

Diving Around the World

with Trish Fedewich, Norm Witt, and Family

Trish Fedewich learned to dive at age 15, inspired by *National Geographic* magazine photos and stories. Norm took up diving at UBC; his friend was a dive instructor.

On their first date, Norm told Trish he was a diver. So am I, Trish replied. Norm thought she dove off diving boards, but Trish convinced him she also was a certified SCUBA diver.

That was 15 years ago. Since then they've had exciting adventures diving in BC and around the world. Here are some of their highlights.

Diving around BC

Powell River

Most BC divers own a book called *141 Dives in BC*. Following this book led us to a shore dive called Octopus City.

We had never seen octopi and were armed with flashlights to lure them from their dens. We swam about 60 feet from shore. Checking under a big boulder, sure enough there were suction cups. Within a moment a giant octopus came out and draped itself over the boulder. The creature was about 10 feet long. We backed off



In the tropics

in fear, but later approached it and even touched it. We marvelled at it for about 20 minutes, then swam off to explore a reef.

Later that day we dove at a site where a statue of a mermaid had been sunk. The base of the mermaid is a concrete block. Another giant octopus came out to meet us—this one even bigger. It spread itself out and turned white. We couldn't remember what that colour meant and it looked intimidating so we swam off. Later we read that white meant it was afraid.

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We have yet to have other octopi interact with us like that. They usually remain hidden in their dens.

Hornby Island

We took a short boat trip to a small island off Hornby that had at least 20 bald eagles on it. We jumped into 20 feet of water and were overwhelmed with a few dozen friendly sea lions swimming around us. These huge creatures, weighing around 1200 pounds each, approached us like enthusiastic puppies.

It was an incredible experience, but not for those who are claustrophobic because the sea lions almost swarmed us. That amazing place is also known for its six-gill sharks that a diver can observe.

Campbell River

Diving off Quadra Island, a short ferry ride from Campbell River, is our favourite BC dive destination. The currents are extremely fast, which makes for abundant sea life. The soft corals along the rock face of the site called Row and Be Damned are spectacular and rival the best dive sites in the Caribbean. The only downside to this area is that you must dive on the slack tide and therefore, some days, you may get in only one dive.

"In 1998, my friend Cathy Lambert and I were pregnant," says Trish. "When our husbands and friends were diving off Gabriola Island, we snorkelled down the Campbell River. The salmon were spawning and swimming upstream as we floated down. The fish ignored us." That is a popular attraction for divers and nondivers to enjoy from August to October.

Diving in BC is beautiful and world famous because of the size and variety of marine life. We've frolicked with seals at Porteau Cove and played with menacing-looking wolf eels.

But diving here is not for the faint of heart. The water is cold and the visibility variable. We have very strong currents. A drysuit is a must.

The dive instruction is also excellent. We recommend that anyone thinking of taking up diving should become certified here because the safety standards are much higher than in other countries.

Mexico

Cozumel

Our honeymoon included diving the reefs off this world-famous island in the Caribbean. The Mexican dive masters were eager to show off the beautiful terrain and sea life. Palancar reef is the most famous; the 30-foot high coral formations were gorgeous. Guides led us through arches and lured out moray eels for us to see. One green moray was about 4 feet in length and about 6 inches deep.

The Mexicans offered us a video of our dives, which is a treasured souvenir. The diving was spectacular and we've been back several times since and never disappointed. This is by far our overall favourite dive spot for natural abundant beauty and ease of diving.

Playa del Carmen in the Mayan Riviera

There are many great spots for snorkelling. Xel-Ha is a sheltered area so it's great for kids and beginners. The waters are teeming with fish and there are interesting rock formations. The ever-friendly Mexicans amazed us by turning up in the most unexpected places to take our picture and later trying to sell it to us.



Dolphin Kisses at Xcaret, on the Mayan Riviera, Mexico, February 2005 (The kids were 4 and 6 years.)

Above: Michael, Below: Rachel

Xcaret

Another great spot. There is snorkelling, encounters with dolphins, swimming in underground rivers, and much more. We spent a day, but you could easily spend many. We took our kids to the dolphin encounter where, in small groups, we learned about dolphins first-hand and, at the end, the kids got a dolphin kiss.

The highlight of this area was a trip to the Hidden Worlds Cenotes. Cenotes are freshwater caverns that are part of an underground river system. We dove in the underground caverns following lines that had been laid to show the way. This is an advanced dive because in many places, there is no air above you if you have to surface. The caverns are full of stalactites and stalagmites—limestone formations.

