

# Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre NOW OPEN

By Ron Kirstein, Edited by Lisa Cole



A mom and her child viewing one of the ocean displays  
Photo Courtesy of Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre

In the early 1970's, a good friend encouraged me to learn how to Scuba Dive. Shortly thereafter, I travelled to Victoria to take my first plunge in the "Salish Sea". From my very first dive, I was hooked. I progressed to teaching diving and taught scuba instructor training for a good number of years. In 1983, the opportunity to move to Victoria was presented to me. After hundreds of hours of scuba diving in the ocean, I felt for the first time in my life that I was "one" with my environment. So, when I heard that the **Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre** was being built in Sidney, I put the opening date in my calendar. I was fortunate to receive an invitation to the media event and grand opening.



Opening Ceremony for the Shaw Ocean Discovery  
Centre  
Photo Courtesy of Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre



Elder Sampson opens the ceremony  
Photo Courtesy of Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre

Saturday morning, I pick up Lisa, my assistant and good friend, and we travel out to beautiful Sidney by the Sea with anticipation mounting. We arrive early, find one of the convenient Sidney-owned parking lots, and walk two blocks to the new Centre. A crowd is starting to gather near the outdoor tide pool that connects the building to the shoreline and ocean a short distance away.

The new Centre (shown above) is in the Sidney Pier Hotel & Spa complex. This modern steel and glass structure shares very few clues of what we are about to experience. There are some banners in the windows and I see a whale skeleton hanging from the ceiling, but that is it! Our imaginations are all that we have to go on.

Soon, dignitaries arrive and First Nations Elder Tom Sampson begins the ceremony with a prayer. He wears a traditional head dress (above right). His family accompany him with singing, drumming and dancing. Elder Sampson then introduces the amazing Angus Mathews, executive director and driving force behind this project. Each of the dignitaries says a few words and the speeches end with a short talk from Céline Cousteau, daughter of ocean explorer and filmmaker Jean-Michel Cousteau and granddaughter of the legendary Jacques Cousteau.



Celine Cousteau, special guest with Ron  
Photo Courtesy of Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre



A child pops up in the bubble in one of the display tanks  
Photo Courtesy of Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre

The First Nations people sing a traditional Paddle Song as they lead us in a procession around the building. At the entrance, they sing a blessing song. The ribbon-cutting ceremony is unique: the mayor of Sidney uses a huge pair of scissors to cut through the fronds of a large piece of bull kelp. The doors open and we follow the dignitaries into the front lobby. From there, we walk through a giant "portal" into the heart of the new Centre. How cool is this! It feels like we're on the movie set for *"Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea"*.

We are led into a large, darkened room, where another short ceremony takes place in front of what appears to be about a 50 foot long movie screen. We wait in suspense as the First Nations singers sing a song for the ocean and all the creatures that live there. As their song finishes, we hear ocean sounds as scenes from beneath the Salish Sea begin to play in front of us. And suddenly, all the tanks in the room light up! The tour is on. We find ourselves in the "Gallery of the Drifters" with back-lit tanks filled with plankton, algae and jellyfish. Up a couple of steps, and we are in the "Ocean's Heartbeat", a high-tech classroom with video, microscopes, Internet links to undersea sites and live specimens. Marine educators are on hand to answer questions and assist visitors. It is anticipated that approximately 8,000 school students will visit the Centre each year. The next area houses the "Gallery of the Salish Sea," full of marine life. In the background, we hear the sound of a

Salish paddle song as life-sized Orcas swim across a giant video screen. Three resident pods of Orcas spend May to September in our waters. Many people never get to see them.



An orca breaching in the Salish Sea  
Photo Courtesy of [Orca Girl](#)



Interactive display tanks in the Salish Sea Gallery  
Photo Courtesy of Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre

An overhead projector with movement sensors casts a watery scene on the floor that changes as we walk over it. The kids love it and try different dance moves to see what kind of effect they can produce.

As we leave this Gallery, we pass through an archway tank that is home to a Giant Pacific Octopus. I have personally seen an octopus with arms that extended past the length of my body (over 6'), so I know they can get really big. A marine biologist once told me that our local waters contain more species of invertebrates than anywhere else in the world. The cool temperate waters are nutrient rich and our waters are full of life, much of which is very well presented in this new and exciting Centre.

In the last section, we find a touch pool where we can get our hands wet and get face to face with some very unique sea life. This tide pool also extends to the exterior of the building. Then there are a number of displays and a gift store.

The Centre has been designed to inspire us to explore, discover, and cherish the ocean. It makes us think about our own impact on the environment, particularly the ocean. At the end of our journey through, we are asked to make a promise to the ocean, which we can post on the wall.

This article and pictures cannot aptly present the Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre, which is truly breathtaking. I can only recommend that you get there just as soon as you can. Once you have done that, you will be back again and again with your family, your children, your grand children, and friends. It is truly an amazing place. It gives both locals and visitors the opportunity to see all the magic that scuba divers get to see when they swim in the depths of the Salish Sea.



display tank fish in kelp  
Photo Courtesy of Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre



Octopus in display tanks in the Salish Sea Gallery  
Photo Courtesy of Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre

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DISCOVERY CENTRE](#)

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