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## A DEADLY PATH

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Our Cyclists*

PG.  
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### Pandemic Paddles

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BC Coast

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*Story & Photos by Frank Wolf*

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# FREELY, INTO THE DEPTHS

FREEDIVING OFF VANCOUVER ISLAND OFFERS A MEDITATIVE  
LESSON IN AN UNFAMILIAR AND UNFORGIVING ENVIRONMENT

*By Andrew Findlay*

**T**he ocean roils around a rocky shoal near the entrance to Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia, as a forest of bull kelp dances in perfect choreography with the ebb-and-flow of the Pacific surge. The sea is a bracing six degrees Celsius, roughly equal to the air temperature on this bone-chilling autumn day.

I seal my goggles to the wetsuit hood, then peer into the depths, luminescent green like looking through an emerald filter. I nod at Chris Adair, my freediving buddy and instructor floating nearby, take a series of deep inhalations then dive toward the bottom, some 10 metres below me. The pressure in my inner ear mounts quickly. Water is much heavier than air. At a depth of only 10 metres, your body experiences nearly 30 psi, or two atmospheres of pressure, twice the pressure at sea level. I try with limited success to equalize with the Frenzel technique, which involves using one's tongue as a piston to send waves of equalization into the middle ear. But the pain persists.

I was told not to dive deeper into agony, so instead choose to hover for 20 seconds at around six metres, from where I can see the olive-green flash of a yellowtail rockfish swimming among the protective nooks and crannies of the reef. Bright green sea anemones and urchins cling to the rocks among the holdfasts of kelp. As the oxygen-rich red blood cells

supplying my brain start to thin, the natural impulse is to panic. However, I resist a little longer the urge to swim upwards, lingering a few seconds more in this magical submarine world. Then it's time. With a few flipper kicks, I ascend through the water column, then break the surface with a loud exhalation.

I give the thumbs up to Adair, who bobs with his spear gun at the ready, 20 metres away in the gentle Pacific swell.

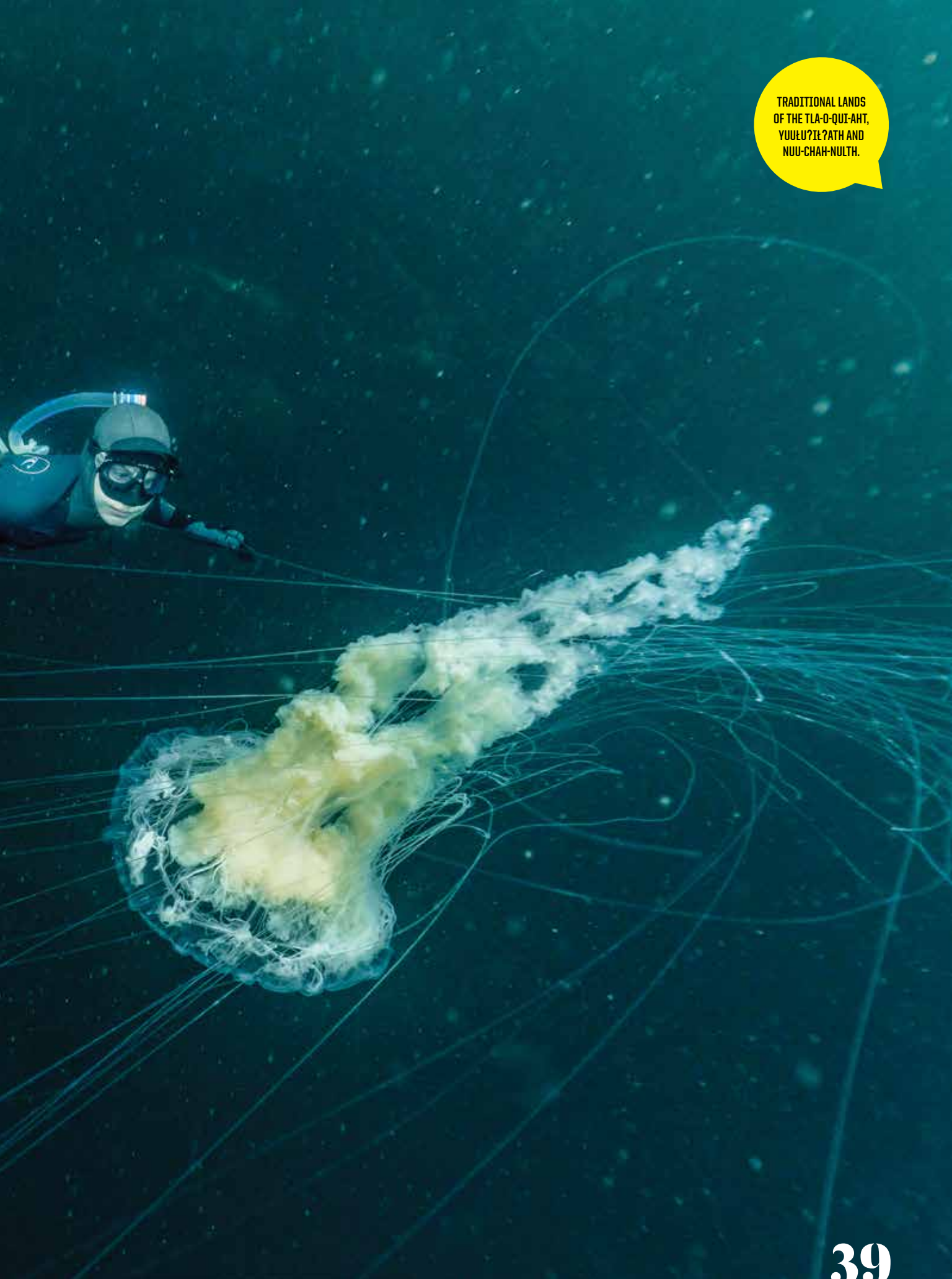
"How was that?" says Adair, co-owner and head instructor at Bottom Dwellers, a Victoria-based company that offers freediving instruction and guided charters.

