

Matai Bay: 23rd – 25th October 2010

Jamie Obern

It can be a bit awkward sometimes when your hobby is also your job and business is always mixed with pleasure. How do you go away on a diving weekend and simply relax, stop organising everyone and dive solely for yourself? It may sound strange but to really relax takes a bit of effort, beforehand that is – when you have to plan where to go and what to do. But if you pick the right group and the right spot it is possible to forget about work for most of the weekend, even if not all weekend. For Labour Day this year I decided that Matai Bay was the perfect spot. And amazingly the weather obliged too – awesome.



The weather and sea conditions were just awful....

A comfortable 4 ½ hour drive from Auckland, at the end of the Karikari peninsular, Matai Bay is an incredibly tranquil place. The bay is a shallow horseshoe with no rips, only a handful of rustic baches, golden sand and



Rush hour northland style

clear water – perfect for parents to unwind and kids to run wild. It is in fact exactly how I imagine a “real Kiwi beach” if there is such a thing. Trying (but failing) not to sound like I’m getting old, it provides the type of backdrop where old fashioned seaside holidays can be taken, without TVs and computers. With the nearest large town (Kaitaia) over 40km away and plenty of other beaches further south to trap most of the tourists Matai Bay remains quiet and undisturbed. Even with a local fishing competition happening over the weekend we were there, we saw very few people, just some 4x4s and boat trailers awaiting the return of their sea-going owners. If you ever need to escape the madness of Auckland this place is perfect.

We had booked our diving through Andre the owner of AtoZ Diving and having been several times before we knew he ran a very relaxed boat. Generally we loaded up at the dive shop at around 8.30am, drove the 3km along the mainly unsealed road to the bay, did a couple of dives before lunch and then had the afternoon to ourselves. And if that all seems too easy you should also factor in that there was only 5 of us on the boat, our accommodation was above the dive shop and best of all there is a vineyard halfway between the dive shop and the bay. Yes an afternoon sitting in the sun enjoying the view from the huge grass terrace at the front of the Karikari Estate is a very tough call. So tough in fact I think I should really do it more often, just to get the hang of it.



Launching the boat

TECH DIVE New Zealand



As for the diving, well it's much like most of the east coast of northland. Clear warm water, lots of life and colour, no real currents, very varied topography – offering something for everyone in fact. AND it does have something extra, two beautiful sea caves, environments which generally bring out a big smile – well inside at least. (Don't know why everyone thinks I'm grumpy.)

We did 6 dives over the long weekend, 3 in the caves and 3 out on the reef. Our 3 reef dives were at the pinnacle in the middle of the bay, an underwater archway full of demoiselles just along the coast (imaginatively named 'Demoiselle Arch') and another

pinnacle, known variously as Moki Playground and Round the World. Of these my favourite was the last dive, especially as the visibility was excellent – 20m+ once you dropped below 20m depth. Of the sea caves my favourite is Cray Cave (again imaginatively named), although both caves provide the exhilarating sense of exploring on the way in, coupled with the fabulous sight of a turquoise blue canyon leading you out of the blackness as you exit. Although I've done this type of dive many times before it never fails to inspire me – definitely a plus point when you are trying to take a weekend off.

As for the rest of our time in the far north (when we weren't at the vineyard) well it was all very stressful. On the Friday night 3 of us checked out the only bar in town – not much bigger than my office at home, full of beardy weirdy fishermen, but very friendly. Cas and Matt organised a BBQ for us on the Saturday night, with Cas as usual providing far too much food. (Where was James 'Mr. Hollow legs' Croker when we needed him?) And on the Sunday afternoon a few of us even went for a walk. Well it might have worked off ½ a glass of wine, even if Cas had to have a lie down halfway through.



Cas burned out after the huge walk.

So if I've learned anything from the weekend it's that firstly I should go to Matai Bay more often, especially as it reaffirms exactly why I moved from the UK to NZ in the first place. Secondly when surrounded by relaxed companions (Mel, Peter, Matt and Cas – all very chilled out) I can go diving and separate business from pleasure. And finally and most importantly I need to practice relaxing on the Karikari Estate – just in case I forget how. You need to trust me on this – everyone who enjoys the odd glass of wine should practice too. (Just don't make Peter go and order pink bubbles like Cas did.)

Oh and next time I go to the winery I need to take a picture of the view, so I can include it the trip report. It's so could everyone should be able to enjoy it.