

Caves vs Wrecks

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If only I had a dollar for every time I've been asked "What's the best dive you've ever done?" It's an obvious question for a non-diver to ask, but once you're been diving for a while you understand the futility of it. How can you compare the challenge and excitement of a complex overhead environment dive with the beauty and colour of a tropical reef, or the adrenalin and emotion of an encounter with large sharks? Each is spectacular in its' own way and I would never willingly give up an opportunity to do any of them. But there is something about the cave and wreck environments which seems to invite comparison. At certain levels there is even competition and rivalry between hard-core 'cave divers' and 'wreck divers' about which type of diving is best. But are these two technically demanding overhead environments really comparable?

As I started writing this article I thought the easy bit was going to be listing the similarities and differences between the two – but after multiple false starts it became clear that even this isn't straightforward. I was going to start with the obvious, caves are natural and wrecks are man-made – but what about another cave divers favourite, flooded mines? Next I thought I would talk about the complications surrounding potential distances to travel within the overhead environment, with caves offering far greater penetration possibilities than wrecks – but this ignores the potentially very high levels of complexity over short spaces which characterise many wrecks, plus the myriad difficulties of locating the correct entry point on a wreck. I even nearly slipped into the mistake of suggesting only caves offered the excitement of 'true' exploration – but ask Richard Lundgren about his search and eventual discovery of the Magnificent Mars in the Baltic Sea. His passion and exhilaration at 'rediscovery' is clear. Besides, for the vast majority of cave and wreck divers simply visiting previously explored places offers challenge and excitement aplenty.



So how can we compare and contrast wrecks and caves? The answer lies in the details.

Firstly, the majority of wreck diving is not actually within the overhead, but rather it is enjoyed by vast numbers of recreational divers swimming around the outside of shipwrecks. There are still skills and hazards associated with this activity, but if we compare the divers who consider themselves as 'cave' or 'wreck' divers it is clear that only 'cave' divers are guaranteed to be entering the overhead environment. This situation is also mirrored in the qualifications held by

Instructors, with PADI offering perhaps the most distinct difference. To self-cert as a 'PADI Wreck Specialty Instructor' requires the instructor to have completed only 20 wreck dives. To self-cert as a 'PADI Cavern Specialty Instructor' requires the instructor to be fully cave trained, i.e. to have taken at least 2 or 3 additional classes. And the mandatory equipment follows along the same lines – with wreck instructors requiring very little extra gear, whilst cavern instructors are required to wear 'full-cave' equipment.

If we go beyond the most basic cavern and wreck diving certifications and look at the additional qualifications available, the difference is still very stark. For wreck diving there is only really one extra qualification 'Advanced Wreck', offered by a few training agencies and usually taking 2-3 days. For cave diving there are many additional qualifications, offered by many different agencies – all usually taking far longer to complete. As well as the usual two additional classes required to obtain your 'full cave/cave 2 cert' there are also classes such as cave surveying and cave DPV, neither of which are ever likely to appear within the wreck syllabus.

So if I were to stop writing at this stage and we only considered student and instructor qualifications it would appear that cave divers and cave instructors are perhaps better, or at the very least have more qualifications – but does this really answer the question? How else might we compare wreck and cave diving?

