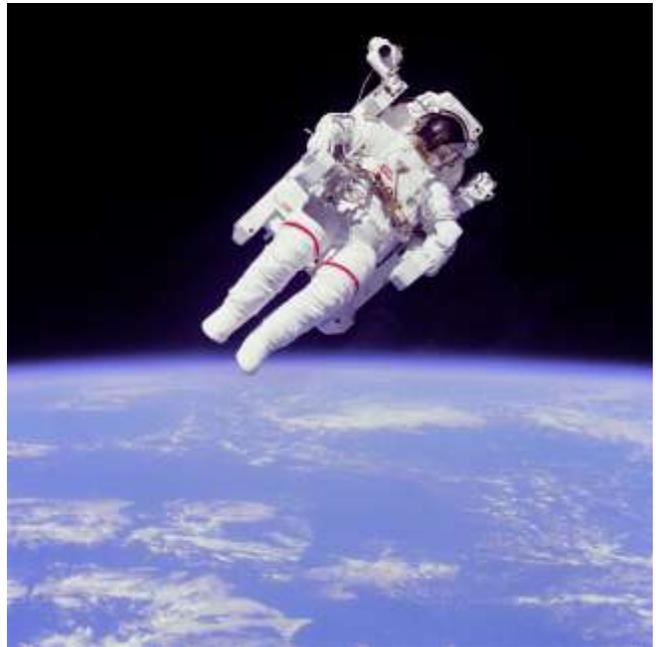


## The Beauty of Caves

*Jamie Obern*

The hidden world enjoyed by cave divers has often been called inner-space, with the obvious intention being to liken cave divers and astronauts. To the non-initiated this reeks of ego gone mad, but the truth is there are many parallels between the two activities. Of course no cave diver would deny such a flattering comparison to one of the world's most elite and highly trained groups, but there is a clear environmental similarity as well. In both activities you are in an alien environment, entirely reliant on technology to keep you alive. Once you have perfected your buoyancy and can hang motionless it is as if gravity no longer applies to you and you can 'fly' weightlessly around, much like an astronaut on E.V.A. (Extra-vehicular activity). And if you switch off your light whilst inside the caves you immediately feel cut off from the rest of the planet, alone in the inky darkness with just the sound of your breathing for company. Probably James Cameron's recent trip to the bottom of the abyss generated similar sensations, but in general most divers will never feel such a sense of exquisite isolation.

As you enter the inner-world a relaxed diver should be aware of certain senses firing up. It is as if your body is on high alert, searching for the slightest input. At first you will notice how your eyes become accustomed to the lower light levels, how details you didn't initially see are becoming clearer. Next you become aware of a heightened sense of touch, any contact with the rock structure of the cave seeming to send an electric current to the brain. Finally if you are truly relaxed you will notice not just the sound of your own breathing, but the sound of your buddies breathing as well. At no other time whilst diving do I feel as alert as when I enter the dark zone of a cave.



All diving has an element of the unknown, the potential for an encounter with something new, but again such sensations seem enhanced within the inner-world. The familiar immediately becomes unfamiliar, as the ghostly shapes of fish glide in and out of vision. Even small creatures seem bigger in the darkness and for those with active imaginations the magnified shadows of eels and larger life can quickly become sightings of Taniwha. There is also the unfamiliar, the weird and wonderful cave formations, each different from the next and each changing as you swim past, with the angle of your light creating a constant movement of shape and shadow. In caves with large amounts of marble in the walls, such as Blue Creek, or caves with very white crystalline formations, such as those in Mexico, light is also reflected, bouncing in unexpected directions and creating yet more shadows and ghostly shapes.

In fact this constantly changing vista of light and shadow provides two very compelling reasons why caves divers keep going back to the same caves over and over again. Firstly it makes every dive feel different. As you swim in, just a small change in position or depth can create a completely different view from before. To give an easy example try swimming into Taravana Cave at the Poor Knights in each of the following four positions – along the sandy floor, along the left wall, along the right wall or along the ceiling. Each will give you a completely



different dive and show you areas of the cave you will have almost certainly never seen before. And if you think you really know Taravana I have a simple question for you – how shallow is the shallowest part of the roof? I don't know yet as I'm still exploring, but I've reached the middle single digits with still more space above me.