Even our kids snorkelled in the caverns after descending down a ladder into the Bat Cave. This spot is so special because of the rock formations and the filtered light. The area was filmed in the IMAX production *Journey Into Amazing Caves*.

United States

Molikini Crater, Maui

We've never found Hawaii a great dive spot, but it has the best snorkelling we've ever done. Molikini Crater is



Ladder down into the Bat Cave



Hidden Worlds Cenotes, Mexico





Michael and Norm at Kealakekua Bay, South Kona Coast, Big Island of Hawaii, February 2006

crescent-shaped so it provides great snorkelling in protected waters. The colours of the fish and corals are incredibly vibrant and the water is shallow. Novices are welcome.

Kona Coast, Big Island of Hawaii

Many spots along the coast afforded us the opportunity to swim freely with turtles. Other tourists reported swimming with spinner dolphins. The waters were teeming with colourful fish and beautiful corals, too. The waters were so inviting that our children Rachel and Michael, aged 7 and 5, were quite comfortable snorkelling in the deep water. Rachel even spotted a small moray eel in a tidal pool.



Snorkeling in Xel-Ha on the Mayan Riviera, Mexico. The Mexican cameraman surprised us from above.

Kona also offers a very unique experience—diving or snorkelling with manta rays. Manta rays have no teeth and are plankton eaters. We snorkelled at night where many lights had been placed in the water to attract plankton which, in turn, lures the mantas. Trish saw six on the night she went. One is nicknamed Big Bertha because it reportedly has a 16-foot wingspan.

It was scary at first, exhilarating, then very moving. The mantas soar through the water so gracefully.

The mantas perform barrel rolls in the water with their gigantic mouths open to feed on the plankton. Because their eyes are on either side of their flat heads, they sense where everything is in the dark water. We hovered above them and only occasionally did they bump into us. It was scary at first, exhilarating, then very moving. The mantas soar through the water so gracefully.

Cuba

Most Canadians vacation in the resort city called Veradero. We dived there in the Atlantic Ocean and were amazed by the huge lobsters that our guides wrestled out of the rocks. Caribbean lobsters have no claws, but they have long antennae that give them away. They were great grilled with just a bit of salt and lime juice. The scuba tanks we used were a little scary; they were short, stubby tanks covered in rust.

The best diving was across the island in the Bay of Pigs in the Caribbean Sea. The water is a few degrees warmer. We saw some spectacular rock walls that fell hundreds of feet below us. The dive sites were adjacent to major roads and the incredible scenery was easily accessible. Even locals were diving there.

Besides the amazing diving, it is the only place where we had a

private guide. He was our driver and dive master and toured us around the island. We went back to his home for a lobster dinner. He even had a friend who sold us cigars.

Egypt

Not many people would go to Egypt to scuba dive, but we wanted to experience the raw beauty of the Red Sea. Of course the historic sites on the land were not to be missed. We dived in Hurghada and in the resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh. The attractions are the large species that include hammerhead sharks and rays. Unfortunately we didn't see any of them. What we did experience were 3-hour boat rides to get to the tip of the Sinai to start the dive—and very rough water.

Two weeks before we arrived, two people had been crushed under the swim board while trying to get back on their boat. On our boat, four people got lost in the current; it was a scary 40 minutes before they were spotted bobbing in the raging seas.

We learned it was better to dive with the European companies, not the Egyptian dive companies, because the Europeans offered better safety standards. Overall, the diving was not nearly as good as what we've experienced in the Caribbean.



Lobster in Cuba

Grand Cayman

We were only here for an afternoon stop on a cruise, but Trish got the chance to go to renowned Stingray City. The group boated out to a sandbar where we stood in waist-deep water.

About 20 stingrays 2 to 3 feet across swam by and occasionally rubbed up against us. I held some squid under the water and a ray swam over me and sucked up the food. I was careful to pull my hand back from its large mouth. This was a great unique adventure that even a nonsnorkeller would enjoy.

Now that we're travelling with our children, we seek out spots where it will be easy for them to snorkel. Good quality, well-fitting masks are the key to comfort. Trish always wears a wetsuit to keep warm, even in the tropics.

Our kids have shown enthusiasm for snorkelling and identifying marine life. After a cenote dive, Trish laid her tank on the ground while getting out of



Trish and Norm in Edmonds in Washington State

her gear and Rachel put the regulator in her mouth and took a few breaths.

As I turned around, I saw her eyes wide with amazement. We won't be surprised if they would like to join us for deeper adventures in our underwater playgrounds. ▲



In Cuban Waters