

# Change

by Mike Lever

The diving of British Columbia and Alaska walks the line between temperate and true cold-water exploration. As the owner and Captain of four different British Columbia liveaboards, the underwater life in these waters has always fascinated me. Few are aware of how amazing the diving really is in British Columbia and Alaska.

It is hard to describe the strange sensation of drifting down sheer vertical walls, every square inch covered in invertebrate life. White anemones, which at first appear to be waving in the current, are in fact using harpoon-tipped tentacles to protect themselves and their cloned siblings from adjacent anemones. Voracious sunflower stars up to three feet across sweep over the landscape and, all the mobile animals in their path scramble ahead, desperate to escape.

I am proud to have seen these wonders and others like them with many, many divers including my friend Richard Salas. Richard has worked tirelessly on this book to capture the intensity, mystery and joy of diving in cold waters. This book is especially poignant to me because it captures the last days of liveaboard cold water dive boats in the Pacific Northwest.

My boat, the Nautilus Swell, is the last liveaboard in British Columbia, and we will retire her on December 1, 2014. The Swell was built in 1912 as a coal fired steam tug. She was the last coal burner and never converted to oil burning, instead, a slow turning diesel engine was installed in the 1950's. I meet mariners all the time who sailed on the Swell. You can feel her history in every creak of her timbers. It's the end of an era, and very sad days.

Things have changed over the 23 years I have been doing this. Large schools of rockfish that we observed 20 years ago are gone. Fished out in my opinion. All that's left is the odd rockfish hiding in cracks in the walls. There are some exceptions, but for the most part, the fish stocks have been decimated.

Nobody else seems interested in running another liveaboard up here. It's too hard for anyone new to start up these days. The business has become too capital intensive due to the ever-changing laws. Every year the regulations get tougher. I guess running a cold water liveaboard is a particular type of insanity, but I love it. I've almost lost track of how many wrecks I discovered. The cumulation of 23 years of exploring BC and Alaska, and there is nobody to pass this information along to.

Captured in these images, the memory will live on. Ten years from now, twenty years from now, fifty years from now: the images and the memory they embody will be there for people to share. Browning Pass, Shushartie Bay, Staples Cut and so many other anchorages. These locales once saw six or more liveaboards all anchored up with divers waiting for the next slack current. The spirit of those boats will linger on and echo through the deserted bays.

To Richard I say thank you with all my heart for your beautiful images. My newest plan is to get a DeHavilland Beaver and offer seaplane diving. Invite our friends from over the years to visit us at our island off Pender Harbour and come diving. I'm not finished with cold water yet. I hope it won't be a long wait until our next slack together. ■