

## Trip Report: Blue Creek Resurgence, 7-8<sup>th</sup> January 2010

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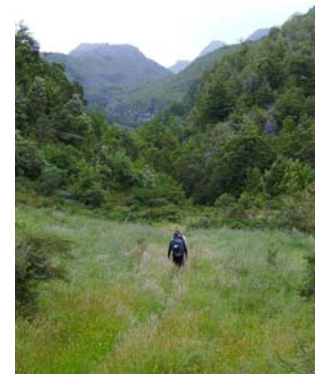
Water temperature of 6 degrees, a restriction at 35m and an unknown strength of water flow - none of these factors are top of my wish list in a cave system, let alone putting all three together. Yet when actually down there, with the crystal clear visibility, the adrenalin and the knowledge that you're one of only a very select group of people who have ever seen the sights you're seeing, it makes it all manageable, even enjoyable!

Blue Creek Resurgence has interested Jamie and I ever since we first arrived in NZ and investigated potential cave diving systems. With little information to go on, plus a remote location 90km from Motueka and a 1.7km hike into the forest from the nearest car park, it wasn't until the beginning of this year – almost exactly 3 years to the day after our arrival in NZ - that we managed to organise a trip down there in conjunction with our first Tech Dive NZ trip to the Lermontov.



With so many unknowns we had to have realistic expectations about what we'd achieve on our first trip, so the plan was simply to do one dive to see what was down there – hopefully this would enable us to start planning for a more elaborate expedition later in the year. Armed with our diving gear, a camping stove and some pre-cooked sausages, we set out on the 90km journey, which includes 22km of dirt road, headed for the DOC campsite at Wangapeka.

With a long hike from the car park to the source of the resurgence, it was obvious that several trips would be necessary to get all our equipment up there. On our first trip, we took just drysuit, mask and fins in order to at least check how viable the entrance was. Every step I took on this initial journey I was anticipating how it would feel with a twin set on my back - I wasn't looking forward to finding out!



My initial sight of the entrance didn't inspire confidence. My naïve thoughts of Mexican cenotes, where you get leisurely kitted up then jump into a large pool of water to get acclimatised prior to starting the dive, were soon dashed. Instead we'd have to wade through the stream, clamber over at least two large sets of wet and slippery boulders and then lower ourselves 3m down a small gap into the entrance. I was reassured a little when we finally got in and realised that the

# TECH DIVE New Zealand

entrance pool was very still, the visibility was excellent and there was at least sufficient space to sit (well, perch) on some rocks and get kitted up with water only up to our knees.

Those initial investigations successfully completed, we made our way back to the car for the rest of our dive gear. It took two further return journeys to get everything in place, and while I admit that I didn't manage the entire uphill journey with my twin set, I did do a significant portion of it. It soon turned out that carrying the twin sets along the forest path was actually the least of our problems; the real difficulty was manoeuvring them over the boulders and into the actual entrance. This feat alone took about 20mins per set.



We quickly realised that we simply weren't going to have the time or energy today to get all of the gear in as well as actually do the dive, so the decision was made to leave everything in place and return the next day. The entrance is well away from anywhere the average tramper would think to access and even if they did make it all the way to the drop off, our equipment was tucked away so they wouldn't be able to see it. Finally, although it was all safely above the level of the water, we decided to tie it in place with ropes - just in case. This turned out to be a very wise move. With everything ready for the next day we headed back to the car and the 90km journey back to the hostel, looking forward to a well deserved soak in the spa after 11km of walking and a further couple of hours of lifting equipment around.



The following morning it became apparent that there had been some rain during the night, although we'd only been aware of a small amount in Motueka. I was very interested to find out what effect this would have on the cave system. The flow in the stream had definitely increased and when I lowered myself down into the entrance I found one twin set floating on the surface and the other two fully submerged. The water level was at least a metre higher than the previous day. When I went to retrieve our fins, I realised that one was missing. It was found just outside the entrance where it had obviously been carried by rising water. As these had been wedged at least 2m above the water the night before and the only exit was a further metre above that, the level must have increased by at least 3m during the night. Psychologically this added to the pressure of the dive. Not only did it make us wonder what the flow might be inside the cave, it also made the entrance chamber far more cramped. In order to get kitted up we now had to stand waist deep in water, meaning exposure to the cold temperatures for that much longer.



