

Trip Report: Blue Creek Resurgence, 7-12th April 2010

Mel Jeavons

All it took was 7 sets of doubles, 5 x 80cf stage bottles, 3 x 80cf deco bottles, 5 x 40cf deco bottles, 3 x argon bottles and 20 regulators. Oh, plus the rest of the “standard” dive gear. Add 4 humans with 4 hand trolleys from Mitre 10, a combined total of 42km of walking with a further 6 man hours (note the use of the word man, not woman...) of clambering over rocks with cylinders and everything appeared like magic at the top of the entrance to the cave. Easy...



Yes, this was Blue Creek Resurgence Exploration Take 2 – not for the faint hearted! Ever since our initial dive in January, Jamie and I had been making plans to return to see a bit more. Steve Baldwin was joining us to make up our team of three, and quite how we managed to persuade Peter Carruthers to come along as a non-diving logistics person, I still have no idea. Head Chef, Senior Sherpa, Transport Logistic Co-ordinator (well, he supplied 2 of the 4 trolleys), Supply Chain Manager – pick whichever title you like Peter, your time and energy was outstanding and greatly appreciated.

Due to the rather unknown variance of flow in the cave system, it is important to dive the creek in dry/summer conditions. From the rain map, it appeared that April was potentially touch and go in terms of timing, but as we were all in the South Island diving the Lermontov anyway, it made sense to time it all together. As it turns out, we couldn't have picked a better time coming at the end of one of the driest summers in a long time. However, in terms of energy levels, doing the trip at the end of 5 intense days of diving (4 on the Lermie, 1 in Riwaka Resurgence) was possibly not ideal.



Whilst it is possible to camp in the Wangapeka region, we quickly dismissed this as sheer lunacy and booked ourselves into a self catering cottage 2km down the 22km gravel road on the way to the DOC carpark (For more details of the logistics and accessibility of diving Blue Creek Resurgence, read the initial report from January). This turned out to be everything we could have asked for plus more. 3 comfortable bedrooms, friendly hosts, open fire and important things like a washing machine and dryer. A real home away from home.

We arrived at dusk the first evening after our Riwaka dive and obviously leaving sufficient time for our Head Chef to pick up the catering supplies in Motueka. After unpacking and settling in, we sat down to Peter's version of sausage and beans. Spanish Chorizo with chickpeas, Caesar salad with home-made dressing and fresh parmesan and hot ciabatta bread. Setting the standard high, Peter...

The following day was the transportation day. You can imagine how it looked to the other trampers when we unloaded all the above gear from the back of our 3 cars. The next 8 hours was spent moving kit around, and with a double set and backplate weighing up to 35kg we were all just a little bit tired and sweaty at the end of the day! This didn't even get any of the gear actually lowered down into the cave entrance itself, but this could be done at the beginning of each day, depending on what cylinders we were using.

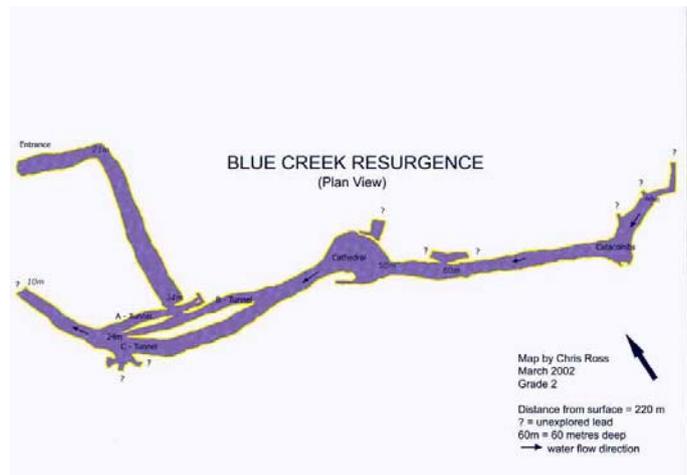
The return to the open fire at the cottage was very welcome and after a shower, we settled down to a well deserved beer while Peter (who had done as much carrying as ourselves) prepared our dinner of lamb curry, complete with rice, popadoms and lightly minted yoghurt. As you can imagine, we partied the night away and fell into our beds at the indecent hour of 8.30.



