

## Cape Brett, trip Report: 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2012

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Before entering the dive industry full time my former career was within merchant banking and I had for a while a boss who lived and worked by a strict set of rules. Always wear a suit to the office, never go anywhere without your mobile phone and never ever mix business with pleasure. In retrospect I think she may view me as a failure. My preferred work attire is shorts and jandals and I hate mobile phones. However, her mantra about mixing business with pleasure is a more complex issue. I left banking specifically to follow a career path which mixes these two, with my hobby and great passion in life also being my business and sole source of income. The question is whether I made the right choice or was she actually correct? I now teach diving and I sell dive gear – and to relax I go diving, using the dive gear I sell. To some people I seem to have the perfect life, I'm living the dream, but there is a fine line between dreams and nightmares.

For those of you who are not in the 'industry' I will give a couple of examples. Firstly, at what point do promo dives become pleasure dives, or visa versa? From a tax point of view I would like to classify all diving as work related and certainly much of it is, but a deep trimix dive with friends – is that a good promotional opportunity for the advanced tech classes I teach, or really a personal expense? And where exactly is the line between friends and customers, given almost all my diving friends started out as customers and most still want to buy the dive gear I sell, although preferably at 'friend's rates'. Occasionally I wonder if I still really have a hobby and whether in fact all my diving nowadays is actually work, especially as I usually end up writing a report about each dive. But enough navel gazing, I want to tell you about a pleasure dive I did recently with a friend – or was it a promo dive with a customer? Whatever the classification one thing is clear, the dive falls unequivocally into the dreams rather than nightmare category – and a stonkingly amazing wonderful dream it was too.



I knew it was a good omen when we started the day successfully, managing to fit all the gear onto just one boat. We had come prepared – possibly over prepared: 4 scooters, 3 rebreathers, 2 professional sized cameras, 30 cylinders and only 8 divers. I could see Julia had a slightly worried frown, but I wasn't sure whether it was a concern about overloading the boat, or a bigger worry that Shane might get ideas after spending all day surrounded by toys. But a happy skipper is always a good thing and Shane was definitely enjoying the 'techy' vibe.

We launched from the usual spot and cruised out at towards Cape Brett at a 'stately' 25 knots. The sun was shining, the sea was blue and up until we reached open sea the conditions were pretty good. As we reached the Hole in the Rock it was clear the easterly swell would be nasty if we got swept around to the wrong side on the island, but we were able to anchor in reasonably flat seas close to Cathedral Cave. James and I kitted up first, rolled in and then continued kitting up. As well as our double 12s we had 3 stages and scooters to play with – enough gear to make life complicated and cumbersome when you're out of practice. However, having dived with the same set up only 2 days earlier I felt slick and relaxed, ready to enjoy the world 75m below the surface.

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We dropped to 6m, did a bubble check and switched to our bottom mix, everything was good. Then just as we started to descend a grey shape glided menacingly out of the blue. Unable to see the bottom and with no visual references other than James I couldn't immediately tell how big the shark was, torn by the hope it wasn't too far away otherwise it was huge, and also not too close, otherwise what the hell was it doing. Thankfully it stopped getting larger at about 2m away from James and I recognised the distinctive shape and markings of a bronzy, swiftly followed by two more bronzies which circled inquisitively. As we continued our descent to the plateau at 45m the sharks followed us down, which made for an awesome start to our dive.