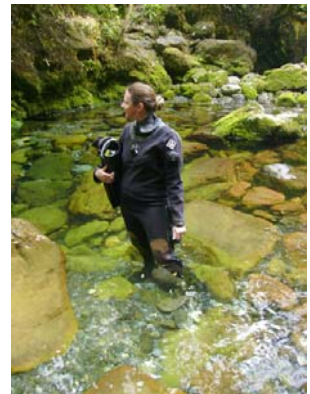
To further complicate matters our third team member found a problem with his can light. He'd recently changed the bulb and there must have been some dirt on the seal - with his kit having been submerged all night water had got inside. Not wanting to risk blowing the bulb - either a costly mistake prior to the dive, or a pretty unpleasant experience during the dive! - and not having a spare can



## TECH DIVE New Zealand

light with us, we decided that we'd have to limit the dive to just two divers. As I was the most apprehensive of the team I decided that my "team resource" can light would be better put to use by our third member, so I took the hit. Great, an entire day setting up and potentially not even a dive at the end of it! I helped the other two get kitted up then slowly watched their lights disappear down the tunnel. We knew that it was a more or less straight tunnel heading at approx 45degrees down to the restriction and the sound of their bubbles making their way back up to the surface was surprisingly loud – but very reassuring! However, they stopped very suddenly about 4 mins into the dive as they obviously made it through the restriction and into the cave system.

As it was pretty cold in the entrance pool I climbed back out and sat in the sun to wait their return. They had given me a run time of 20mins back to 6m, where they might then spend some time investigating the possibility of a habitat for future dives. After 16mins, I knew that I would be hearing their return bubbles very soon. After 17mins, I started to get a bit concerned. At 18 mins, yeah, I was anxious. Then suddenly I heard the gushing of air and large bubbles appeared in the entrance pool, followed a couple of mins later by beams of light and finally a couple of heads.



The smiles on their faces and gleam in their eyes told me everything I needed to know. "Wow" was about all they managed! I could see their hands shivering from the cold so got them dekkitted quickly and back out into the sun to warm up. After all, the quicker they warmed up the more chance there was of a second dive and this not being quite such a wasted trip for me!



Once they'd rested and warmed up a bit, I was really keen to get my chance to see what was down there, so Jamie volunteered to go back down with me, even if it was just to the restriction so that I could get a feel for it. He bravely ventured back into the rather refreshing water and we quickly got kitted up and went through our full checks. Once confident that everything was okay, we descended to 5m and headed towards the back of the entrance pool and the tunnel down.

As soon as I got under the water, all my apprehensions disappeared; the water was like air and the floor was all gravel - so minimal chance of disturbing the visibility. As we descended, the height of the tunnel definitely narrowed but it stayed at least 3m wide, giving plenty of room to manoeuvre. There was also no discernable flow at this point and with pale coloured walls reflecting our light we had a definite sensation of space - unlike some darker cave systems which seem to swallow your light.

I led the way, following the guideline that was already in place from previous divers, checking all the time the integrity of the line laying, that all tie offs were solid and there were no additional jumps that could confuse us on the way back out. At one point, a tie off was right under the gravel so we had to check that it was a continuous line and not broken where we couldn't see it. We also checked for other side tunnels all the way down to the restriction – there were none, meaning no navigation problems on the way out.

# TECH DIVE New Zealand

During the winter season the greater flow of water clearly affects the build up of the gravel so the “restriction” at 34m will always be changing, but for this dive in the middle of the summer it was more of a narrowing than a restriction. Although in the narrowest part there wasn’t much space above me and my chest had to brush the ground, there was still enough horizontal width for at least 2 or 3 divers to pass side by side – not a big psychological problem. Also as soon as we were through, the cave opens up into a far larger space, with passages leading off in several different directions.

As this was Jamie’s second dive and he was getting pretty cold at this point, we went just a few meters into the larger chamber to confirm that the flow was still virtually non-existent. Jamie also pointed out the direction that he and James had gone on the previous dive, a clear upward sloping tunnel that they would liked to have explored further had they planned a longer run time.

I too was keen to explore a little bit more, but I was happy to leave that for our next expedition, when we would be far better equipped for it. Next time we’d have more thermal protection and also a better idea of where we wanted to go, especially now that we had some feel of what the cave system was like. We turned round and made our way slowly back up the tunnel to the exit. While I could definitely feel the cold, especially on my hands, the adrenalin made it more of a pleasant sensation somehow and I exited feeling very pleased with what we had achieved. We may not have landed on the moon, but at least we got a glimpse into an environment that very few people in this world had ever, or would ever, see.

So, all in all, 360km of driving, 20km of walking and two entire days moving kit around, all for a 14 min dive. Was it worth it? Well, we’re going back again in April, so it obviously was. I’ve just got to get the motivation to get to the gym so that carrying my twin set becomes a little bit easier!