And this is the second reason for visiting supposedly 'known' cave systems, the chance that something has been missed. Is the dark patch in the corner just a shadow or a new lead? For 20 years everyone thought the UK's most well-known cave system, Wookie Hole, was explored out, but then Rick Stanton made a discovery and now exploration is continuing again. Here in NZ there is active exploration happening in several different caves and even at the Poor Knights not everything has been mapped out. Three times this year I have found 'new' cave I haven't previously seen, even after 5 years of poking into holes and in one particular cave I know for certain I'm not yet at the end. Somehow I feel the need to quote Gene Roddenberry's Star Trek – "To boldly go....." Can there be a better buzz out there?

Even non exploratory dives create a buzz. Take Scary Cave as an example – firstly you have the large triangular cavern zone which looks dark and mysterious until your pupils dilate. Then you have the slowly narrowing passage leading gently downward, usually crystal clear unless disturbed by less careful divers and with the brilliant white sand bottom running like a river towards the exit. Next you have the short restriction or pinch, where the rock roof comes to within a metre or less of the floor – usually the spot where many divers stop. As you pass this pinch you enter a large round chamber, with a halocline normally about a metre from the floor. Just this natural phenomenon alone is enough to make me smile, but as you rise through it, experiencing the temporary loss of vision as the fresh and salt water mix, you enter a new world where the fresh water gives everything a green tinge. As you explore in this area you will see fabulous banks of pristine silt, covered in unblemished swirls and ripples. Such a sculpted environment is very unique at the Poor Knights and I am pleased other divers have taken the care not to destroy such a beautiful spot. Finally you have the exit part of the dive, where no matter how much you enjoy being inside the cave you always experience a little release of stress, knowing you will soon be in open water and 'safe'. As you clear the restriction you get the first hint of light at the end of the tunnel and then as you pass the corner the vivid turquoise blue of the entrance comes fully into sight, seemingly welcoming you back into your previous world. I love this procession through the cave, enjoying in equal measure both the entry and exit sections of the dive. The Poor Knights is particularly great in this regard because you even get a short reef dive at the end of most cave dives – such as my usual safety stop atop Landing Bay Pinnacle after a dive in Taravana.

# TECH DIVE New Zealand

As New Zealand's only cave diving Instructor I feel a responsibility to both protect the cave environment and also promote it. Caves have given me some incredible memories and experiences and ever since I arrived in 2007 I have wanted to help others explore and enjoy inner-space. However, I must admit I initially felt a little nervous about becoming an instructor – would it ruin my experience of the caves I taught classes in? In fact being an instructor has actually enhanced my enjoyment of the caves.

During other diving activities the person leading the dive or going first is often the one who sees the most. This can be because the aquatic life is scared away or because in wrecks there is often silt dislodged by even the most careful divers. Cave diving at the Poor Knights is different. I am equally happy leading the dive and enjoying being the 'explorer' or going second and enjoying a much greater view of the geology of the cave, as I can usually see both my own and my buddies lights. As an instructor I am usually ghosting through the cave without any lights and it is amazing how different the caves look when the area immediately around you is still dark but the area around the students is lit up.



I also often get to see the 'light-bulb' moment as the students suddenly 'get' cave diving. It's great to watch a previously slightly nervous student start to properly look around the cave and relax. In addition it's great to see the progression of students through a cave class, as more and more problems are managed, light communications improve and dives which were once too difficult are now possible. Finally I love the sensation of broadening someone's horizons. Open Water Instructors will know exactly what I mean, but maybe a quote from Paul, a very experienced diver who was a student on my last class, might enlighten those of you who still don't 'get' cave diving. "This trip has shown me a whole other side to the Poor Knights."

So ask yourself this simple question: "Isn't it time you got to see the rest of the Poor Knights?"