Day two dawned, and we had come up with a possibly ambitious but we thought feasible plan. Oh, the lessons you learn! Steve had to return to Motueka to get a spare tire repaired so Jamie and I would head off to do the first dive, Steve would join us later for a second dive with Jamie, then Steve and I would fit in a third dive by about 4pm. With 1 ½ hours surface interval between the dives, it was tight but manageable. There were some logistics of lowering cylinders into the cave entrance to be done first, but we factored that in and worked out that an 8am departure time should allow for a first dive time of 11am. No problems! Well, nearly. It started

well with Jamie and I at the entrance by 9am but it then took us a further 1 ½ hours to lower down the required cylinders before we could even start to kit up. By this time we were once again tired and sweaty, not an ideal state before a dive in 6 degrees water. It took a further hour before we were able to enter the water, so half an hour late but still feasible for the day's plan.

Our dive plan was to see whether the restriction had altered from last time, go though it to the chamber at the bottom, then head up tunnel A to have a look at entrance to the un-explored sidemount tunnels (marked on the map as question marks) to see whether they were a potential for a future expedition. We descended slowly with Jamie leading. Due to the cold, we had taken 100% O2 to deco on as a safety margin so we clipped this onto the line and made our way down to the restriction at 24m. It was obvious as soon as we started in the tunnel that it was a fair bit narrower than in January and sure enough the restriction was far smaller than we had previously encountered. It is a gravel bottom so no fear of silt outs and the width of the tunnel is a good 3m making it possible to turn around at any point so we continued on down. With our cylinders grazing the ceiling and our chest pushing gravel out in front of us (sorry, Mum!) we made our way through to the larger chamber at the bottom and took stock. A flow check showed that our left posts had completely rolled off so we quickly re-opened those, feeling grateful for our high quality cave training that made this check an instinctive reaction. Once we'd got ourselves together, we tied off our primary line and made our way up the side tunnel to 24m where it joined the "main" tunnel. It quickly became obvious that Jamie wasn't happy although I wasn't sure what the problem was. He indicated his ears to show that he was having problems with a reverse block and signalled that his head was spinning so we called the dive and turned around to exit.



It is a gravel bottom so no fear of silt outs and the width of the tunnel is a good 3m making it possible to turn around at any point so we continued on down. With our cylinders grazing the ceiling and our chest pushing gravel out in front of us (sorry, Mum!) we made our way through to the larger chamber at the bottom and took stock. A flow check showed that our left posts had completely rolled off so we quickly re-opened those, feeling grateful for our high quality cave training that made this check an instinctive reaction. Once we'd got ourselves together, we tied off our primary line and made our way up the side tunnel to 24m where it joined the "main" tunnel. It quickly became obvious that Jamie wasn't happy although I wasn't sure what the problem was. He indicated his ears to show that he was having problems with a reverse block and signalled that his head was spinning so we called the dive and turned around to exit.

TECH DIVE New Zealand

Staying in team formation, I headed out through the restriction first with Jamie following and as before I had to push my way gently through the gravel. Jamie followed a minute or so behind me and I was concerned that his ears were giving him more trouble but as he told me once he'd surfaced, he got a free flow on the stage bottle that he was breathing from so had switched to his primary and turned his stage off. Remembering what had happened to his left post on the way down, he checked his backup necklace and sure enough, the post had rolled off again. Without being able to reach his left post, he was suddenly down from three to just one working regulator whilst in a restriction. Fortunately turning off his stage bottle for a minute or two had stopped the free flow so he turned it on and was back to two regulators. Once out of the restriction, he opened his left post again and everything was back to normal, but still slightly concerning for him! Or sphincter clenching – as Peter and Steve liked to put it.



Upon surfacing, it soon became apparent that our plan for this first day was actually wildly ambitious and completely unachievable. With the time it takes to get kitted up and go over the dive plan in the small cave entrance, we would basically have to start immediately upon surfacing and after 40 mins in 6 degree water, at least an hour in the sun was necessary. With Jamie's ears playing up, we immediately decided to scrap the idea of 3 dives and just do one with Steve and myself once we'd had lunch and warmed up. As it was, it then took us a further hour to lower down his cylinders and get him kitted up, then another half an hour to get in the water, so we didn't go in for the second dive until gone 3pm.



