

Poor Knights - 10 x 10 x 10 – Winter Diving Extravaganza – May to Sept 2011

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When you have conceived, nurtured, developed and finally seen an idea all the way to completion it is time to sit back and contemplate. Was it a good idea? Was it a success? Ten by Ten by Ten was a reasonably simple plan. Organise 10 days of diving, highlighting 10 specific sites and offering 10 people the chance to win a free weekend of diving. Whoever completed all 10 sites first, or had completed the most by the end of the 10 days would be the winner. But there was more. There was no entry fee or additional costs, just the standard boat fees, plus everyone who dived six of the sites would win a free days diving. In theory all 10 entrants to the competition would be able to walk away with a prize if they wanted to. We thought the idea was a winner.



What we didn't anticipate was the level of suspicion from the average Kiwi diver. During the months I lost track of how many times I was asked 'What's the catch?' The answer was simple – there was no catch. The 10 days scheduled for the dives were published in advance. The 10 sites were published, all excellent sites, specifically chosen to offer divers places they hadn't seen before. There was no minimum number of trips you had to go on, no minimum qualification, no gear requirement, no secret handshake, no membership of the masons, no contracts written in blood or strong-arm money-with-menaces tactics at the end. What the hell was wrong with everybody? Had people's experiences of life left them so jaded they couldn't see a good deal when it was offered. Maybe if we'd adopted the 70% off, SALE SALE SALE approach of Harvey Norman and Briscos it would have been more in line with expectations. Ok, stop ranting. Breath. It was a good idea and everyone who came along and enjoyed the dives agreed. Let me tell you why.

Early on in my first 10x10x10 trip report I used the words "Yah-boo-sucks" and I still stick by them. I use them when I hear the phrase "But I've done the Poor Knights". It's an attitude which rankles with me, that somehow by doing just a couple of dives at the islands you can now tick them off as 'completed' and move on to the next thing. The Poor Knights have incredible diversity, both fixed at each dive site (topography) and varying every dive (fish life). There are multiple different walls, many different arches, numerous caves and cracks, isolated pinnacles and more. The water is clear, the existence of the marine reserve guarantees great fish life and you have very good chances of seeing sharks, dolphins (from the surface) and other larger life. If you have lost interest in the Poor Knights then you have lost interest in diving! Oops, sorry, ranting again.

The 10 sites we chose included 4 dives I had never done and 6 other dives which I knew I loved. We could easily have chosen 20 or even 30 great sites but we wanted to make the competition manageable. Our final selection was a compromise, balancing sites we knew weren't regularly dived, with a mixture of different topographies and spread right around the islands so we could always guarantee hitting at least a few no matter what the weather. We knew the chances were the majority of divers would have done very few of these sites before, so this was a way to showcase Poor Knights Diving at its best.



We started in May with a superb trip, hitting 5 different sites out of the 10, thereby almost guaranteeing those involved in this first trip would win at least a free day. We even managed 3 of the 4 sites I had never seen before –

Phil's Pins, Scary Deep and best of all 12-Fathom Reef. Our first dive on this last site will stay with me for a long time as the most fish-tastic of all the dives I've done so far at the Poor Knights. I will also remember this trip for two other reasons, firstly because I got to play with my new scooter for the first time and for a comment made by Christian. He noted the novelty of sleeping aboard a boat moored inside a cave, something I had started to take for granted.

Our second trip in June mutated somewhat from the original idea, although it was still a lot of fun. Claire from Dive HQ Wellington came up to join us, along with Pete H, planning to do the TDI Cavern and Intro-to-Cave classes. Also on this trip were Tony and Chris, who were initially focussing on the 10x10x10 sites, but the lure of caves became too much and they both joined the class. If you read the trip report by Chris it's clear he's still wondering quite how he got talked into yet more training with me. (Go on, admit it Chris – it was fun.)

In July our trip had to be cancelled due to the weather, but in August we were back at it again, this time with Mel leading the trip whilst I competed in the Rotorua Tough Guy Challenge. This was the trip where our first people won their free days diving – John and Christian getting to 7 completed sites – although Christian did try to claim 8 sites by doing the same one twice. Maybe it was just innocent confusion due to the fact he hadn't had much sleep with the arrival of his son Samuel only a few short weeks earlier. Again however the weather caused problems, with the weekend cut short due to strong winds forecast to arrive on the Sunday afternoon.



Dawn rays shining through Blue Maomao Arch

Which brings us to our most recent trip in September, which was the final chance for people to get to the magic 6 sites required for a free days diving. Amazingly Chris who was on 4.5 sites and Hamish who was on 5 sites didn't make the trip and John couldn't contest for the top prize due to 'home improvement' commitments, which left Christian home and clear to bag 2 more sites and claim the most with a total of 9. Congratulations Christian – you win a free weekend of diving courtesy of Kev and Jan at OceanBlue.

But how good was this last weekend of diving?

