



SARA ELLISON



SUZANNE MORPHET

The ethereal beauty of blades of kelp.

Iron Mine Bay is a popular snorkelling spot an hour from Victoria, B.C.

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

COVER STORY

Swimming in scenic views

On Canada’s West Coast, cold-water snorkelling has become a hot new trend

I was floating, spellbound, next to a rocky islet off southern Vancouver Island. Half a metre beneath me, reddish-purple flowers swayed with the gentle swell of the sea. When I waved my gloved hand over them, they snapped shut, feathery fronds recoiling out of sight.

I’d seen something similar while scuba diving in Fiji, but in Canada? In the cold Strait of Juan de Fuca? On shore, just 30 metres away, people out for a walk were dressed in winter coats. It was February, after all.

My snorkelling guide swam over to identify these strange flowers. “Feather dusters,” declared Olivia Devenish, founder of the Vancouver-based tour company Olivia’s Reef. “Not plants but worms.”

Eudistylia vancouveri is their scientific name, I later learned, and they’re among the some 10,000 species of marine life in the temperate waters of the Pacific Northwest. In this region of rich biodiversity, half the animal species are found nowhere else.

Scuba divers have long been drawn to Vancouver Island for its abundant underwater life. But in recent years, a growing number of people have realized you don’t need all the gear, skill and expense of scuba diving to explore here. You can simply snorkel.

This revelation has moved snorkelling “from a niche activity that always raised eyebrows and quizzical glances from onlookers to having a thousands-strong following,” University of Victoria professor Sara Ellison told me. Her 2023 book, “Snorkelling Adventures around Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands,” and her monthly meetups in Victoria have inspired people who would otherwise not have tried snorkelling here.

Ellison also offers snorkelling-related workshops and, with two friends, started the Facebook group Snorkellers of BC, which has grown to more than 14,600 members. On any given day, my feed lights up with photographs of colourful creatures I’d expect to see somewhere more tropical. Recently, for instance, someone posted a pic of a frosted nudibranch, a translucent, walnut-size sea slug that looks like someone outlined its serrated back with a glow stick.

Almost one year ago, for my 67th birthday, my husband and I tentatively put our finned feet in the water for the first time at Iron Mine Bay, a popular snorkelling spot an hour’s drive from our home in Victoria. We had rented wet suits and weight belts from a local dive shop, dug out our snorkels, masks and fins — last used in Mexico — and hiked down a muddy trail to see what all the fuss was about.

We expected the shock of cold water on our bare faces, but I hadn’t

anticipated the ethereal beauty of the common bull kelp, which provides a canopy and ecosystem for many of the “critters” here. Just offshore, we swam through a dense forest of the seaweed, which grows up to 36 metres in a single season. The kelp’s wide golden blades streamed through the clear blue water like Rapunzel’s hair, illuminated by shafts of sunlight.

Holding my breath to dive down, I saw small fish dart between the blades and wondered what else was hiding in this alien-to-me forest. “Too scary,” said a friend when I related my adventure later. “You don’t know what’s down there.”

Having read Ellison’s book, I do know there’s “nothing man-eating or deadly venomous” in these waters. Still, with its strong tides, currents that can race like rivers, and temperatures that rarely climb above 15 C, even in summer, this region of the Pacific Ocean can be intimidating.

I was hooked but wanted a guide. With cold-water snorkelling exploding in popularity, some PADI-certified scuba diving guides have turned their attention to the activity as well. Devenish of Olivia’s Reef is one of them.

