




Exploring an Underwater World

*by Penny Howard
Photographs by
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On August 28, 1988, an unusual sailboat named Lorcha docked at Harbourfront in Toronto, Ontario. For five years, Lorcha had been home for Penny Howard and her younger brother, Peter, and their parents, Fiona and Paul, as they sailed from country to country around the world. The family had started out on their grand adventure on Penny's sixth birthday, July 1, 1983.



When we left Canada, I knew how to swim, but I had never learned to dive or to snorkel, that is, to swim with a mask and breathing tube. I first wanted to snorkel on Bucco Reef in Tobago, an island in the clear, warm waters of the Caribbean.

Dad showed me how to put on a mask and snorkel. The mask keeps an airspace around your eyes, which enables you to see clearly through the water. The snorkel is simply a curved tube with a mouthpiece. You swim on the surface of the water with your face down and you breathe through the snorkel, which sticks up in the air above the water.

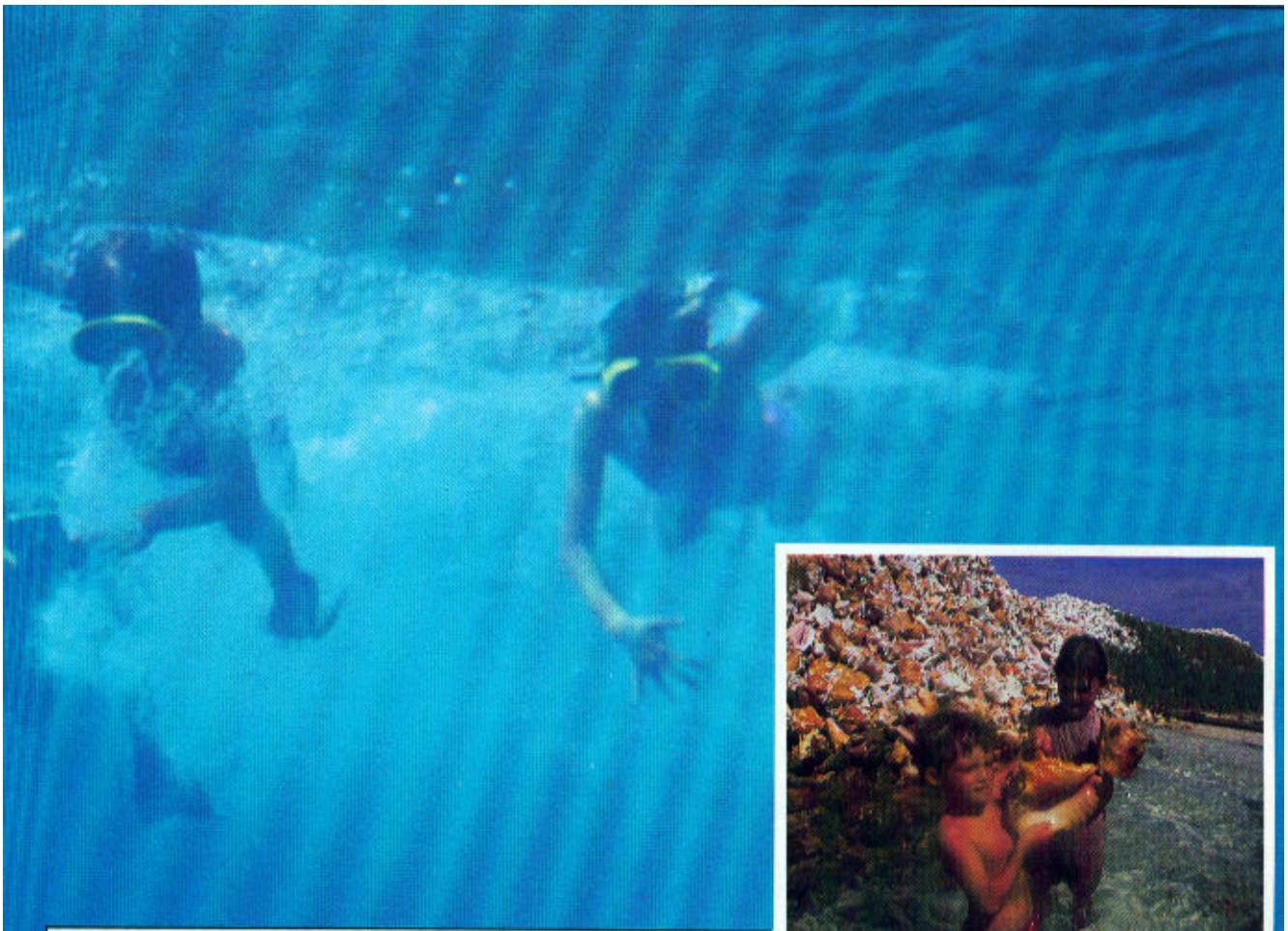
To tell you the truth, I was a little scared. What if I couldn't breathe? But when I looked out over the beautiful, warm, turquoise

water, I decided it was too good a chance to miss, so I slipped in.

