

Long weekend at the Cowshed: 24th – 27th September 2010

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There's a certain sense of freedom mixed with anticipation as we head north on SH1. The country and spectacular coastline open up and suggest adventure is waiting to be found. And it's all the more satisfying to experience this thrill with friends who share the same passion. In the not so distant past it was easy to feel a little isolated as a "techie" or non-hunter/gatherer in New Zealand. However the last couple of years has seen a few trails blazed or widened, with the number of cave, wreck and trimix divers expanding throughout the country and with them the number of diving opportunities. For this weekend there would be about 20 divers arriving at Northland Dive, all ready to enjoy a diving extravaganza!



It was a real mixture of divers, from many backgrounds and interests, but not a cray noose in sight. What united us was a common aim – to get wet, socialise, share and explore the underwater world using any means possible. Single tanks, twin tanks, tech rigs, cameras, wetsuits, dry-suits - everybody had a chance to dive with a suitable buddy team and with two boats available dive sites could easily cater for different depth ranges.

For our dive team, the weekend had started early. Mel, Jamie and I had arrived Thursday evening along with GUE instructors Richard, Marcus and Liam. We were all happy to escape the rain and the waves we had experienced at Lake Pupuke over the previous two days. The plan was to take advantage of the shelter and deep dive sites that the Bay of Islands has to offer in order to complete Tech 2 trimix training. The course culminates with two experience dives to depth and it was this that the team was looking forward to the most.



The welcome is always warm at the Cowshed and after a three hour dive in the lake followed by the trip up north, Julia's cooked dinner went down a treat. This left us with enough time to prepare for the next days diving. As our twin sets and bottom stages were already full of 21/35 along with deco bottles of 50 and 100% O₂, we went straight into a theory session. The Cowshed's comfortable sofas and a wood-burner provided a wonderfully relaxed atmosphere for discussion.

The following morning gave a sense that the super-storm that had ravaged the country for the past week was finally bugging out. Our visiting GUE training team from Sweden, Brazil and Australia could now get a true sense of what Northland has to offer. Meeting the boat at Bland bay, we loaded up and escaped the westerlies by heading for our dive site, Danger rock.

Danger rock just breaks the surface and offers excellent diving to around 50m. It would provide the perfect base to test our team skills in dealing with multiple failures at depth. Today we would dive to 30m allowing repetitive dives. In typical fashion, for the first half of the dive we were able to explore and take in the huge variety of life on display. Schooling fish guided us down the reef towards the many colours and shapes of sponges encrusting the rocks. Cruising along the gut and enjoying our surroundings

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it was all too soon before we had to turn the dive and allow the fun to commence. Building on previous training we were tested with gas switches, post failures, out of gas, no mask etc combined with ascent drills and bottle rotations. A second dive allowed for a change of team captain and further exploration of Danger rock in a new direction. Again we finished the dive with multiple failures.

The following day we returned to Danger rock and completed similar scenarios at 40m, introducing loss of deco gas as an extra failure to contend with. The dives had certainly enhanced our skill levels and answered questions in terms of correct weighting for salt water. It's amazing how buoyant you become with empty stage bottles! We now felt confident and prepared for the deeper dives that would follow.



Saturday afternoon was spent covering more deco theory and dive planning. As the evening came around fits of giggles and popping sounds started drifting into the lecture area from the kitchen, as if a surprise was being prepared. Marcus came back into the room having been to see what was happening. "Is it somebody's birthday?" he asked. "Who is the party for?" Jamie replied "That would be mine then!" And with the cat out of the bag, it was time to get everybody together, drink a toast and swap stories from our day out on the boats. Julia again supplied a feast and with Cas bringing some delicious home baking we all enjoyed the moment. Richard was also able to entertain the crowd with a slideshow of his wreck exploration efforts with Ocean Discovery in the Baltic Sea.

Every day involved time dedicated to mixing gas, with Shane doing a fantastic job to help us get all the deco gases and sets filled for the course as well as the nitrox fills for all the divers. Our portable compressor was also busy recycling trimix and adding helium. All in all, a smooth operation definitely helped by the relaxed Northland vibe.

Sunday morning provided perfect diving conditions. The sun was blazing and the water inviting. With all the gear loaded, the team was amped to get out there for our first deep dive. The longer run out to Cape Brett was spectacular as the coastline whizzed by thanks to the much coveted V8 propelling us forward. Sweeping through the hole in the rock caused whoops of delight from those onboard! We were greeted with flat conditions and blue water, which was already being enjoyed by the local seals.



The dive plan was simple. Using the hypoxic protocol we had learned and practiced, we would switch to 15/55 trimix at 8m and descend to 65m. From here a line would be laid and exploration as a team commenced. We would have 20 minutes once reaching our target depth to look around. The rock formations were amazing as they guided us with sweeping curves and gulleys. With some depth still beneath us we shared the swim escorted by schools of fish as flashes of silver reflected the light from above when they changed orientation. The pristine terrain was extensive and there were just too many swim throughs and overhangs to

fully appreciate in one go. Having made our way back to the line we started our ascent and 40 minute deco obligation to pay for the privilege of what we had just experienced. Back on the boat we could reflect on our first dive with hypoxic gas, excited by the progress we were making and the new areas we could reach.

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Monday allowed us to relax a little. Everybody was itching to get out again after yesterdays dive especially as the conditions were even better today. It was perfect for going back out to Cape Brett and diving the reef walls that drop away to 100m plus, although we would restrict ourselves to an average depth of 72m.

Without the hassle of laying a line we were able to cruise down the reef to depth and again appreciate the beauty laid out before us. Our team formation was improved from yesterday making communication and awareness far easier. The reef was incredible and with the intense sunlight penetrating from the surface and the helium in our bottom mix every colour and feature stood out. Orange and yellow finger sponges made remarkable formations, large gorgonians decorated the outcrops and nudibranchs and eels added their visual input. Even a Hagfish was present making us feel we had truly entered a different realm, as they are often encountered at depths of over 1 Kilometre.

With a run time of an hour and no ascent line to worry about, we were able to view the reef at different depths and carry out deco on the reef itself rather than being suspended in mid water. This was a truly enjoyable dive and one I can't wait to repeat. It was a fitting end to the weekends diving and a tribute to the course having achieved our goals.

Northland remains one of my favourite areas to escape to and dive. Its' biodiversity and suitability for all divers is fantastic. Our overseas instructors left with a great impression of the community and area for both diving and teaching, along with a desire to return. Fantastic news! The weekend even allowed us to demonstrate why a black plastic bin bag is so important in diving and export the joy of "Hey Cow" to Sweden.

Thanks to all involved, especially Shane and Julia at Northland Dive.
Until the next time....!