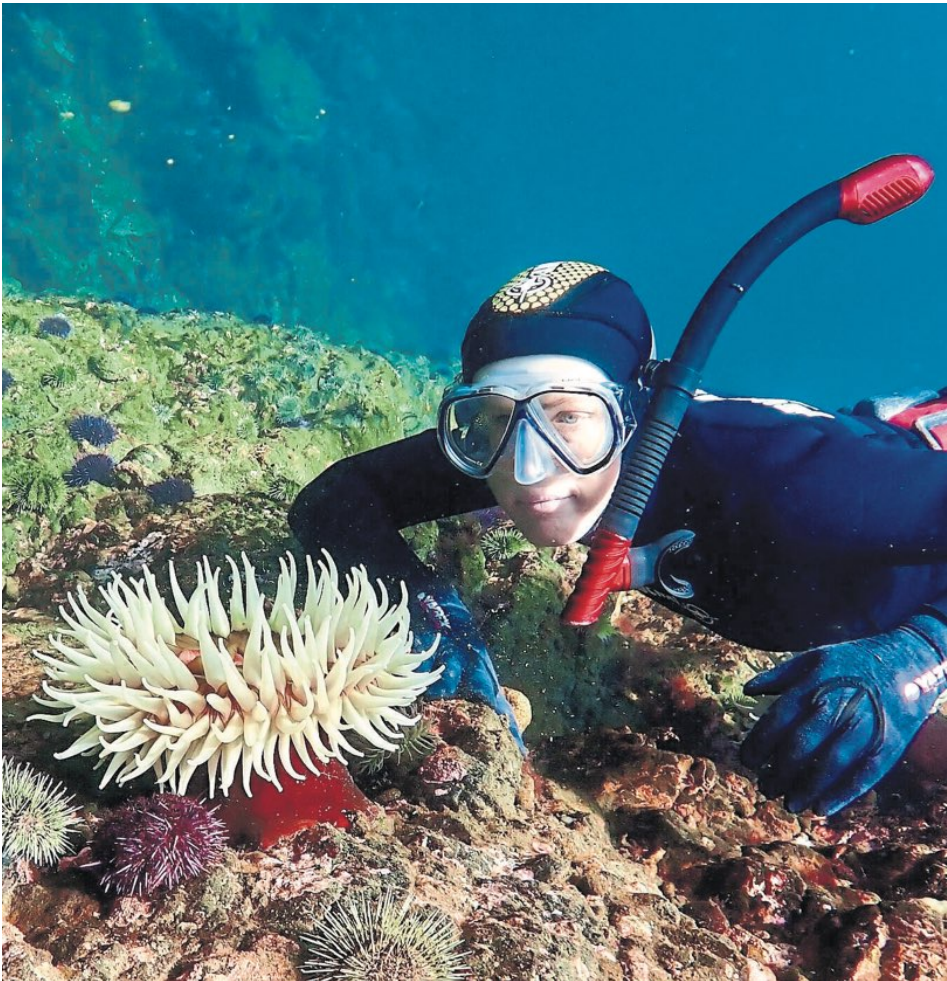
She leads one-day and multi-day snorkelling tours around Vancouver Island and the Sunshine Coast year-round. September and October are considered the best months as some vegetation dies, allowing for better visibility, and water temperature is still in the double digits.

In February, the water in the Strait of Juan de Fuca is a chilly 8 C, about the same as the air. But when I learned of Devenish’s three-day snorkelling tour happening that month, the cold didn’t deter me. The first day we snorkelled the outer edge of Victoria’s breakwater, where green sea anemones and purple starfish clung to the granite blocks close to the city’s downtown.

In the community of Sooke the next morning, we left our cosy log cabin to drive to Iron Mine Bay, the same place I snorkelled on my birthday. This time, with Devenish’s help spotting and identifying creatures, I was enamoured by a pudgy Monterey sea lemon; a jelly-bean-shaped white nudibranch; and a tiny winged sea slug “flying” through the water. White giant plumose anemones blossomed lustily along a rock wall. And the sea stars! We ogled more than a half-dozen varieties.

Despite having lived in Victoria for three decades and being a diver and snorkeller long before that, I’ve only just begun to appreciate the profusion of eye-popping, candy-coloured, sometimes ludicrous-looking creatures living just beyond our shore. It’s nothing less than wondrous.

SUZANNE MORPHET TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF OLIVIA’S REEF, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.



JON WILLIS

Sara Ellison, a University of Victoria professor, inspired heightened interest in cold-water snorkelling in B.C. with the publication of her 2023 book on the topic.



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A striped sun star, above, shows off its vibrant colourways. The sea slug, left, known as the frosted nudibranch looks like it’s been outlined with a glow stick.

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