When I opened my eyes, I was in a different world. I was amazed at all the beautiful fish. Red and orange and green and blue and gold and purple creatures swam past, with all kinds of spots, dots, stripes, and squiggles.

But there were other, less friendly underwater creatures. When a mean-looking barracuda cruised by, I swam very close to Mom. He was almost two meters long!

Snorkeling on the surface of the water was fun, but soon I wanted to take a closer look at the fish and coral. So I began to learn to dive. The flippers I wore helped me swim faster and dive deeper. Soon I was diving down two or three meters.



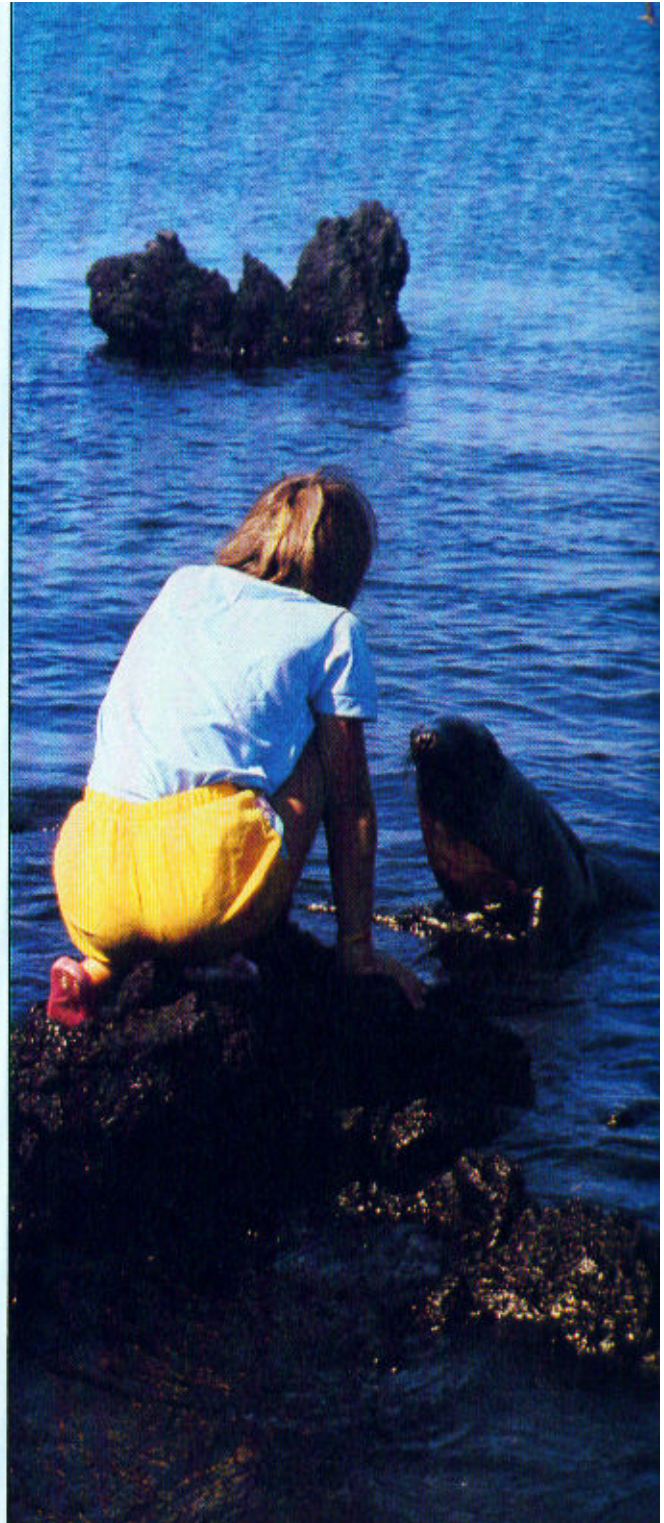
Peter and I both liked to snorkel and to dive in the coral reefs and islands just off the coast of Venezuela. Sometimes we caught dinner for the whole family by diving for conch. These big shellfish are quite heavy, and Peter,