This second dive went a little more to plan, the intention being to head down Tunnel B to see what depth it met up with Tunnel C (the "main" passage) as the depth wasn't marked on the only existing map. I took the lead on this one as Steve hadn't been in the cave system before and headed down to the restriction. It had opened up a little since Jamie and I had essentially re-arranged the gravel bottom on the previous dive but was still a squeeze for me. With Steve's rather more (ahem) manly chest, he took up more room so found it a little harder but made his way down to the chamber. Once again, we laid the line and had a quick look up

a side passage that only went a few metres before stopping, then headed down Tunnel B. When we got down to the joining passage, we had a quick look around before preparing to turn round and retrace our steps. Steve came beside me and signalled to me that my line had gone slack. I apparently actually had it trailing over my fin but on turning round to take in the slack, the line had come off so I was none the wiser until he told me upon surfacing. However, as I had turned round several times I had got myself slightly disorientated and had a mildly disconcerting moment when turned back to exit and wasn't instinctively sure which way to go. A few moments assessing made it apparent where the exit was and sure enough the line was there to confirm this, but it's still a very worrying feeling while it lasts.

We got back to the restriction and Steve was in front. As he approached the restriction, he wasn't at the right angle to clear it so struggled to get through. He decided to move across the passage to try another position, still couldn't make it and went back and forwards a few times. I wasn't sure whether this was stressing him and

TECH DIVE New Zealand

being smaller and having the gravel moved a bit more, I decided to go through next to him to at least be within eye sight if he needed to signal me. As I went through, he cleared it as well so we continued up the line. While he hadn't been overly stressed, he admitted that it had given him the "heeby-jeebys" and his gas consumption certainly showed that with him breathing 40 bar of his doubles during the 8 minute ascent.



Thus ended the first day's diving. But the day wasn't over yet, we still had to lift an empty twin set and 3 stage bottles out of the cave entrance, clamber them over the rocks and cart them back down the 1.7km to the car park. Peter was on hand to help out so fortunately we managed it all in just the one trip. It was close to 7pm by the time we got back to the cottage, so an 11 hour day to achieve two dives! Are we having fun yet??

Fortunately the Food Fairies had been hard at work in the kitchen during the morning and dinner was mostly prepared so once again the three of us got to lounge in front of the fire while Peter did the finishing touches. Tonight's menu was lamb kofta with couscous and tadziki. Having come back so late, by the time we'd eaten, washed up (we didn't have a Washing Up Fairy, unfortunately) and relaxed for a while, it was the ridiculously late hour of nearly 10pm so we sloped off to bed.

The following day we had a more realistic plan on just doing one dive as a team of three and taking some photos and video footage of the restriction, then trying once again to check out the small unexplored passages that Jamie and I had intended to do on dive 1. We left ourselves plenty of time but just before leaving the cottage, we did a final check of the battery level on the video to discover that it had completely discharged so we delayed our departure by half an hour to give it a quick charge. As Steve was leaving early the following morning we had to get all of his gear out of the cave today so knew we had a long afternoon ahead of us moving gear. Peter was still around to help but wanted to leave by approx 2pm so I certainly felt a bit time pressured leading up to the dive – never a good thing on any dive, but especially not with the sort of diving we were doing.

In addition, our energy levels were getting depleted by this stage after 11 challenging dives on the Lermie, a dive in Riwaka plus all the work this trip had entailed. On my side, I couldn't help feeling that today's dive "had" to go well to justify all the hassle involved. Steve admitted to being slightly concerned about going through the restriction again and Jamie was still unsure about his ears so all in all, it wasn't the best prepared group entering the water. It's always a relief to actually enter the water and get the weight off your back so as we descended and clipped off our deco bottles at 6m, I started to relax and look forward to the dive. I was leading and made my way down the tunnel. When I got to approx 18m, I saw Steve's light gently moving from side to side to get my attention so turned round to see what the problem was. He signalled that his drysuit inflation bottle was empty meaning that he wasn't able to add air to his suit so was getting massive squeeze on his body and was unable to descend further. He made further signals that I didn't understand (he later explained that he was suggesting just taking photos at that depth), so he called the dive.



