

## A year in review: 2010

*Jamie Obern*

A few weeks ago there was a posting on the SDNZ forum asking people for their memorable moments from 2010. I looked back through my logbook, selected a few dives and posted a reply, initially thinking that would be the end of it. But in looking back I realised 2010 has been a quite epic year for me, mixing some very cool trips, with challenging courses, achieving a few long held goals and some weird and wonderful moments. Hopefully some of my recollections will inspire you to create a memorable 2011 for yourself.

### Big Trips

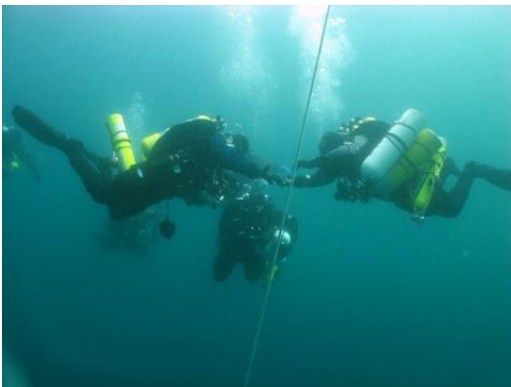
Three trips stand out for me in 2010: Blue Creek, The Mikhail Lermontov and France. Blue Creek is memorable for the sheer effort involved and the intensity of the diving. Firstly you have the problems of location – a cave in the middle of nowhere, requiring the team to cart all of their gear laboriously along a 2km narrow bush track. Secondly once you reach the cave you need to lower all the gear in through the narrow entrance, each day wondering where the water level will be. And finally once in the water you have to deal with 6 degree temperatures and depths of 50m+. But if you are wondering why, simply ask yourself where else is left where you can truly explore?



James in the entrance of Blue Creek

We did four Lermontov trips this year and the great thing was we got to build our knowledge of the ship over many dives. I remember last year struggling to find the cinema, but this year the dive team got into the hospital, the kitchens and plenty more besides. We have big plans for 2011.

France was awesome for many reasons. It was my first trip back to Europe since emigrating to NZ 4 years ago; it was the middle of the European summer (35 degrees) and I was missing the worst of the NZ winter; the food is always excellent; I got to intern on a cave 1 class with the instructor who originally inspired me to become a GUE diver; and I did a lot of very beautiful cave dives in a fabulous part of the world. Three weeks was definitely not long enough, maybe next time.



Graduation dive on GUE T2 class

### Big Courses

This year I have been lucky enough to be both a student and a teacher on some superb courses. As a student I was put through my paces on the GUE Tech 2 class, which culminated in two 20min long 70m+ dives in the Bay of Islands. This course was also memorable for not only being the first GUE T2 class ever run in NZ, but also for bringing 3 GUE instructors here to teach and intern: Rich Lundgren, Liam Allen and Marcus Werneck. Rarely does NZ have so much technical diving experience in the same place at the same time.

As an instructor I managed to organise and run the very first GUE Rec 3 class in the world, right in in NZ. For once the 'World Famous' tag which Kiwis love so much was accurate. I also organised the first GUE Tech 1 class in NZ and the first TDI Introductory Cave Diver Class. It will be many years before so many firsts can be achieved again.

### Memorable Dives

Five dives stick out in my mind as high points in an exceptional year.

January, Lazons Reef nr. White Island

I can picture the scene clearly, even though it was almost a year ago. I'm floating just above the reef, looking upwards at the boat moored above me. I can see the splashes as other divers step off the boat and even distinguish who is who – and yet I am over 30m below them. The water is as clear and blue as anything I have seen in the tropics and I am surrounded by stingrays, pink and blue Maomao and a dozen Kingfish. This is reef diving at its very best.



The incredibly blue water at the Volkner Rocks

March, Waikato River, night time drift dive

As the sun sets we slip into the river and do final gear preparations. A few passers-by give us quizzical looks, wondering what mischief we might be up to. Just before it gets dark we slip under the river's surface, allowing the gentle pull of the current to drag us downstream. We done this dive before, but at night it is far harder to get your bearings and shadows give the river bed a completely different appearance. Flying through the shallow sections, gliding over rocks and tree trunks is exhilarating. It's a shame to reach our exit point so soon.

April, HMNZS Waikato, locating the anchor

'The navy came to look for it, but weren't successful. Do you want to try?' It was a pretty irresistible offer, although I wasn't sure how I would feel if we beat the navy. Excited by success or worried about my adopted countries lack of military capability? But we had to try. And what a day the weather gods put on for our search – the best vis. any of us (including the Dive!Tuts staff) has ever seen on the Waikato. And with the help of an underwater metal detector from NIWA and a few stage bottles of deco gas we found it. Now I'm just worried we may have to raise it as well, as 8 months later the navy still hasn't been able to do it.....