"Beautiful but I was having a tough time equalizing," I reply.

"It'll come. It takes practice," he says.

**AFTER YESTERDAY'S IN-CLASS** theory session, I had joined Adair for an afternoon of hunting and gathering in the ocean, and to put some of what I had learned into practice. There is something of the ancient arts to freediving, as challenging mentally as it is physiologically demanding. No supplemental oxygen other than what you can store in your lungs. Just you, a mask, some flippers and in our northern waters—a wetsuit. Adair likens it to "training the mind and learning the skills to be more in control." Or putting it another way, "being more comfortable with being less in control," Adair says. ▶

CHRIS ADAIR



TRADITIONAL LANDS  
OF THE TLA-O-QUI-AHT,  
YUULU?IL?ATH AND  
NUU-CHAH-NULTH.



Humans have been freediving for food for thousands of years. Archaeologists studying the mummified remains of the Chinchorian, an ancient people that lived around 6,000 years ago on the coast of present-day Chile, discovered exostosis, a condition in which the bones of the ear canal grow over due to repeated exposure to cold water. Modern day surfers, kayakers and divers refer to it as “surfer’s ear.” In Japan, the *Ama* (loosely translated as “woman of the sea”) is an ancient tradition of freediving and foraging for abalone, oysters, sea cucumbers and other seafood that is passed from generation to generation and is still highly revered in contemporary Japanese culture. Recreational freediving is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1949, a daring

Italian air force captain named Raimondo Bucher dove to a seafloor depth of 30 metres off the coast of Naples on a wager. Observers confidently predicted that he’d perish due to the pressure, but Bucher surfaced unharmed and richer to the tune of 50,000 Lira.

For Adair, freediving was a natural progression. As a Vancouver Island kid, he grew up next to a lake and was holding his breath underwater long before he even knew that freediving was a thing. At age 15, he got his first introduction to spearfishing and freediving during a family trip to the Mediterranean.

“We went out to collect items for a Bouillabaisse soup,” Adair explains. “I remember the experience of tracking and hunting fish underwater being pretty alluring. I

ended up getting my first fish and a squid that day.”

Though it would be years before Adair would go spearfishing again, the taste was enough to sink a hook. In 2013, he met Mick Sheinberg, then co-owner of Victoria’s HtO Surf Shop, which was stocking spearfishing equipment at the time. It reignited his interest in the underwater world, and three years later he launched Bottom Dwellers.

