

PLACES

Photos: Snorkelling Vancouver Island

Exploring the wonders of the Pacific and the unique ecosystems surrounding Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands with author and photographer Sara Ellison

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STORY BY SUZANNE MORPHET

When Sara Ellison jumped into B.C.'s Salish Sea with a mask and snorkel at the height of the COVID pandemic, she was struck by two things. First, how cold the water was — no surprise there! — but also by the teeming world beneath the waves. It could have taken her breath away — had she not been holding it underwater.

"This cliff where we had chosen to go in was just covered with giant white anemones that I had never seen from the shore before," she says, still sounding awestruck several years later. "I just had no idea that this was growing just a few feet below the surface."

That first jump was the start of an all-consuming passion for Ellison, an astronomy professor at the University of Victoria more used to studying the stars in the sky than those underwater.

While renowned oceanographer and filmmaker Jacques Cousteau once rated the waters around Vancouver Island as "the best temperate-water diving in the world and second only to the Red Sea," no one ever suggested snorkelling here. Scuba divers wear dry suits that can be inflated and deflated as need be and can insulate divers from water temperatures that range from a very chilly average of 8.4°C in winter to a slightly less bracing 13.2 °C in summer.

Most snorkellers wear wetsuits (which keep you warm, sure, but not as warm as dry suits do). And so, Vancouver Island only appealed to the hardiest of snorkelers in summer, if that. Then came the pandemic. Suddenly, people who used to fly to the tropics to fulfill their snorkelling fantasies had no choice but to dip their toes in the local water.

"This was really a COVID silver lining," says Ellison. "Now we can travel again and I've been back into tropical waters, but I actually feel that we have much more exciting things to see in the cold waters of B.C. than we do in the tropics."

After that first eye-opening snorkel off Saturna (one of the Gulf Islands), Ellison began exploring the coves, cliffs and beaches around Victoria, where she lives, along with both coasts of Vancouver Island as well as the smaller islands. She soon discovered that rocky areas with a strong current are most likely to harbour more marine life, including the colourful invertebrates called nudibranchs, which she describes as "sheer eye candy."

"Some of them are smaller than my little fingernail and some of them are as long as my forearm and they come in all different colours and shapes," she enthuses. And those giant anemones she spotted off Saturna Island? "You can feed entire mussels into them and watch them watch them gobble them up!" she says with glee.

With her keen eye, scientific curiosity and penchant for taking notes and recording observations, Ellison eventually realized she had a book on her hands. *Snorkelling Adventures Around Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands* was published in 2023, giving readers detailed descriptions of where to go, what to expect and how to snorkel safely. Aside from boisterous and sometimes aggressive sea lions, "there is little to fear from marine life in our island's waters," she writes. "Nothing man-eating or deadly venomous."

The biggest danger is perhaps the strong currents that come with tidal changes. "You just have to be careful," says Ellison. "If you get to a spot, even if the current table said it should be calm, if you can see the water's moving really fast, then you don't get in."

Hypothermia is the other obvious danger. Ellison stresses she's not one of those cold-water swimmers you hear about. So, before she could pursue her new-found passion, she experimented with different kinds of wetsuits. She found that a seven-mm open-cell suit keeps her warm for up to an hour in winter and indefinitely in summer.

While winter months tend to have less plankton and therefore better visibility, daytime tides are higher, meaning you need to dive deeper to get close to creatures. Ellison favours September and October instead, when vegetation is dying back and water temperatures are still in the double digits.

Around the same time that Ellison's book hit bookstores, Facebook groups for snorkellers started popping up, creating communities of like-minded people and a place to share information and photos.

Today, *Snorkellers of BC* has more than 2,500 members and separate chat groups organizing meetups in Victoria, Nanaimo and Vancouver. There's also [Vancouver Island Women Underwater](#) and [Vancouver Island Freediving, Snorkeling and Spearfishing](#) (Freediving and snorkelling overlap somewhat, but most snorkellers don't dive more than a few metres underwater, whereas some free divers go as deep as 40 metres.)

Members' comments and photos could pique the curiosity of even the most reluctant. "Snorkelling at Terrace Beach (in Uchelet) was like being in a sunflower star nursery," writes one person.

