

Like your fried eggs over easy?

Vancouver Island: Jellyfish enhance an underwater world -- but hold the cayenne

By Neville Judd, The Province July 27, 2010

So close to breakfast, they weren't the kind of fried eggs I'd been expecting.

About two feet wide and with stinging tentacles 20 feet long, a fried egg jellyfish had just made my acquaintance, dangling a single silk-like thread by my face.

Forty feet below the surface of Saanich Inlet, I peered up to see a flotilla of fried egg jellyfish cruising by.

"It's okay, they won't kill you," dive-master Elly Pendleton had assured us earlier in the boat. "But their sting kind of feels like cayenne pepper on your face, it's not very comfortable." Covered head to foot in neoprene wetsuits with just a glimpse of skin exposed beneath a mask, we were unlikely to get egged. Fried egg jellyfish, or *Phacellophora camtschatica* as biologists know them, are just one colourful attraction in Saanich Inlet's underwater safari.

Saanich Inlet lies between the Saanich Peninsula and the Malahat highlands on Vancouver Island. Pendleton runs Rockfish Divers, part of the Marina and Eco-Adventure Centre at the Brentwood Bay Lodge and Spa.

The resort is well known for its spa, which pampers guests with pedicures, manicures, facials, massages and vinotherapies -- whatever they are.

We'd come for a two-night scuba dive package and were greeted like minor celebrities when we showed up at the lodge on bikes.

"I think we get cyclists about once a month," Vicky, on the front desk, told us.

Cycling was my wife Leah's idea. Brentwood Bay Lodge and Spa is luxurious, all soaring windows and Douglas fir beams, the kind of place where the bath towels are the size of bed sheets and the beds are the size of a dance floor.

To earn such luxury we should ride our bikes, Leah had suggested. It turned out to be a good decision. From Swartz Bay ferry terminal it's about an hour's ride via Sidney on the Lochside Trail and the Interurban Trail, mostly flat routes along the ocean and then inland through fields and quiet subdivisions. Cycling had freed us from unnecessary baggage and compelled us to virtually live in the robes and sandals provided for the next 48 hours. It also honed my appetite for beer-braised buffalo ribs and pints of Lighthouse Amber Ale at the lodge's Seagrille restaurant.

The following morning, after two mugs of coffee and an orange juice, we were in the hotel pool with Elly, getting used to our wet suits and learning the basics of scuba diving.

And the basics are, don't drink two mugs of coffee and an orange juice before scuba diving; or at least before putting on your gear.

Regulators, emergency regulators, inflator valves, purge valves, pressure gauges, depth gauges, oxygen tank, wetsuit, fins, snorkel, mask ... on a full bladder it's a lot to wear -- about 60 pounds of added weight, in fact -- let alone learn how to use.

Fortunately, once in the water that equipment becomes largely weightless. Just as fortunately, I got to a bathroom after our pool orientation and before boarding the Loup de Mer, Elly's dive boat.

Twenty minutes later we were at McCurdy Point, a sheltered stretch of the inlet, to embark on the real thing: Beneath us another world to explore with only our inhibitions in the way. Our early efforts to descend faltered as we tried to get reacquainted with our regulators while adjusting our buoyancy. Equalizing the pressure in our ears also took time to master. But encouraged by those tantalizing glimpses of the jungle beneath the surface, and Elly's unflagging patience, we persevered and eventually descended.

What a world! The fish mesmerized me first: vermilion rockfish, vivid and inquisitive; moody looking ling cod with permanent frowns; and muted-yellow perch. Then came the fried egg jellyfish flypast above us, a

reminder we had descended almost 40 feet now -- about the limit for a rookie diver.

Along terraced shelves sea urchins, giant nudibranchs (sea slugs) and plumose anemones added brilliant colour to the rock and kelp, spidery looking crabs busied themselves and sun stars basked motionless. Elly pointed to what looked like the most delicate lace flower -- the eggs of a nudibranch, she later told me.

Of course, we'd merely rippled the surface. Saanich Inlet has its octopus and giant cloud sponges, treasures for more experienced divers in deeper waters. But the appetite had been whetted.

At the Brentwood Pub that night, my ears still popping, I reflected on the dive. It wasn't just the visuals that had held me in thrall. It was that for a few moments I relaxed enough to enjoy the quiet and the freedom to fly.

Then I ordered the Pacific sushi platter.

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