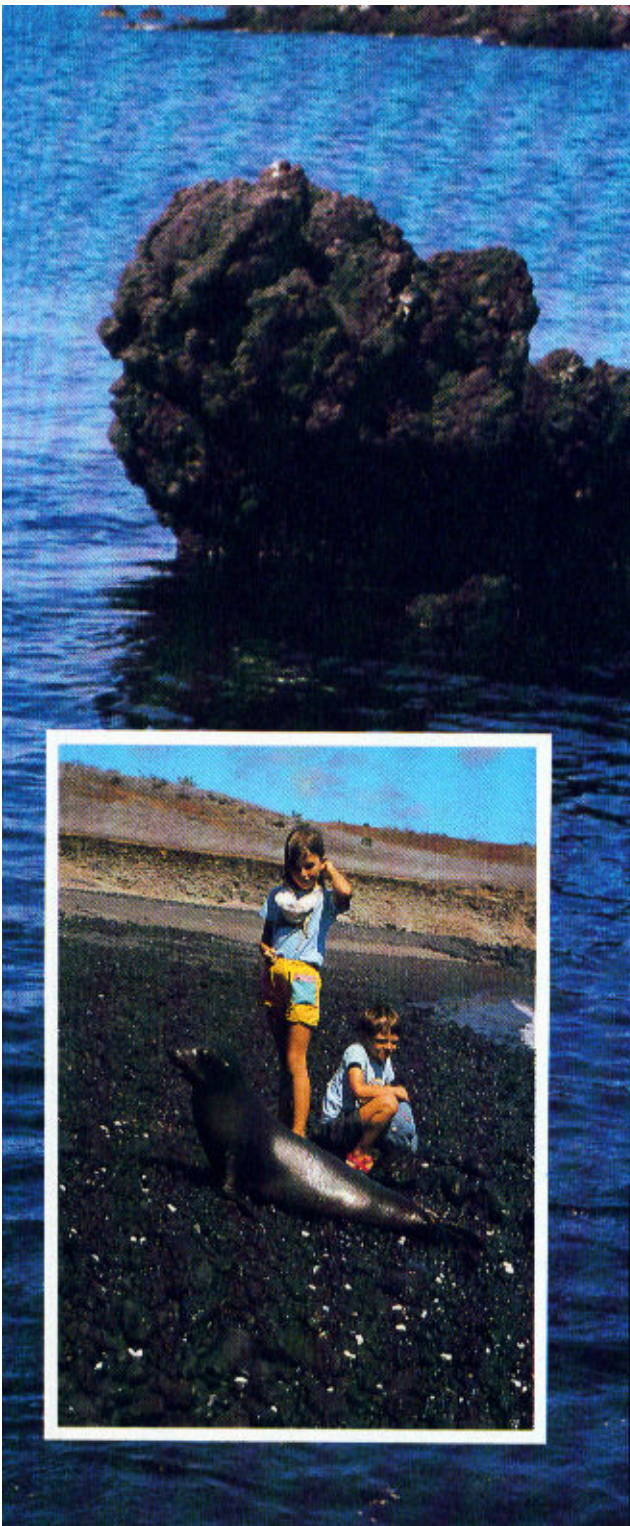
only five, would be practically spluttering when he finally made it to the surface. Someone usually had to go and help him get the conch into the dinghy before he sank again under its weight.

If I had to select one favorite place to swim, it would be the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific Ocean. All the islands have very tame animals on them.

One day, our guide told us we could go swimming with the sea lions. I was a bit apprehensive about this. The slithery creatures looked quite friendly, but they were nearly as big as me and they were swimming around so fast. But after everyone else had slid into the water, I went in too. It was kind of fun, with sea lions zooming right at me, then sheering off at the very last moment, just centimeters away.

It was easier to make friends with the sea lions on shore than while swimming with them. I had a long talk with a sea lion who popped up out of the water beside a rock I was on. Another sea lion came ashore to tell Peter and me about how a shark had bitten off his flipper. He had nasty scars to back up his story.





By the time we got to the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, I was a pretty strong swimmer and I felt comfortable diving to about three meters.

One day, someone from another boat asked Mom and Dad to dive for their “prop” (the propeller for the engine of their dinghy). They had dropped it overboard in about eight meters of water.

“There’s also a really nice triton shell down there,” said our friend.

“Hmmm,” I thought to myself. I had never dived so deep before, but I took a long breath and swam down and down and down.

Everyone was surprised when I came up, gasping for breath—and holding the shell!

The shell now sits in my bedroom in Toronto. It reminds me of great adventures in faraway lands. It also tells me I can do whatever I want to do—if I just try.