**THOUGH I AM** comfortable in the water, diving to depth while holding my breath feels counterintuitive. We are, after all, by nature terrestrial creatures. It takes presence of mind, an almost Zen calmness to relax and allow one’s physiology to adapt to enable prolonged forays into the underwater realm.



LEFT: Foraging for fresh crab near Tofino, BC. FROM TOP: Bottom Dwellers operates freediving tours in Tofino and Victoria. Collecting fresh shellfish in the cold Pacific; finning through a biodiverse bull kelp forest; a prize sea cucumber catch; even the sea-flora itself has culinary value.



## FRESHWATER FREEDIVES

Head inland to these salt-free beginner dive sites:

### HORSESHOE LAKE

**Jasper National Park, Alberta**

This wall-dive into a cold and beautiful glacial lake is set alongside Icefields Parkway, about 28 kilometres south of Jasper townsite.

### FATHOM FIVE NATIONAL MARINE PARK

**Bruce Peninsula, Ontario**

There are 22 marked dive sites within this park—one of the best for novice freedivers is *China*, a two-masted schooner sunk in three metres of water.

### MORRISON'S QUARRY

**Wakefield, Quebec**

About 30 kilometres north-west of Ottawa, Ontario, Morrison's Quarry, near the town of Wakefield, Quebec, offers a shore dive to view a sunken plane, boat, car and more.

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British Columbia has long been renowned to harbour some of the best cold-water diving on Earth—an experience accessible without the need for air tanks.

“The meditative mindset that comes with freediving is hard to compare. There’s nothing quite like it. The mental practice and strengthening, was something that greatly drew me into the sport,” Adair explains.

Humans, it seems, can’t resist a challenge, to go farther, faster, higher—and deeper. In 2007, Austrian Herbert Nitsch set a world record when he dove to 214 metres near the Greek Island, Spetses. Nitsch, who can hold his breath for more than nine minutes, achieved it in a “no-limit” freedive, whereby divers use any method of their choosing, such as a sled or bar attached to a line for descending and gas-filled balloons for ascending. It’s considered the most dangerous form of a sport that is inherently risky.

“You know you’re about to do something fun when you have to sign this many waivers,” Adair said at the onset of yesterday’s in-class session, trying to inject some levity as course participants scribbled signatures on a sheaf of liability waivers as thick as a bible.

There are things to consider carefully about this pursuit. For example, hypoxia, or lack of oxygen to the brain, can cause what’s known as shallow-water blackout. It



As local and fresh as it gets: combine freediving, fishing and gourmet dining.

## DIVE & DINE

Bottom Dwellers has partnered with Tofino Resort and Marina to offer a Tide to Table freediving course that teaches sustainable and safe harvesting techniques. The course is capped by a freediving excursion in the waters off Tofino, enabling participants to harvest seafood and have it prepared fresh that evening by chef Terry Somerville at the resort’s 1909 Kitchen. [tofinoresortandmarina.com](http://tofinoresortandmarina.com)



## FOR MORE INFO

Bottom Dwellers offers Performance Freediving International-certified courses that focus on safe diving and risk management. With a combination of in-class and in-water sessions, participants learn and practice proper breathing and equalization techniques, rescue scenarios, and how to use and maintain equipment. [bottomdwellers.ca](http://bottomdwellers.ca)

happened to Adair a few years back when he was trying to break his personal breath-hold record of more than five minutes in a swimming pool. Divers can also suffer from nitrogen narcosis at depth, which impairs judgment and consciousness. Pressure changes and equalization issues can damage eyes, sinuses and ear tissue.

**MY FREEDIVING GOALS** are modest. If I could eventually flipper my way around a reef for 30 seconds at eight metres, I'd be happy. If done safely, Adair says the rewards of freediving are huge, not to mention the potential of a fresh seafood

feast to follow, which is our goal this afternoon. It's been good hunting so far for Adair. So good, that a curious sea lion periscopes to the surface not far from where I tend an hour-and-half's worth of spearfishing effort—three lingcod in the realm of 20 pounds each.

"I love being able to harvest seafood sustainably and sharing catch with friends and family. The experience of the hunt, harvest and shared table brings it all together as a whole," Adair explains, after we haul ourselves back aboard the boat and begin the bumpy 20-minute ride back to Tofino. ✕

# FOR ADVENTURES TO COME...

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