had barely begun when we started talking about making plans for a return trip in 2009.



I now understand what all the fuss was about. Reading about the diving in Port Hardy is one thing ... experiencing it is something else altogether. I've been to Heaven. I now only wonder how it will affect my enthusiasm for diving in the Purgatory we call Puget Sound.

For more information on the Browning Pass Hideaway see <http://www.divevancouverisland.com/s/hideaway.php>

To see our complete photo show go to <http://photoshow.comcast.net/watch/SC3rt6XB>

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