TECH DIVE New Zealand

When someone calls a dive there simply is no option, it is immediately aborted and we make our way to the surface as a team. I had no hesitation in this, but I do have to be completely honest and admit that my immediate reaction was “for f**ks sake, all this hassle just to abort, I could have stayed in bed” and I further admit that I cursed my way up several metres until I caught myself and acknowledged that this is simply part of diving. I had done this to people in the past and I certainly wanted the option to do it again in the future. Having given myself a stern talking to, I was fine when we surfaced. Steve suggested that Jamie and I go ahead and do the dive as a buddy pair but having been down to 18m, this wasn't an option for either of us, plus Jamie was cold so he decided to get out. I was still keen to get some photos so Steve used my argon bottle to get some air into his suit and descend down to 12m to take some pictures. On the way back up I took the opportunity to remove some of the old line that was hanging free in the passage, so while it may not have been the dive we planned, it was still a useful dive to make.



After a wholesome lunch of pot noodles in the sun, we started the tiring task of removing more equipment from the caves. As it would be just Jamie and I diving for the next two days, Steve and Peter were happy to help make our lives as easy as possible by setting up everything and removing anything surplus to requirements. It took a couple of hours of manhandling cylinders then two trips each down to the car park and it was close to 6pm before Peter was able to head away.

With Peter gone, dinner was a far more casual affair of roast chicken thighs with jacket potatoes and green beans fried in onions and garlic. That really was the last of the good food though, and left Jamie and I with pasta and potatoes for our final two days...

The following day was a far more relaxed affair. Jamie and I had learnt from previous days and decided to keep things very simple. Our equipment was fully set up and ready to go so all we had to do was put our drysuits on, enter the cave and kit up. We initially thought we'd take the video camera down again but sensibly decided that it was too much task loading so rejected the idea. Our plan was simply to get to the cathedral at the bottom of the main tunnel, have a look around then make our way back out. For the first time, everything went completely according to plan. Amazing what can happen when you keep it simple! The restriction had opened up further so while tanks and chest were still touching the top and bottom, it was relatively comfortable to get through. The chamber was beautiful and huge and we allowed ourselves a few minutes to have a look around it. We exited feeling very pleased with ourselves, the only down side to a great dive was the fact that it was 50mins in total so we were extremely cold by the time we exited.

Once again we had kit to remove from the cave but just 2 stage bottles and 2 small deco bottles on this dive so one comfortable journey back to the car park and we were back at the cottage by 3.30 and could enjoy a very relaxing afternoon for the first time.

The following and final day of diving was to be a repeat of our initial dive plan, to make it to the potentially unexplored tunnels at 24m and also to take some video footage. Again we kept it simple and everything went well. I lead the way as Jamie had the video camera and the restriction was sufficiently opened up to slip through easily while just grazing cylinders and chest. We made our way up to Tunnel C and headed over to where the unexplored leads were



TECH DIVE New Zealand



marked on the map. I held in the main tunnel while Jamie went ahead a few metres just to see whether they were accessible or not. We could definitely identify two of the tunnels but neither of them appeared to lead anywhere. There was a lot of fine sand at the entrance to one so possibly there had been a small entrance but since the map had been made it had been filled up with sand. Maybe once the winter flow has been through things might be different – it will be interesting to see on our next trip in the summer!

And that ended our diving at Blue Creek. We made our way slowly back up the restriction, taking video footage as we went. Upon exiting, all there was left to do was a couple of hours of moving cylinders around, two journeys down the 1.7km trail back to the car and we were on our way back to the cottage for a well deserved beer and relax!



All in all, we did achieve everything we set out to do, but not nearly as easily as we had naively thought we'd be able to. Our initial confusion over why the map was "only" done to 200m was quickly laid to rest when we realised that with all of our work, we had only managed to explore approx 50% of an already created map and I can only imagine the work it must have taken to create this initially! There is still plenty left to explore and we will be back after the winter. Any willing helpers, just let us know!

All that is left to say is thanks to Steve for making up our team of three, and a very big thank you to Peter for all the work he put in helping us carry equipment and keeping us well fed. Hopefully it has inspired him to get his cave training and join us as a diver in time.