The beautiful Saint Saveur

August, Saint Saveur, France. 74m cave dive

I was diving with Joe, my old cave buddy from the UK. For both of us this was a new cave, although we had a good map and instructions from a couple of divers who had dived the site before. Our plan was to drop down and keep going until we either reached the bottom or either of us felt uncomfortable. I was leading and with good conditions I continued down steadily. As my computer clicked over to 70m I started to smile – my deepest ever cave dive. At 74m we reached the bottom and stared along the tunnel which stretched horizontally ahead of us. When I turned to look at Joe I could see he was smiling even more than me.

October, Mikhail Lermontov

After five trips and several aborted attempts we were ready to do the complete traverse of the Lounge Deck. We entered the Bolshoi Lounge through the doorway just below the bridge, passed through the lounge and exited through the lower double doors. Locating the spiral staircase as our landmark we passed through the collapsed area and along the corridor by the bar storerooms into the Astoria Bar. From here we passed the Games room and Activities Office and reached the middle foyer. Dropping down slightly we entered duty free,

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passed the Sadko Bar and found our last spiral staircase. The last part of our dive was to traverse the passage by the Barbers which leads to the Neptune Bar and the Swimming Pool. We exited after 35mins and exchanged handshakes – awesome dive.

## Funny Moments

No year is complete without some humour and 2010 didn't disappoint. To quote a phrase: "The names have been changed to protect the innocent....."

a) I distinctly remember my dive buddies face as he marched into the chemist, clutching the money I had happily lent him. The doctor had prescribed an immediate enema to fix his digestive problems, adding sagely that the patient was advised to use warm water for the procedure. Watching him unwrap the boxes from the chemist felt like a bizarre type of Xmas, where the one doing the unwrapping wasn't getting any enjoyment from the event. The long plastic tube with the mastic-gun-like nozzle caused tremendous glee amongst all bar the patient. Clearly the procedure itself was a solo diving effort, but afterwards the doctor's words echoed in the breeze; 'I should have used warm water', was all the patient could say.

b) As I climbed back onto the boat I saw one of our dive group slumped in the front cabin breathing from the O2 set – never a good sign. After asking his buddies, the boat handler and another instructor who had witnessed what had happened it became clear the diver was only being cautious after a faster than normal ascent. With plenty of oxygen available it was a reasonable precaution, which I expected to be followed by the diver resting for the remainder of the afternoon. What none of us expected was seeing the diver exit the boat, hoist the oxygen cylinder onto his shoulder and stomp the 500m uphill to the lodge – especially when the truck was empty and waiting. Nothing like some gentle(?) exercise to help off-gas.

c) The plan was to enter the wreck via the nearest hole, pass through the engine room into the boiler room, pass between the boilers and exit into the TV room. It seemed simple looking at the deck plans and with the benefit of trimix the way forward was clear – unfortunately the divers I was watching attempting to complete this plan were on air. There were no laurels for this performance, more like Laurel and Hardy.

d) After 112mins of exhausting cave diving drills I finally let my two students surface to rest and debrief. I wondered whether I had perhaps pushed too hard in order to impress the watching examiner. Amazingly he lead me to one side to debrief my performance and started with the word's 'You need to push the students harder'. I thought the student listening surreptitiously was going to have a heart attack at that point.



e) James and Tom are full of incredible ideas for potential dive spots and Tarawera falls is no exception. The falls which pour from the middle of 100m+ high cliffs are actually the spectacular resurgence of an underground river – our aim, to find the submergence. We initially found two submergences, one too tight for access the other to turbulent and were close to abandoning our search when we found a sign by a river pool advising against swimming due to a cave entrance in the bottom of the pool. We unpacked the dive gear Tom had brought specially for such an event. Thermals – check. Dry-suit – check. Fins – check. Mask – oops. For some bizarre reason James had

his swimming goggles in his bag and as we had nothing else we sent Tom into the water looking like DJ Disaster at an all-night rave!

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## Final memories

Aside from the big and bizarre there are several other moments from 2010 which stand out. I will always remember this as the year we bought our portable compressor and started blending our own trimix in the backyard. It is the year Steve B got his silly smile back when he dived Riwaka Resurgence with me. It is also the year when I finally dived the Minato Maru, a wreck which has been on my hit list since first arriving in NZ in Jan. 2007.

Finally I will remember this year not for something I did, but for a dive one of my students achieved – a dive he has wanted to do for a very long time – the Leningrad Restaurant on the Mikhail Lermontov. I remember first meeting this student in 2007 and my initial impressions weren't great. It seemed like every piece of equipment he owned had a problem. If you'd asked me then where I thought his diving career was going my answer would have been 'nowhere'. Three years, 150 dives and a handful of courses later he successfully entered the restaurant with barely a whisper of silt from his fins. He had a good year too.

