

## Five years old

*Jamie Obern*

It's time for a birthday celebration! Five years ago Tech Dive NZ was born.

In early 2009 I received my wings as a technical diving instructor and I was keen to start a business. Together with Andy, another tech instructor, we came up with a plan, set up a website, organised some gear and launched ourselves into a frenzy of activity. We raced around the country scouting dive sites and visiting places we had always wanted to go – justifying the costs as necessary business set-up expenses. Looking back if I compare the days spent simply pleasure diving vs. the actual number of students being taught, then our business was not operating in a sustainable manner, but perhaps blowing off a little enthusiasm was exactly what we needed. At the time it certainly felt like I was living the dream.

Our very first newsletter was published in June 2009 and you can still find a copy on our website. Back then all we managed was a single page with a few photographs and brief mentions of various trips we had taken or were planning to take. The range of courses we offered was limited, just GUE Fundamentals and TDI Advanced Nitrox/Deco Procedures and the closest we got to real scooter diving at that time was our logo – which was more an indication of our dreams than our experiences.



Since then plenty has changed – Andy left the business to concentrate on his new family, Mel joined the business, technical diving in NZ has gone from being very niche to the coolest thing around and TDNZ has grown considerably. But what has not changed is my love for diving. Happily I still have plenty of days where I think I have the best job in the world. So for those of you who are new to technical diving, here is a brief summary of what TDNZ has achieved in the last 5 years?

Firstly we now offer a much larger range of classes, including many which are unique within NZ. We are the only company offering full cave training and I am still the only GUE instructor based here. Our range of GUE classes has grown from just Fundies into our current offering of 10 different GUE classes: 7 full classes and 3 primers. And excitingly since June last year I can also offer GUE Instructor training.

Our combined experience and knowledge of the wide variety of diving offered in NZ is now very comprehensive. We have 7 wreck sites, 20+ cave and cavern sites and literally hundreds of reef sites we know intimately. Australia has become a regular destination for us and the pacific islands too, as well as a few more far flung cave and wreck diving destinations such as Mexico, France, Florida and Croatia.

And at last we have a range of very cool technical toys. We have a portable trimix blending system, four Halcyon T16 scooters, enough stage bottles and double tanks to mount a sizable expedition and a few other bits as well - rebreathers and side-mount rigs.

In the five years we have been operating we have been involved with a variety of different events, including OCEANZ, OzTEK and most recently TecFestNZ. We found the missing anchor of the Waikato wreck, explored

new sea caves, dived many unnamed deep pinnacles, joined an expedition to the Nullarbor Desert and we have run six expeditions to Blue Creek Resurgence. We have also managed to bring over to NZ several leading explorers and divers from around the world, including Richard Lundgren from Sweden, Casey McKinlay from the USA, Rich Walker from the UK, Steve Trewavas and Liam Allen from Australia and JP Bresser from the Netherlands.

Of course trying to fit five years into only a few hundred words is always going to be impossible, but if I had to pick five events from the last five years which really stand out to me, then the following list would be the most appropriate.

5. Doing our first live-aboard at the Poor Knights where we could do every dive on nitrox.

Getting a nitrox blending system installed onto OceanBlue's boat Mazurka was a dream of mine for several years and it was very exciting when we finally got things sorted out. This was the first time we could get nitrox fills at Tutukaka. (Next step trimix!)

4. Doing a trip to Blue creek with all three of the students from my very first Fundies class.

Seeing the development of Tom, Mike and Rob from inexperienced GUE divers into fully fledged cave expedition team-members was awesome.



3. Horahora Power Station

Horrible diving conditions and several aborted attempts, but finally a few photographs inside a real piece of NZ history. Looking through window panes and seeing electrical fittings which have been underwater since the 1940's was very exciting.

2. Shaft Cave – Mt. Gambier

Joining a GUE team tasked with capturing images at the very end of the Shaft (123m). Dropping into the water for the very first time, with borrowed gear,

unfamiliar team members, lights and scooters – and successfully pulling off a very demanding dive at the first attempt – this was GUE at it's best.

1. Pinnacle's cave

Doing a deep (70m+) scooter dive right around The Pinnacles (Poor Knights) and discovering a 'new' unnamed cave, which is one of the biggest caves at the islands – this was NZ tech diving at it's best.

There have been tough times during the last five years, things which were demoralising and work which was back-breaking, but I have achieved the goal of most professional diving instructors – to live the dream and do some fabulous dives. Hopefully we have also helped a few other people live their dreams as well – something we intend to continue doing for the next five years! I wonder what stories I'll have to write about by then.