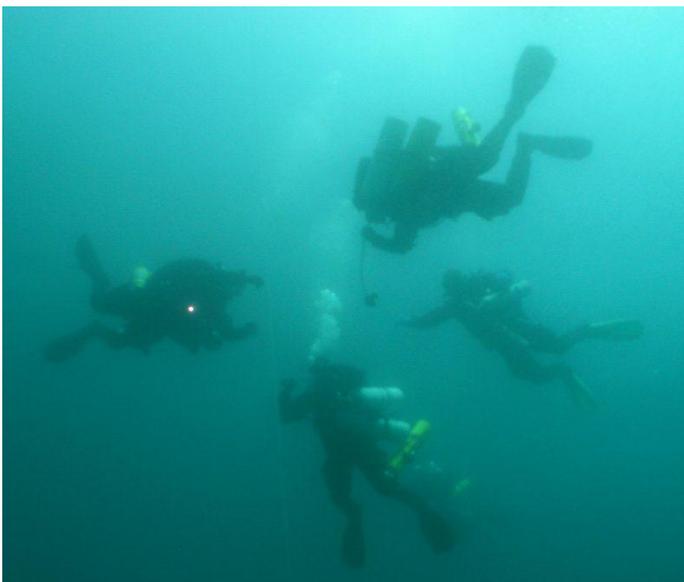
Once we reached the plateau I gave James a quick OK and hit the trigger, pointing the scooter away from Cathedral Cave and in the direction of the pinnacle which stands just off the end of Cape Brett. With minimal effort we traced the ever descending sand line and were soon passing 60m. Here the terrain flattens out and more navigation is required, but having been to this same spot at the beginning of February I knew where I wanted to go. We dropped to 65m, then 70m and finally reached 75m, passing on the way a series of small black coral trees. Reducing the scooter speed we cruised gently along, stopping every few minutes to allow the procession of Pink and Blue Maomao and Two-spot Demoiselle trailing behind us to catch up. Sometimes when we stopped our entourage would completely surround us, reducing visibility enough to make it hard to see James. At other times the dozen or so marauding Kingfish who were also keeping us company caused our smaller companions to split, allowing us to see glimpses of the two bronzies which were still with us, although now at more of a distance.



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Our limited 30 minute bottom time seemed to pass in a blink and we pointed our scooters upwards to start the faster part of our ascent. We rose at a rate of 9m/minute, which always seems fast and which the computers hate, but is necessary to start the off-gassing process and avoid too much additional loading in the slow tissues. On reaching our deep stop we paused for a minute and then continued at the slightly slower rate of 6m/minute. By this time we were back onto the plateau and heading directly for Cathedral Cave. We entered the cave at about 30m and headed towards the back, which provided the perfect sheltered oasis in which to do

the switch to our first decompression mix. Also in the cave were Trevor and Andrew who had done a similarly deep dive to us, plus a few of the other guys who had 'only' done 50m dives.



After such a spectacular deep section of the dive I was quite content to while away the deco in relative peace, but the ocean hadn't finished for the day. As we nosed around the cave we disturbed a whole group of dozing stingrays, maybe 15-20 in total, some of which immediately rushed out of the cave whilst others watched us warily or ignored us altogether. We also upset a huge school of Big-Eye which were sheltering in the dark and really did not appreciate our bright lights and bubbles. Although they didn't want to remain too close to us they also didn't want to head out of the cave, which created

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some confusion when we positioned ourselves at the back of the cave, the perfect spot to view the Big-Eye silhouetted against the bright blue of the cave entrance.

By this time we had been in the water for almost 80 minutes and it was time for our second deco switch, to pure oxygen at 6m. With the switch safely completed and with another 30 minutes of decompression to do we decided to take the scooters for a tour outside of the cave. Keeping the wall on our left we headed out to the very tip of Cape Brett, enjoying the bright sunlight and the great visibility on the sheer wall below us. Unlike the cave the conditions weren't so benign during this part of the dive and we had to constantly work hard to ride the swells and maintain our depth. We seemed to reach the end of the wall very quickly and it was only when we turned around we realised how hard the current was running. With the scooters on maximum thrust we still had to fin slightly in order to make any headway back towards the cave – no wonder no one else had headed along this way.



Our trip back took at least 3 times longer than our outward journey and on reaching the cave we decided it would be prudent to complete the remainder of our deco and our gas breaks in tranquil waters, so we returned to upset the Big-Eyes and stingrays. Finally, just as the two hour mark rolled up, it was time to surface. We pointed the scooters out of the cave and headed towards the boat.

I am often asked whether deep trimix diving is worth all the hassle and effort. People query whether the reef you get to enjoy down at 75m is really any different from the shallower reef and whether the expense of trimix can be justified. After a dive like this there is no doubt – absolutely trimix is justified. During our two hours it felt like we did 3 totally separate dives. We started with the sharks and our entourage of fish down in the depths. Then we enjoyed a spectacular dive in a huge sea cavern and finally we had an adrenalin scooter ride along the top of a vertigo inducing wall in

very 'sporting' conditions. Any of these dives done individually would have been good, but to do them all back-to-back is very special. It is the sort of dive which fires up your enthusiasm and makes you hungry for more. And of course it was definitely a working day – a highly important advertising initiative to support the training side of my business. Well that's what the accountant gets told anyway.