

Cavern Diver Course Report: 6 – 8th September 2010

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This is one of my very favourite courses to teach, combining beautiful and inspiring dives with a challenging and dynamic environment. It is always a thrill for me to see the excited eyes of the students as they exit from their first proper dive in the overhead environment, knowing they have conquered their initial apprehension and seen the inner-world. It's also a thrill to watch as skills develop; to see previously difficult tasks become easier and awareness grow. Having experienced the same buzz myself many years ago I know exactly how they feel.

What I also love about this course is how we've structured it, with 3 days liveaboard on OceanBlue's boat Mazurka. Caves are an environment I care passionately about and it is important to me that students appreciate the potential fragility and delicate beauty of these places. It is therefore also important that they properly develop the skills required to safeguard both themselves and the cave from harm. When you rush such training both students and caves suffer and I don't like that. We've doubled the 'normal' in water time for this course and as a result everyone has a much better time – this trip was no exception.

Joining me for this course were Mike and Matt (2 Kiwis – possibly a record), Peter (no surprises - a Brit) and Christine from Canada. As usual Kev was our skipper and Mel was crewing (more Brits). Mike and Peter have both done courses with me before so knew what to expect, but for Matt and Christine it would be the first time. And for Christine it would also be the first time in double tanks – happily not a problem with both Mel and Kev onboard to help. The only question in my mind was should I ease the new guys in gently or hit them with one of my special scenarios straight away. Mel suggested a compromise – she'd ease Christine into double tanks gently whilst I hassled Matt from the start – well he is a qualified DSAT Tec 50 Instructor and Advanced Trimix Diver.....

Normally on the first day we get underway as early as possible, but with a very gusty spring storm lurking around we opted to spend the morning doing lectures and line work in the park. As usual I laid a less than ideal line to start with, mixing some nice tie-offs with some awkward ones. The point is to show students the importance of taking their time and really thinking about how the line is laid – could they follow it blind if they had to? Ok, so the point is also to get some funny photos and confuse the passers-by. Happily we achieved all these aims.



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After a couple of hours of line laying and with what appeared to be a fortuitous lull in the wind we took the decision to head off from the relative quiet of the harbour and face the less than ideal crossing conditions. Following my normal routine I opted to sleep for most of the journey – no sea-sickness that way – and apart from one very big wave which completely covered the wheelhouse windows it was a relatively uneventful passage. Of course knowing we could guarantee a sheltered spot to hide once we reached the islands helped us to get through the lumpier parts of the journey.



Our first anchorage was in Rock Lily inlet and after a couple of false starts we anchored ourselves securely and got ready for the dive. The plan was for me to lay a line course around the rocky bottom and then for the students to practice various skills whilst following the course: finning techniques, following the line blind both solo and as a team, managing s-drills whilst maintaining the line as a reference, etc. Rock Lily inlet was definitely a good spot for this and I'll be using it again. After 90mins a combination of failing light, lack of gas and the stern anchor line snapping brought this first day to an end and we headed round to Cave Bay to anchor for the night and enjoy a well earned beer. Unsurprisingly Kev's Moroccan Lamb curry disappeared very quickly.

Day two and with rough conditions on the west side of the islands we were confined to the eastern side. I decided to use Air Bubble Cave for the first couple of dives as this has a large sized cavern area with a rocky bottom which is perfectly suited for line laying practice. We did two 70mins dives here and everyone had the chance to lay and recover lines and practice their buoyancy, trim and finning techniques in the more confined environment. For the third dive of the day we moved around to South Harbour, ready to tackle Venus' Cave.

The entrance to Venus' Cave is quite large, starting as a small crack at 10m and opening to a quite wide space at 20m. The bottom however is not as friendly as Air Bubble Cave, heavy sand but with a fine dusting of light silt on top. It is a good place to see how well the finning techniques are working, as students get immediate feedback should they make any errant strokes. Another thing I like about Venus' cave is that most students have never done it before so it adds a little extra 'edge' to the dive and because there are two very large holes in the roof in which I can lurk. (I would say more but it would spoil it for other classes.) This dive was definitely an eye opener for the students – in Matt's case quite wide eyes as he realised how quickly a seemingly innocent cave can turn stressful if you lose concentration. We ended the dive with a team ascent with Mike popping a bag at 9m – another interesting experience when you have a drysuit which is very difficult to dump from. Two learning experienced in one dive – we were on a roll.



We decided to stay in South Harbour for the night and whilst most of us were content to chill out with a beer Mike and Christine took the opportunity to do a more relaxed night dive in Blue Maomao Arch – which was very useful as Christine took some great photos. Thanks Christine.

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Day 3 and at last we were able to get around to the eastern side of the islands and tackle the bigger caves. For the first dive I wanted to show the students the size and splendour of Taravana Cave and as usual it didn't disappoint. As you enter through the enormous main entrance, approx. 20m high and at least 15 wide it feels almost as if the islands are trying to swallow you. Then as you exit through the smaller side entrance, still comfortable large, you really get to enjoy the blueness and enhanced visibility that comes from your pupils having dilated in the darkness. As usual this was the dive where everyone gets the urge to do the next course.



For our final dive at the Knights I wanted to show the guys how difficult some caves could be in certain conditions, so I took them to Big Eye Cave. Prior to the dive I had done my final lecture about peoples' motivations for cave diving, factors influencing psychological stress in a cave environment and accident analysis. I was interested to see if they had listened. Finding the cave was no problem but laying the line was – lots of surge meant we were being tumbled about, one minute 4m inside the cave and the next 2m outside. Mike did a great job of getting a couple of good tie-offs with a lot of help from Peter, at which point I started causing a few problems with lights. Having exited the cave successfully I signalled Peter to take over as team captain

and we approached again. After 60 secs of tumbling he signalled to abort the dive – great call – someone had been listening to my lecture. These were definitely not the conditions to be tackling Big Eye Cave.

We ended the trip with a guided trip around a different type of overhead environment, the HMNZS Waikato. I lead a winding tour up and down through the tightest hatches I could find and past plenty of dangling cables. Amazingly everyone kept up – good job guys. So there we have it, another great trip in the inner-world and four new cavern divers looking forward to their next dive. As usual I had a great time and I'm looking forward to the next course. I'm also looking forward to running the first Intro to Cave course in a few weeks time. Look out for the report of that trip.