

THE GREAT RACE

By Ron Kirstein

Late Saturday night I contact my source to make sure weather conditions will be favourable for our trip to a small bit of heaven just outside Pedder Bay. The news is not good: strong winds, a small craft warning and a strong tidal change make for a likely cancellation. I have a group of Aboriginal Youth from Northwestern ready to go diving at this Marine Ecological Reserve known as Race Rocks. There goes my reputation!

Over the years, I have travelled to this special place to many times to count. The light keepers over the years used to joke about my record of "good luck". My game plan has always been to pack up and go and see what fortune bestowed me.

But this time, it doesn't look good.

Sunday morning 7:00 am. I call my source again and he says the water is flat in the Strait and we should give it a shot after all. I jump in my car and head to where the youth are gathering. They are ready and we convoy out to Pearson College in Pedder Bay. Garry Fletcher, a Biology Instructor at Pearson College, is our guide for the day. Just as we arrive, the sun breaks out. Our luck is changing.

We load up the dive gear and head out of the Bay. There is a small wind blowing from the Northeast but the tide is flooding which keeps the waves low. A great day is unfolding!



Race Rocks Vancouver Island BC

(Photo courtesy of Ron Kirstein)

As we approach Race Rocks, we see about 20 gulls harassing a mammoth sea lion as it tries to eat a very large salmon. The youth who accompany me have never seen anything like this before. Their eyes bug out, "Wow, is he huge!"

We are now nearing the dock, where a guest is sitting-- another hefty male sea lion. To the left of the dock is a large contingent of sea lions, lounging on the shores of Great Race, the island where the lighthouse is situated. Mike Slater the Marine Protected Area Guardian comes down to assist our docking and the big sea lion slides into the water. The ones to our left start making lots of noise, expressing their disapproval at our approach, but none of them leave. A large male is rolling around in the water next to a group of females. I think they're with him.



Sea Lions welcoming us to Race Rocks

(photo courtesy of Ron Kirstein)



Dock at Race Rocks
(Photo courtesy of Ron Kirstein)

Something flashes by that was big and black and moving like a rocket through the water. What was it? Then, without any warning, it's back in your face. What is it like to have a 2500 LB sea lion looking into your mask from 12 inches away? Well I can tell you. Your heart pounds so hard, you think it will go right through the wall of your chest. All of sudden you feel real small and when you watch these beasts glide through the water you feel like you're just learning how to swim. Sometimes they click their teeth by jawing at you. I think they are trying to scare you. It works.

At peak times there are hundreds of sea lions living at Race Rocks. I have been surrounded by 10 of them at once. I've gotten used to them over the years, so today I decide to play. I do a somersault and within seconds two of the sea lions do exactly the same. They seem very curious and friendly. For a moment, I think one is going to take my head off, but it swerves at the last minute. I think it just wanted to impress me! Most often, they just appear playful or curious. The first

time you see one underwater is one of those all-time rushes. I have never heard of anyone being injured by the sea lions at Race Rocks.

We dock and Gary explains the layout of the dive site to the Aboriginal Youth. The tide is flooding and moving approximately 4 knots. When the tide floods like that it forms a large back-eddy on the East side of the island where the dock is located. Often described as a location for advanced divers, the conditions we are facing are more than manageable. It is very easy to stay out of the current if you choose to. There is a large area to explore without ever getting into the it. When you approach the sides of the island, you can actually see the current screaming by. Chunks of kelp break away and it whizzes by your face along with other ocean debris.

The bottom life in this special place is exceptional. I describe it as "Butchart Gardens" underwater. It is very colourful and contains just about every kind of sea life the Pacific Northwest has to offer. Because of the strong current, the animals that feed do so



Imagine face to face with him!
(Photo courtesy of Ron Kirstein)

I've had encounters with wolf eels at there, too. For years I fed one and I swear it got to know me like your pet dog would. It grabbed me by the hand several times but never applied much force. It even allowed me to hold and carry it. After many visits, one day I could not get it to come out of its den, so I put my finger behind its large incisor teeth. It closed on my finger and I pulled it out that way. Normally, I tend to be a chicken of the sea, but in this case, I felt more than comfortable coaxing out my pet.

with reckless abandon. Barnacles open and close rapidly to maximize their filtering, as do the burrowing cucumbers. The area has an abundance of sea anemones and lots of brooding anemones. These critters have babies on their stalks that eventually move off and grow to adulthood. Because of the strong current you can find basket starfish, an uncommon starfish that looks like a white gorgon head. There are octopus, wolf eels and a large variety of fish.



Divers headed for Race Rocks

(Photo courtesy of Ron Kirstein) "

Sound great, eh? (Eh-That's Canadian for right!) But say you don't dive and wonder what all the fuss is about? Well, above water there's still lots to see and do. All of the rocks around Great Race are covered with sea lions during the winter months. There are Stellar and California sea lions, some elephant seals and numerous harbour seals. Race Rocks is a veritable smorgasbord for Transient Orcas who dine on young seals and sea lions. (The 3 resident pods of Killer Whales eat only fish.) You just never know when the whales might appear. I have seen them in this area numerous times. Salmon-eating whales are often found in areas where the deep ocean rises to shallow water and, you've guessed it, this is one of those locations. The waters around Race are only about 30 feet deep with 60-foot averages. The Strait is hundreds of feet deep and that is why the current is so strong. All that water has to go through that shallow space and move as it does.



Brooding Sea Anemones

Race Rocks is an ecological reserve and if you wish to visit you should arrange your visit ahead of time. It houses one of the oldest lighthouses on the West Coast of Canada. Pearson College has labs on site. Many sea birds nest on the Island so it is important to stay on the paths.

The Olympic Mountains of Washington State provide a majestic backdrop to the Juan de Fuca Strait, and are often covered with snow.

Many Whale Watching Tours and Ecological Tour operators will take you to this phenomenal site. Some of the Victoria dive shops also take people out to Race Rocks. If you are adventurous, you can rent boats from the Pedder Bay Marina and travel the short distance to this special place.

The sea lions move through the raging currents like they are on a leisurely stroll. It is amazing to watch them hold their position right in the middle of one. If you are lucky enough to be on the leeward side of one of the islands when the wind is blowing you will get your sinuses cleared. The smell from these rocks is something else!



The scenery just does not quit!
(Photo courtesy of Ron Kirstein)

There is no doubt in my mind that this is one of the very best dive sites in the world. It is also an exceptional place to visit to see what British Columbia has to offer. Race Rocks is the most southern point of land in Western Canada. It is well below the 49th parallel, which represents the border with the USA.

