

Trip Report: Matai Bay, 24-26th October 2009

Mel Jeavons (Photos: Carolyn Tongue)

They always say that it's the little things that make the difference. For me, there are lots of little differences about living in NZ and one of them was reinforced this weekend. A holiday weekend and beautiful weather. Two phrases which are never associated in the UK, unless the word "not" is included in there too.

Having not been able to make the past two trips to Matai Bay and hearing great reviews about both trips, I was very much looking forward to this weekend. Even the long drive up there wasn't going to put me off, especially as I wasn't the one driving...! Friday morning dawned sunny and bright and Bryan and I left Auckland by about 11am, allowing for a pretty straight forward drive up to Whatuwhiwhi missing most of the holiday traffic.

We were booked into stay in Andre's accommodation above the dive shop which is described as "deluxe backpackers" so I had no idea what to expect. I was very pleasantly surprised when we arrived, it's a very nicely designed area with one double room and 4 single beds in one half of the lounge. A bit cosy for those 4, but plenty of communal room in the other half of the lounge. Cooking facilities are a bit limited with no oven and a plug-in cooker top with 2 hobs but there is a big BBQ on the deck which did its job fantastically.

The next to arrive were Cas and Matt at about 8.30, with Cas looking a little jaded around the edges. She'd just flown back from New Orleans at 6 that morning and had kept herself awake by catering for all of us for the weekend. Bryan had been a bit concerned that she may not have factored in his appetite, but soon realised that she's acclimatised to diving trips with James so there was sufficient food to feed twice the people for twice as long. Our main problem was where to store it all!

The other two to join us were Chris and Lee. Chris had left work a little early and turned up at about 9.30, but we were all long asleep by the time Lee made it by 11.30.

Saturday morning saw us up nice and early and ready to head off by 8.30am. The diving is off a small rib which is launched at Matai Bay, approx 5km down the road and all the diving is within approx 15mins drive, making it a very relaxing dive weekend. The sun was shining and the sea was flat calm - we couldn't have asked for better weather.



All the diving here is pretty similar, in a good way. There are lots of rock formations so plenty of pinnacles and walls, good fish life, lots of crays (for those who know where to look!) and plenty of macro life for the photographers. The depths are reasonable and variable so you can pick what you want and spend as long as you like just mooching around taking it easy.

Our first dive was Matai Pinnacle which breaks the surface and drops down to approx 70m. One of Cas's favourite sites out there, which apparently has nothing to do with the fact that she

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can't get lost on pinnacles... Mind you, we did both get a bit confused as we circled the very top of the pinnacle, passed the anchor line, decided to do a final tour round before we surfaced then failed to find the line again. We may both be bad at navigation but surely even we're not that bad! Upon surfacing, we were pretty relieved to find that Andre had pulled the line up!

The second dive was at Demoiselle arch. This is a large arch swim through coming out in a bay with lots of boulders and smaller swim throughs. Andre dropped us right off at the arch way so that we couldn't miss it, although that didn't stop Cas last time she dived in. I did notice that she was hanging back on the descent so that she could follow us just in case...! This dive site was literally covered with serf, which are weird jellyfish like things but don't sting. In some of the gullies, they must have been about a foot deep of them, enough that you could dive down and hide in them. Not that I'd do that, of course...

The diving was finished at a very civilised 1pm and we returned to the accommodation for lunch. We did consider eating at the winery, but with the amount of food that Cas had provided, that seemed a little unnecessary. Lunch was outside on the deck in the sun and the afternoon passed in a pleasant combination of beers, chatting and snoozing and continued eating. The most adventurous we got was a quick stroll down to the beach and back again.

After our sumptuous dinner BBQ of steak, burger, sausages, half a cray (provided by Andre), chicken kebabs and salads – green, rice and potato (all of this was preceded by bubbles with cheese and crackers, not going hungry on this trip), Chris brought out his card game Phase 10. This is essentially a bit like Uno for grown ups and proved to be great fun, if a little frustrating for those of us who seem incapable of collecting more than 2 of a kind. Runs of up to 9 cards, no problems, but sets – forget it! Poor Cas was trying hard to sleep off her jetlag, and even Lee had to give up at about 11pm. Finally by gone midnight and several bottles of wine and crates of beer later (mostly consumed by Bryan...), Chris stormed into the lead and finished all 10 phases. Matt brought up the rear with over 800 points to Chris's 500 or so.