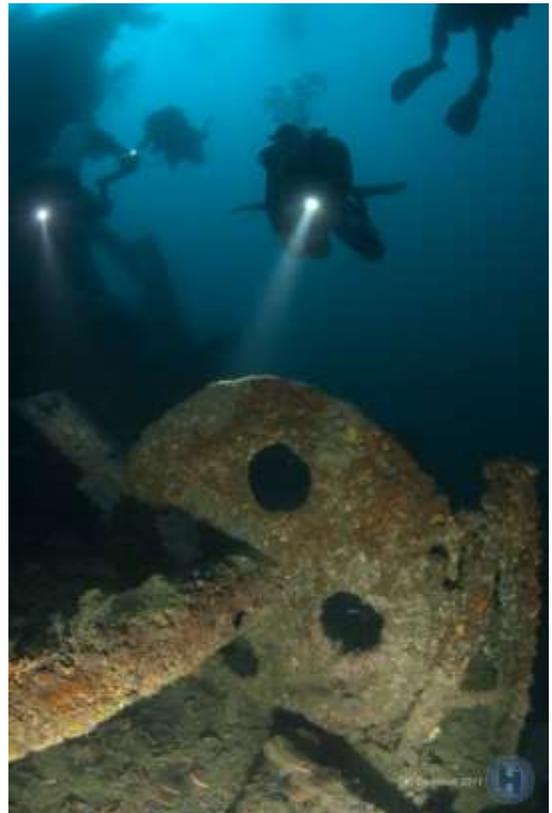
Certainly familiarity and comfort play a part. Wreck diving is often far more accessible than cave diving, meaning far more divers are exposed to wreck diving. Equally entering a man-made space, even when the orientation may be different from normal i.e. the wreck is on its' side, still seems to be easier mentally than entering the weirdly convoluted and unpredictable world of caves. But do comfort and popularity really equate to better?

What about the environment itself? Wrecks in general are often teeming with life, with wrecks such as the Shinkoku Maru and Fujikawa Maru at Chuuk Lagoon offering such an abundance of life and colour that they rival many tropical reefs. And like it or not, the lure of finding some 'brass' or other treasure is still a huge draw for many avid wreck divers. Of course cave divers counter these claims by highlighting the spectacular natural phenomena found in various places – just google 'Bahama caves glass factory', or talk to regular visitors to the Yucatan, who are constantly entranced by something as simple as a halocline. So why, if the environments are so different, is there this rivalry between caves and wrecks?

I wonder if it is as simple as the rivalry between the Kiwis and Aussies, who to the majority of Brits and Americans are almost indistinguishable. (Don't shoot me for saying that – it's a fact!)

What I mean is that the real rivalry happens when a prize is at stake, like the Bledisloe Cup. Obviously there are no tournaments or championships at stake within the diving world, but when you are engaged in very technically challenging dives such as the Niagara or Pearse Resurgence, there is always going to be a part of you which wants recognition, a part which wants to believe you are at the forefront of your chosen sport. And so in the same way that the All Blacks and Wallabies players retain an admiration and respect for each other, they still want to be 'better'. And so it is within diving, between the cave and wreck divers.

But does it need to be this way? Whilst I can't see Dan Carter switching to the Wallabies, do you need to classify yourself as just a wreck diver or just a cave diver? And if you do then ask yourself: WHY do you?



Cave diving and wreck diving are both awesome, they are both technically challenging and both will inspire and excite you. Both environments offer beauty and wonder, with plenty to keep photographers and videographers engaged for hours. And here in New Zealand we are lucky enough to be able to dive within both environments during the same weekend, or indeed the same day. North of Auckland we have the Poor Knights and Bay of Islands, with great and easily accessible wreck penetration dives (Canterbury and Waikato), plus a host of sea caves of various sizes and lengths. One of the caves at the Poor Knights even has a Halocline! Last weekend was a great example of the variety of diving easily available. In the space of three days I visited 3 different caves and the Waikato wreck. In the spirit of not 'classifying myself' I also enjoyed a few open circuit dives and a few rebreather dives – plus squeezed in a great scooter dive around the Pinnacles, enjoying the reef life which lurks on the deeply plunging current washed walls

So if you are currently in the head-space of "I am a wreck diver" or "I am a cave diver", or worse still "I don't like wrecks or caves" then I challenge you again: WHY? Yes you need some extra training above and beyond the vanilla recreational stuff and yes the training for wrecks is a bit different from the training for caves, but these are problems easily overcome. I appreciate that entering the overhead can be daunting, but again this is manageable with the right training. (And don't forget, if you are already happy to do some decompression then you have already entered the 'virtual overhead' because surfacing is not really an option.)

I guess my point is this, why label and limit yourself, when in reality nothing is holding you back. Here in New Zealand we have a great variety of world class diving – you should be enjoying it all!