Well we started with perfect NZ spring conditions – clear blue skies, calm seas and some warmth in the sun. As we headed out to the Knights we were joined by a group of Bottlenose Dolphins who stayed with us for about

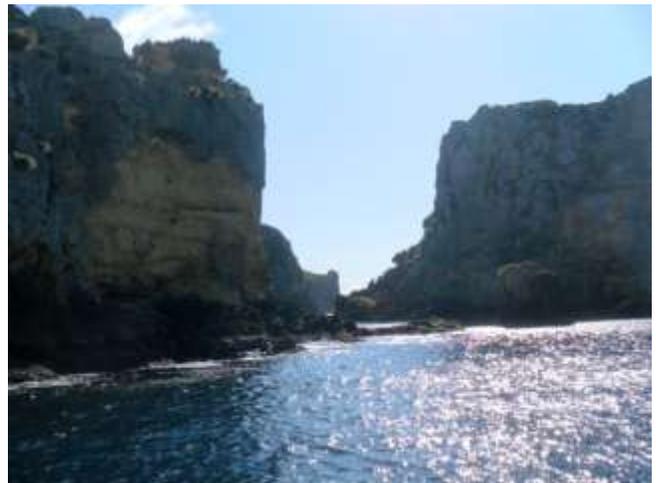


Tim burning himself out as usual

15 minutes, giving Ali, Christian and Kent the chance to take some wonderful photos. On reaching the islands our first dive was the final one which I had never done – going from Wild Beast Point right around to Northern Arch, a distance of about 1km. OK so the current didn't exactly help us to make it a 'drift dive' but Christian and I both reached the arch just as 60mins ticked over on my computer. Unfortunately Ali and Tim didn't make it all the way to the arch – but having been joined by dolphins on their dive we didn't feel at all sympathetic. Just like our May trip had been the perfect start to 10x10x10 it appeared this trip would be the perfect end.

Our second dive was at 12-Fathom Reef, which although already ticked off Christian's list couldn't be missed out with such perfect conditions. Again we had some great fish encounters, although not quite as impressive as in May, but we did get to see two huge Bastard Cod which was great. We also hijacked this dive slightly, with Tim and Ali doing valve and s-drills at the end as part of their GUE Fundamentals 'tech' upgrade process.

Our third dive was the last untouched site of the complete 10x10x10 list, Red Baron Caves, and after doing more GUE drills at the start of the dive I lead the guys through all three cracks, getting to just below the air chamber at the very back before turning the dive due to swell. This was a tough dive for Ali as not only had I made her and Tim sweat the entire dive wondering if I was going to pass them, but she also didn't have her camera with her and surfaced almost certain she had seen a species of nudibranch that was new to her. For someone who can list all 34 species of nudibranch she has seen so far in NZ I can imagine the stress caused. Thankfully I was happy to award the 'tech' upgrade so it wasn't all bad. We completed our final weekend with three more dives not on the 10x10x10 list, Northern Arch, Blue MaoMao Arch and Dutchman's Cove. Definitely a good way to end.



So looking back how do I feel about our first 10x10x10 Winter Diving Challenge?

I have mixed feelings. It feels great when I get comments like the one from Christian at the end of the trip. "I joined the 10x10x10 in order to see some new stuff at the Knights. Now I understand why Jacques Cousteau rated this place in his top 10." However I have to balance this with the surprisingly lack of engagement we got from most divers. We thought we had a winning formula and would get lots of interest. As it was those people who took advantage had a great time, but so many more could also have joined us. Maybe next year.



The complete list of 10x10x10 (2011) dive sites:

Twelve-Fathom Reef

This rarely dived reef on the west side of the Poor Knights rises to a maximum 22m before dropping off into the depths. You need good buoyancy and a keen eye for sharks.

Phil's Pins

This collection of pinnacles is another rarely dived site on the east side of the island. The pinnacles start deep and go deeper still – you have been warned!

The Mermaid of Taravana

Taravana is the longest underwater cave at the Poor Knights. To reach the Mermaid you will need to plan carefully and not be afraid of the dark.

Fresh-water zone in Crystal Cave

This cave is also known as Scary Cave and with good reason. To reach the fresh water you will need to pass the restriction 100m in from the entrance.

The Chimney at Fraggie Rock

Follow the wall and look for the darkness. This chimney starts at 30m and drops vertically down to the sand at 38m. You can't hang around at this depth.

The Window on Landing Bay Pinnacle

Prepare yourself for a spectacular view as you exit the window onto the sheer rock face dropping to 45m+.

Drift dive: Wild Beast Point - Northern Arch

Take it easy and go with the flow, just look out for the wild beasties. This is a classic dive at the northern tip of the islands.

Circumnavigate: Sugarloaf or Scary Deep

Maintain your depth and keep an eye on your compass as you enjoy spectacular drop-off at the far south of the island chain.

The air chamber at Red Baron Cracks

It is not easy to navigate the labyrinth of cracks collectively known as Red Baron Caves. Can you find your way to the enclosed air chamber at the very back?

East or West

How good are your navigation skills? Can you find more than 1 dive site on the same dive or will it take you several dives to complete this challenge? To pass the eastern challenge you need to find Mine Shaft, Matt's Crack and Air-Bubble Cave; to go west you must visit El Torito, Shark-fin and Big-Eye.