Sunday morning wasn't quite as bright and sunny as Sat, but still beautiful none the less. The first dive was on another pinnacle and we were told that there was a crack with lots of crays in it. Andre is, quite rightly, very particular in his views on catching crays. While he has no problems with the principle of it, he believes that it should be man against animal, so no snares allowed and that it should definitely just be the one of two that you'd actually want to eat, not the macho 6 or 7 that you struggle to even give away. As we descended, we looked down at the crack and there would have been food for most of NZ in there. Fortunately the crack was too deep for even the longest cray snare so they remain safe.

Sunday afternoon was a little more subdued due to the lack of sleep and slightly sore heads but followed the same pattern as the day before with eating and sleeping taking up most of the afternoon. Well, except for Lee who decided to have his shot of Red Bull and went to try and find a mountain to

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climb. For those who know Lee well, you can just imagine him on an intensive Red Bull hit...! He is officially banned from any caffeine hits on future dive trips.

The evening was taken up once again by Phase 10 with Cas joining us this time. I think I must have beaten a world record by still being on Phase 1 about 8 hands later while Bryan was on Phase 5, if not higher... Matt got stuck on the 2 sets of 4 while Lee just chuckled gently in the corner from his redbull hit. The table was well and truly split between Chris, Cas and Bryan speeding through the phases leaving Matt, Lee and I far behind. There was a small temper wobble when Matt made Cas miss a go and she missed out on the one card that would have given her Phase 9. Instead she ended up with a record breaking 110 points... We all managed to stay friends, just!

Monday morning arrived (pretty slowly as Bryan and Chris appeared to be having a snoring competition. Bryan was declared the winner as he kept people awake even through a closed door) and it was back to UK holiday weather, grey, miserable and raining. Bryan decided not to dive – he'd even woken himself up several times with his snoring – and the rest of us headed out into the rain. We dived the pinnacle again and I was 20 mins in to a fairly relaxed dive when Lee came up to me and started gesturing randomly with his hand cutting across his chest then pointing down to his feet. We eventually managed to deduce that he was getting some leaking in his drysuit due to the zip not being fully shut. As we'd been down for quite a while, this obviously couldn't have been too bad but I asked if he wanted to surface and he signalled that he was fine so we continued the dive. After about 30mins, we passed the shot line for the boat so he decided that maybe he would surface after all. When Chris and I surfaced a further 15 mins later, Lee was cuddled up in a ball at the back, hands completely blue with his drysuit legs bulging to over his knees with water... He'd left his zip open about 6 inches and water had been pouring in! I know Northern UK males are supposed to be tough but honestly. What would he do if the prop cut his leg off - put a sticking plaster on it and continue the dive...?? Mind you, he did sully his reputation a little bit. I don't want to go into details but he has now earned the nickname Mr Wee. Apparently there was so much water in his drysuit that he didn't think a little bit more would make any difference... 'nuff said...



The second dive was going to be Cray Cave. Cas and Matt had already decided they were only doing one dive and oddly enough, Lee decided to sit the next one out as well so it was just Chris and I diving. Despite the weather and the small chop that had built up, the cave was completely protected from the surge so was beautiful and calm inside. It's essentially a large crack in the cliff, fairly narrow and only going to about 5m. It connects two sides of the cliff so is completely out of the daylight zone for a lot of it, but open to the air at the surface, which makes it a great dive for those who want to experience what a cave environment is like. Chris

had hired a canister light from Halcyon NZ, had his LED scout lights as a back up and with the backplate and wing that he'd also hired, he was all set up to go. The visibility was significantly better inside and we made our way slowly through the cave. The name Cray Cave was certainly apt as there were loads of really small crays all through it. Apparently there used to be lots of large crays as well,

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but then people went diving in it! They were sitting out on the rocks but obviously startled by the lights as they folded themselves up and shot off backwards at an amazing speed as we approached. Very cool to watch! After about 10 mins of slow swimming in, we turned the corner and could see the faint glow of the exit on the other side of the cliff in the distance. We'd started to get a fair bit more surge at that point as the exit wasn't so protected. After Jamie, Andy and James's experience last time, we decided to turn round and come gently back out rather than risk getting sucked out with the possibility of the long surface swim back round the cove to where the boat was anchored.

All in all, it was a great end to a great weekend. Thanks to Cas for the catering and thanks to Andre from A to Z Diving for the diving and accommodation. I look forward to coming back up in 3 weeks time for the cave explorations.