

Blue Creek – Team building 2014

Jamie Obern



Blue Creek Resurgence is a cold, deep, remote and hard to access cave system in the Kahurangi National Park. Since 2009 I have run six diving expeditions to this cave, each one building upon the experience of the previous trip. What has become obvious to me is that there are only two smart ways to tackle this challenge – you either go extremely lightweight, with a tiny group of very experienced rebreather divers and limited objectives, or you take a much larger team, go mainly open circuit and tackle multiple objectives. To date I have always opted for the latter, partly because there are so few experienced rebreather-cave divers in New Zealand and partly because I am keen to grow the pool of potential cave divers based here.

However, whilst it sounds exciting having multiple objectives and a large team with which to tackle them, this option comes with some major practical difficulties. Accommodation and transport becomes more complicated. Planning meals and snack quantities takes more time. Communicating objectives and organising each day's activities requires a more formalised process. And with a big but inexperienced team there is a need for training. In prior years we have always dedicated time during each expedition to training the 'newbies', but given our ambitions for future cave exploration I decided to dedicate the majority of this year's expedition to training. In January a dozen of us met up at our usual base in Tapawera and headed into the bush. It was the biggest team of divers we have ever used for this project and the results were encouraging.

The first challenge newbies face is an unexpected one – learning how to kit up successfully. The nature of the location requires some modifications to both the standard diving kit and the kitting up process. We begin by lowering the majority of the equipment into the cave, setting up the tanks and checking everything is working. Once this is done the divers climb out of the cave and start to layer up. The water temp is 6 degrees and due to the restricted nature of the cave swimming activity is limited. I always wear several additional layers, plus use dry gloves and have an extra thick 11mm hood which I save purely for Blue Creek. During this part of the process the key is to dress slowly but efficiently – you don't want to start sweating, as this will chill you badly once you get into the water, but also there are other divers waiting for their dives so you cannot take all day to get ready.

Once dressed you need to climb back into the cave, ensuring you don't damage your dry-suit as you slide over the rocks and squeeze in through the entrance. Next you need to get into your remaining gear, a process which is again more complicated than usual. Space in the entrance chamber is at a premium and there is nowhere flat to put your feet or to rest the tanks. Previous trips have taught us the benefits of overhead electric lights and benches, which we set up on day one and we also always ensure at least one extra person is available to help the divers kit up. Finally you slide into the water, put fins on, clip on any additional stages and do the pre-dive checks – but again this is carefully controlled. Team-members need to limit how much time they spend waiting in the entrance pool, partly to keep warm, but importantly also to avoid stirring up the bottom sediments and ruining the visibility. As before the key is to be slow and smooth.

The second challenge is also unexpected, simply getting comfortable once inside the cave. The bulky undergarments make the gear feel cumbersome and unfamiliar and manipulating anything whilst wearing dry-gloves is incredibly frustrating at first. The initial section of the cave is a downward 45 degree slope, meaning you have to do everything whilst floating head-down and feet-up, a position most inexperienced dry-suit divers have nightmares about. Once comfortable doing nothing the divers are then expected to complete the tasks required on the particular dive, which could include surveying, photography, video, equipment transport or habitat support.

Almost all of our dives involve some task or other, meaning general sight-seeing is limited to any remaining time after the tasks have been completed. The simplest task is equipment transport, usually moving safety bottles into position for the biggest dives or cleaning up used bottles at the end of big dives, but even this is challenging at first. Ask yourself: Could you safely manage 4 or 5 additional stages and a scooter, plus all your own gear whilst inclined at 45 degrees in a very restricted space? Surveying is another relatively straightforward task in theory, but difficult to do well. Accuracy is vital and managing a compass, slate, pencil, depth gauge and light all at the same time usually takes multiple dives to master. Successful photography and video is another league entirely in terms of difficulty, as these tasks are not done individually but as a team, which means lots of planning and communication. To get good shots we need not only a good cameraman, but also good models and good lighting support divers – all of whom need to know what to do and where to position themselves.



And finally there is the habitat, probably the most amusing part of this year's trip. Several years ago we identified the need for a decompression habitat in the cave, basically a big pressurised air bubble which the divers can climb into in order to stay warm during long decompression stops. It is also a major safety feature for divers who may have flooded their suits and I have used it twice for this purpose. For anyone unsure of what I'm referring to, the closest analogy I can give for setting up the habitat is pitching a frame tent. We have a collapsible frame which we take into the cave, a bag which attaches to the frame

and then we use rocks as anchor points to hold it in place. Finally bench seats need to be tied into the frame to hold everything rigid and maintain a wide enough entrance for the divers to move in and out of. Continuing with the tent analogy, if you have ever seen an over-enthusiastic family trying to put up a new frame tent without reading the instructions then you'll be able to imagine what happened underwater with the habitat! Three separate teams all had attempts to set it up correctly and let's just say everyone learned a lot in the process...

There are also plenty of other factors which go into building a successful cave-diving team apart from the more obvious aspects mentioned above. Fitness and stamina play a big part in any remote location project. Every day we are carrying, hiking, lifting, lowering and generally man-handling heavy dive gear. Maintaining a sense of humour and accepting each other quirks, or at least limiting the extent of personality clashes is important, particularly towards the end of the trip when everyone starts to get tired. Filling in or showing initiative with all

the myriad tiny jobs which keep a big team running smoothly also are qualities I'm always looking for in new team-members. And with any project things don't always go to plan – things break, bad weather strikes, people forget bits of kit – and people's responses to the unexpected often make the difference between an issue being a minor inconvenience or a major set-back.

So was this year's trip a success?

Measured against previous objectives – exploration, u/w photography, extension of the existing survey – then no, this year's trip did not add anything new to what we already know. However, this wasn't the point of the trip in January. This year we wanted to give a much larger group a chance to 'have a splash' in Blue Creek; to understand the training required to go beyond the initial section of the cave; to appreciate the experience and preparation needed to be successful with the u/w tasks; to join a large project team and see if they enjoyed the experience; to realise the equipment required to be comfortable in 6 degrees. When measured against these objectives then Blue Creek 2014 was a definite success.



And when viewed from the longer term perspective, the development of a community of passionate cave divers is always going to be good. Blue Creek is not the only remote cave system still to be explored in New Zealand, and my hope is that by building a team of experienced, enthusiastic and capable cave divers we will have the opportunity to see more of our beautiful country.

Plans for next summer are already underway – bring it on!