Another noted that she was practically hyperventilating when she reported that, "Last night, we saw a seal attacking a Giant Pacific octopus!"

Or how about this advice from another Facebook member? "Get changed into/out of your wetsuit at home, so you don't get cold at the beach! Bonus — the weird looks you'll get whilst driving around town in your neoprene!"

That snorkelling around Vancouver Island seems to be exploding in popularity was noticed by Frederic Lapierre and Laurie Feist, who last year opened [East 2 West Freediving](#) in Victoria, a store dedicated to free divers, spear fishers and snorkellers. Lapierre, who moved to the West Coast from Quebec's Magdalen Islands, is still in awe of the variety of marine life around Vancouver Island. "There's so much stuff, you know, little kelp crabs holding on to the kelp stock and in the current are all the schools of fish. There's just so much to see."

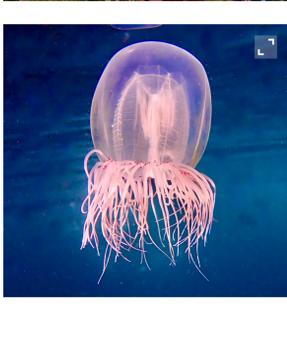
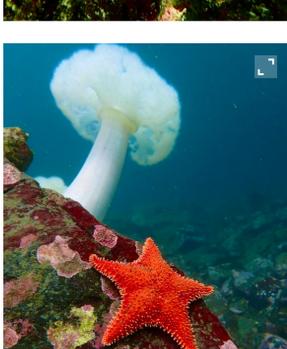
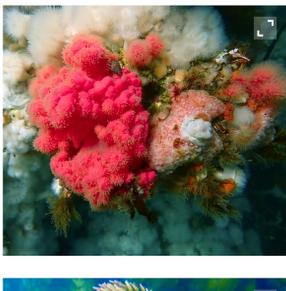
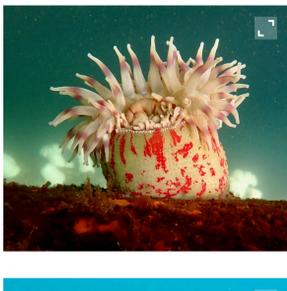
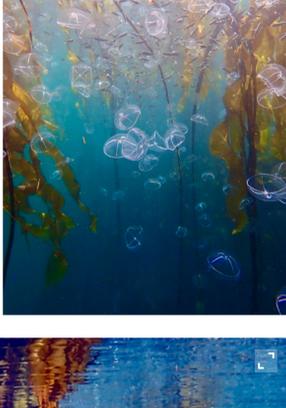
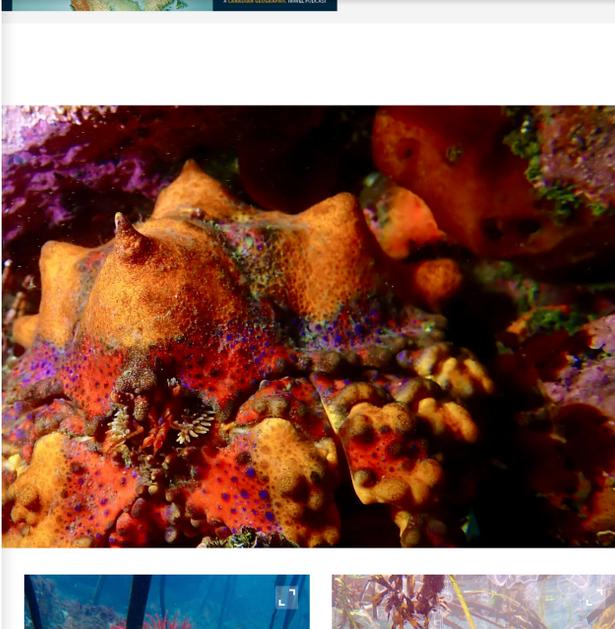
Feist says what she loves about snorkelling (or freediving; she does both) is the meditative aspect of it. "It's just so relaxing. You're out there with nature and you're just focusing on your breathing. Nothing else matters."

And, she jokes, snorkelling is the perfect winter sport for rainy Vancouver Island. If you're going to get wet anyway, you might as well be in the water. 🌊

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