

## Tank Cave, trip Report: 6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> April 2012

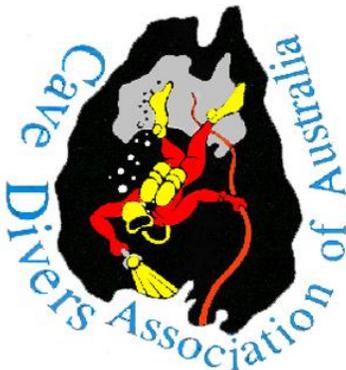
Jamie Obern

Half-way through the first day of OZTeK '09 and I'm standing by the CDAA Stand. (Cave Divers Association of Australia) I'm pondering about organising a trip to Oz to go diving and the CDAA member I'm talking to is pointing enthusiastically at a very garishly coloured map. After from the really famous Nullarbor caves this is apparently the next best cave for diving in Australia, with far easier access. He says it has at least 9km of passages, or maybe 11km he's a bit vague, but it's a must-do dive. I ask if he's done it and the answer is no; he's still doesn't have enough qualifying dives to get access yet. I ask a few more questions and it starts to sound too hard to arrange. Unlike Mexico, Florida, France, NZ and the UK where I have just turned up and dived at will, in Oz I have to book my day, go with a guide and fill out mountains of paperwork. I make a few non-committal noises and wander off to look at some other stands.



Over the next two years I do lots of cave diving, mainly in NZ but also some in France. I qualify as NZ's first cave diving instructor and also get to know many more of the cave diving enthusiasts in Oz. At OZTeK '11 I return to the CDAA stand to look at the map once again and ask some more pertinent questions. It still sounds hard to arrange, but mentally Tank Cave is now on my 'to do' list. Unfortunately my 'to do' list is pretty long, even more so after a whole weekend of chatting to fellow divers and explorers. Again I do nothing about arranging a trip, instead planning more expeditions in NZ. And then in the strangest of locations things fall into place. I'm sitting in a hotel room in Niue, wondering what to do as the rain buckets down outside. Mel is surfing the net and sending emails. She has been trying to arrange some wreck diving from Melbourne when Steve T sends a reply suggesting we join him for some cave diving instead. Suddenly the trip I've put off for so long is all arranged and we've booked some flights – now all we have to do is the dammed paperwork.

To quote from the CDAA website:



*The CDAA was formed in September 1973. At the time landowners throughout the Mount Gambier area of South Australia were contemplating the closure of all holes to diving, for fear of legal liability following a spate of diving fatalities. With the forming of the CDAA, sinkhole divers hoped to prevent the wholesale closure of the dive sites by presenting a united voice in defence of their sport. They wished to indicate to landowners and the public at large that they were able to regulate their activities to acceptable standards of safety and training. The newly formed CDAA set up a series of criteria and testing procedures. Initially these were a listing of all the popular cave diving sites divided into different categories based on their degree of difficulty. Cards were issued to divers to display to landowners to indicate their competency. The landowners gained confidence in the ability of the CDAA to produce safe divers and, as a result, the holes remained open.*

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Tank Cave is one of the sites controlled by the CDAA and has been under their jurisdiction for many years. As their premier cave they have pretty strict access guidelines. You need to be CDAA Advanced Cave qualified, or equivalent. (GUE Cave 2, TDI Full Cave etc). You need to have done at least 25 dives after obtaining this qualification and at a variety of different sites – no more than 10 dives at any one site. You also need to be a member of the CDAA, or have a Special Visitors Pass (SVP) and go with a guide. And you need to book which days you will be diving as numbers are limited – no more than 12 per day, with access permitted only every other weekend. Thankfully Steve and several of the other cave divers I had met over the last few years guided us through the process and helped us get bookings for the Easter period. Everything was good to go – nearly.

The plan was to fly to Melbourne where Steve would pick us up and drive us the 450km to Mount Gambier. He was organising our accommodation and was also going to borrow a whole pile of gear from friendly divers so we didn't have to drag all of ours across the Tasman and pay excess luggage. The only problem was that Steve was in China – hopefully arriving back in Oz on the morning of the day we were supposed to be meeting up. It was a definite case of fingers crossed (and toes and everything else) that all the gear was waiting, working and all the various flight connections arrived on schedule. Amazingly everything happened according to plan and although Steve was clearly a little jet-lagged we arrived on time in Mt. Gambier with almost everything we needed.

Steve had booked us in at a purpose built dive lodge called 'Just a Bed', conveniently located close to both the town and Tank Cave. The rooms were basic but comfortable, the lounge was spacious, there was plenty of hot water and to make things really easy the compressor station was right next door. We dropped all our tanks off and fell into bed – excited to be finally diving Tank Cave after so many years of putting it off.



Tank Cave was not pretty. After so much hype from all the CDAA guys I really hoped the cave below didn't match the land above.



