

Cavern & Cave Training Report: 11/12th Feb 2011

Hamish McKay



We woke to a reasonably grey but still warm Saturday morning, in one of the most amazing locations New Zealand has to offer. It was quickly apparent that we were all very excited and anxious about the upcoming activities for the day and there was plenty of speculation about just when “Evil Jamie” would appear to test our stress management skills and create some worst case scenarios during the two planned dives.

After a quick breakfast, a few cups of coffee and deciding who would be in each of the two teams we all headed down stairs to the dive shop to set up our gear. Half an hour later the kit was loaded onto the boat and we piled into the cars and headed down to the beach at Matai Bay. Being the only one in the group who had not been to this unbelievable area before, I was totally speechless when we arrived at a beach that would rival any in Fiji. What a sweet place to do a dive course! We geared up next to the beach while Andre launched the boat and then we quickly shot off to our first site for the day, Canary Cave. After 15 minutes we pulled up to the site and Jamie began running through the tasks involved in the exercise we were about to undertake. In dive

one we were to split into two teams, Tony and myself in one and Chris and Christian in the other. The goal was to run a reel towards the back of the cavern, practicing tie offs and other line securing techniques along the way (not such an easy task with a moderate surge in a small narrow confinement!), leave the reels and return to the entrance.

We entered the water and both teams carefully made their way down towards the back of the cavern, struggling to keep in control of the line as they were pushed back and forwards in the surge. After about 15 minutes we made it to the turnaround point where we had to tie off and follow the line back towards the entrance. This is when Evil Jamie finally showed himself, along with the infamous air gun. First to be hit with a multiple valve failure was Tony, followed by Chris in the second team. Expecting something like this to happen we acted quickly and got the two distressed buddies sharing air with us. Now the tricky part was to get out while staying on the line, keep in trim, in very bad surge and sharing air! As you can imagine this must have been a funny sight for Jamie.

Both teams made it back to the entrance and we were signalled to make our way back into cave to retrieve our lines. The surge had become very bad and after five minutes of being thrown around in the swell Jamie signalled for us to make our way back to the entrance while he retrieved the reels. We all surfaced safely after about 45mins.

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After a quick surface interval to off gas and let the stress from the first dive disappear we geared up again and set off on our second dive, this time at the Cray Cave site. Chris, feeling a bit crook, decided to sit this dive out so Christian, Tony and I formed a three man team. For this dive the goal was to again successfully run a line to the back of the cavern, turn and follow it back to the entrance while staying in formation and communicating with our lights. With slightly less surge than the first site the line work went really well and with Christian leading we made it to the back of the cave without too much hassle. Everything was going well but after a minute or so we were suddenly all faced with a catastrophic series of primary light failures, leaving all of us using back up's.



We all correctly agreed that the dive was compromised and turned around to make our way back to the entrance, as you would in a real life scenario. We had just got comfortable with the current situation when Tony was for the second unfortunate time in one day faced with another total valve failure. Acting quickly Christian donated his primary hose to Tony who was now in front of him while I came back to grab the reel and wind it back out while the other two shared air and followed the line out. This turned out to be a big mistake.

Excited and probably a little bit stressed Christian and Tony began speeding up to get out of the cave as quickly as possible while I was left fumbling around with the reel trying to secure it. All of a sudden the group had split and Jamie decided this was the perfect time to teach us a lesson, hitting me with various problems. After signalling frantically with my back up light and watching the other two swim obliviously away, it became clear this was not an ideal situation. After learning a hard lesson about staying together we retrieved the reel and ended the dive after 40 minutes, surfaced and headed back to the lodge.



Later that evening we all regrouped at the lodge for some more exercises. Jamie had set up a line course around some parked cars and we had to all close our eyes and work as a team to make it around the course. When we had mastered the art of following a pre-set line we had to work as a team to lay our own route and follow it while a series of theoretical silt-outs and gear failures were sprung upon us. To finish things off we were then split into teams of two and were timed following one of Jamie's more unconventional line routes blind. Tony and Chris went first, while Christian and I watched, saying rather too loudly we could obviously do it way faster. Big Mistake! As we headed off blind around the route Jamie added a

jump line to the course, sending us off into the bushes in our hurry to beat Tony and Chris. We learned two valuable rules that day; always be aware of your team members and be careful what you say in front of Jamie when he's teaching you...

The next day we set out very early to avoid the caverns having too much surge like the previous day. Our first dive was in Cray Cave this time with similar objectives to the previous dives. Here we would reel in, tie off and follow the line out blind to simulate exiting in a sit out. Both teams made good primary tie offs and quickly made their way inside the cavern. There was a strong surge already and we were all thrown around inside the cavern, worse than the previous day but managed to tie off and begin the exercise. Chris and Tony were the first to turn and used a contact method that involved holding onto the arm of the second person. This proved to be a reasonably slow method in a situation where the line is so close the ground. Christian and I adopted a method where the person at the rear holds the lower leg of the person in front meaning they were not bumping into each other and allowed them to exit the cave much more quickly. Due to the amount of surge once this exercise was completed we retrieved the reels and surfaced to attempt another dive across the bay at Canary Cave. Once again the surge was really bad on this side of the bay so we opted to make this a pleasure dive instead of doing exercises in what seemed like a washing machine.



Hamish recovers after the course

We arrived back at the lodge by mid-morning and cleaned our gear, tidied up the lodge and packed the vehicles before sitting down with a beer to have a group debrief about the weekends activities. Jamie went through each exercise with us and described what he saw, how we could improve technique and identified areas which needed work. After a bit of discussion and banter over who was responsible for the epic failure on Saturday when I theoretically died, we said farewell to beautiful Matai Bay and began the long journey back to Auckland. Overall it was a great weekend. I think we all learned a lot and we're all looking forward to completing the TDI Intro to Cave and hopefully Full Cave course in the future.