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To get into the cave we first kitted up all our gear in the shed and then lowered the stages down the ladder into a small dry chamber 3 metres down. Then we got into our dry-suits and doubles and climbed down the ladder ourselves. There is about enough room for 5 or 6 kitted divers to sit or stand a little hunched over whilst out of the water, but only 3 divers can be in the very small surface pool at a time and only if they huddle up. From the surface pool you drop through a narrow rift into a room at 9m where you do bubble checks and then through another small rift into the first main tunnel – called A tunnel. If the first diver is not careful the visibility in the initial rift can become very murky so it comes as a wonderful surprise when you break into A tunnel to be confronted with fabulously clear water and lots of space. This is when you realise why Tank Cave is so popular.

The cave itself is a very complex web of interconnecting tunnels and it's possible to do loop after loop after loop. Without a guideline you would quickly become hopelessly lost, but the cave is probably the most comprehensively lined and marked cave I have ever done. I said at the start how the map initially appears horribly garish, with a rainbow of colours, but once you start to plan your dives the logic behind this becomes clear. Each coloured

area denotes a different section of the cave system, A tunnel, B tunnel, C, D, E, F, G and so on. Each tunnel is lined and marked with the code letter, but even more helpful are the regular numbers – A1, A2, A3, A4 etc. As long as you have a reasonable memory it is easy to remember the dive plan: head down A tunnel to A6, turn into B tunnel until B5, then F tunnel until etc. (And before any smart arses write in to tell me you can't do the above dive my excuse is I don't have a Tank Cave map in front of me so the route I've just laid out is simply an example of how you might plan a dive.)

For CDAA divers doing their first few dives in Tank Cave there are a series of dives planned out, which allow new divers to slowly get used to the cave and build their experience. SVPs can bypass this requirement, although Steve still took us for a 'gentle' 80 minute tour to start off with, showing us the main tunnels and pointing out the large air bell at marker A10 – very useful in case of emergencies. Once this was completed and we'd had a break we headed back down for our second dive, this time with me leading us. We went right to the end of A tunnel where we had a good look around to see if we could see a way on. As you approach the end of the line the tunnel starts to get bigger, but then suddenly stops – clearly collapsed. I would guess many other divers before us have also looked for a way on, also without success.



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Over the next three days we did 4 more dives, the longest being nearly 3 hours. My favourite was probably our final dive, a short 2 hours, where we went almost to the end of G tunnel to visit a huge chamber called the 'Ballroom' and then returned via F tunnel and an area called the 'Goat Track'. The Ballroom is a beautiful space which could easily accommodate 100 divers at the same time. The water was so clear that from my position at the back it looked almost as though Steve and Mel were flying through the air and it was only when you saw the regular exhalations you could tell we were in water. I was also reminded of

why many people have likened cave divers to astronauts – the isolation from the rest of humanity, the complete reliance on your equipment, the total silence apart from your breathing and the weightlessness. There are more similarities as well, but you get the picture.

The Goat Track however is not a big space, quite the reverse. It is a nasty convoluted nearly vertical squeeze, which requires precise positioning to enter. We had done this same squeeze the day before, but on the last day, with me again at the back, Mel somehow managed to get her entry wrong and as she reversed out of the crack she pretty much silted the place out. The last thing I saw was her fins as she disappeared back into the crack, correctly this time. And then what could I hear? Steve laughing to himself knowing I was going to have an interesting time working my way through. Why is it that all cave divers have such a dark sense of humour?

Finally, for those of you thinking about a visit to Tank Cave here are a few logistical bits of information. The water temp is a constant 15 degrees year round – wet gloves are ok for 2 to 3 hours after that I would recommend dry-gloves. The deepest depth we got to was 19m and all of our initial dives were to a maximum of 13m. Double 12s and a stage of 32% are perfect for two dives a day on your first visit. Our longest penetration was about 900m horizontal distance. And don't think doing multiple dives in the same cave will be boring. Each area of the cave is very different – there is everything from massive highway type tunnels great for scootering, to tiny squeeze tunnels which can only just be passed by back-mount, or if you really want side-mount or no-mount. And the rocks are very different too. OK to non- cave divers wet rock doesn't sound fascinating, but I know some of you understand. Just look at the pictures Steve took to see how the rock varies if you're not sure what I mean.

Finally we had to return to Melbourne, but Australia had one final present for us. As we drove back and the sun set, turning



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the landscape to the golden red brown and orange which you see in all the tourist brochures, a sudden rain storm created a fabulous rainbow, which came down directly onto the highway ahead of us and with the long straight roads we drove onwards towards the rainbow for well over an hour. Chuck in a scattering of gum trees, some local wildlife – cockatoos, emus and kangaroos and it all felt very special. It was a spectacular way to drive back into town.

Finally finally I want to thank Steve for arranging everything and also all the local divers who lent us kit. It was wonderful to head across the water and find can lights, backplates, wings and fins waiting for us and all exactly like the ones we use here – maybe even a bit better dare I say it. If ever there was a great advert for standardised kit this was it. Plus contrary to the rumours Kiwis love to spread about Aussies everyone was amazingly welcoming, friendly and helpful – so much so we'll definitely be going again. All I'm wondering about is why I left it so long to do a trip in the first place?



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