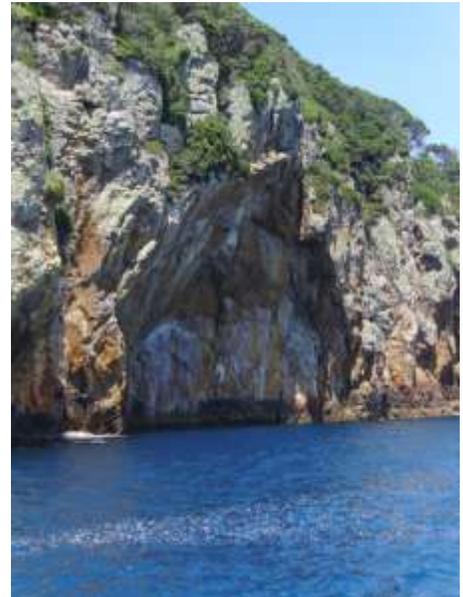


Introductory Cave Diver course: 8th December 2010

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At some point during almost all courses there is a special moment, an event which stands out from the rest and becomes the defining memory for that particular course. It can be as simple as a student comment, or more involved, such as the feeling of success when a previously difficult skill like the back-kick is finally mastered. It can even be comical, like Scott's attempt at back-kicking, which looked far more like an illegal activity with a sheep. You can never be sure what it will be or when it will happen, you may not even recognise it at the time; but whatever it is, these moments are like gold-dust when you have to write about each course later on.

And so it was with my first Introductory Cave Diver course in October, which was also my exam to become a cave instructor. OK, those of you paying attention will realise this report is supposed to be about the Introductory Cave Diver course in December, not October – bear with me, all will become clear. Anyway, to cut a long story short: “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 led 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.”



Immediately below this cliff-face is Taravana Cave

Which brings me back to December and my first class as a fully qualified cave instructor - I wondered, exactly how hard should I push my students? Now in case you were wondering this isn't just me as the instructor enjoying causing stress. Stress is a fickle thing – you need to push people a bit in order to get them to work hard and achieve their best, but you push too hard and all learning stops and performance collapses. A good instructor has to balance when to push harder and when to back off. And this is particularly important during cave diving training. Although underwater caves provide astonishing beauty and tranquillity, they can also be some of the most hostile and threatening environments in the world, where the penalty for poor training and preparation is death. As the certifying instructor you need to know your students are ready for this environment – which means somewhat more pushing during training than on a typical open water course!



One of the many caves at the Poor Knights

We started in Taravana cave, the longest and biggest of the underwater caves at the Poor Knights Islands. Matt was the lead diver and the brief was to enter the cave via the main entrance and lay a guideline as far back as our gas reserve and no-decompression-limits would allow. It sounds simple, but two features of Taravana make the reality harder than expected. The first problem is the sheer size of the entrance, almost 20m high and 30m wide – where do you start? Often the instinctive reaction is to stay close to the floor of the cave as this is somehow comforting. I have

seen students do this before and the big problem with this approach is the depth, 35m on the sand. At this depth not only are you dealing with very limited gas supplies and short NDLs, but narcosis is also slowing decision making. Thankfully Matt fought against this instinct and remained high up in the cave.

The second problem is to want to follow a wall rather than read the cave. In Taravana the right hand wall will lead you directly into the main tunnel, thus speeding your entry into the cave, but the left wall is not so kind. If you follow the left wall it leads in and around a big bulge, adding perhaps 50m of extra line laying before you get to the main tunnel. This is the wall Matt followed and in laying the extra line precious gas reserves and non-deco time were expended. A lesson learned.



Peter doing a land drill

We did two separate entries and exits in Taravana, running through a variety of failures – valve failures, out-of-gas, lost lights etc. and by the end of it all Matt and Peter were ready for a break.

Our second cave for the course was Scary Cave, far smaller than Taravana and with a short pinch and a fresh water chamber at the back. Peter was the lead diver for this cave. Again the brief was similar – lay the guideline and explore the cave until gas limits, NDLs or problems dictate calling the dive. As the cave is shallower (starts at 11m, max depth at the back 22m) I knew it would be the problems which dictated the end of the dive. Time for an increase in stress levels!

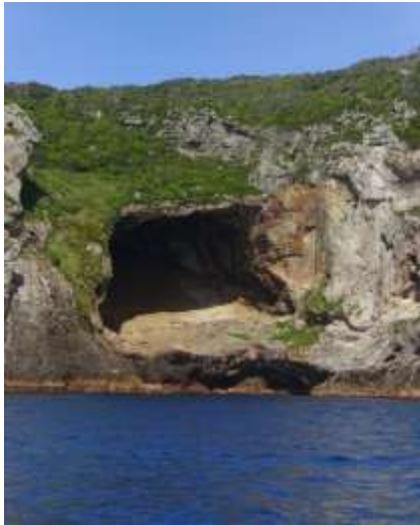
Now the usual way dives such as this work out is that the instructor lets the students swim into the cave as far as necessary, without any problems, and then the problems start and get worse all the way to the exit. Generally I don't give any problems early on in the dive – and honestly I stuck to this principle on this dive! As Peter led the way into the cave I watched (with an ever growing smile I might add) as Matt slowly entangled himself in the guideline. Firstly he just dropped a little, getting the line between his legs – unnoticed. Then as he turned the corner and Peter moved to one side to do a tie off, the line wrapped loosely around Matt's fin – still unnoticed. Next as the team headed further into the cave the line got caught around Matt's loose fin strap (spring heels Matt!!!!) and started to pull tight – noticed at last. Finally to my great amusement, as Matt turned around to see what was going on, he double wrapped the line around his fin and then to compound the problem instead of calmly signalling his buddy to help untangle him he tried to sort it out himself – fatal mistake. He ended up losing control of his buoyancy and plummeting into the sandy floor like a dying fly. At this point Peter turned around to see what was going on and it was clear from his look up towards me at the roof of the cave he thought I was the cause of the problems..... Not a chance guv, honest. Thankfully at this point in the cave the bottom is sand rather than silt, so with a little teamwork they were able to sort out the problem and continue the dive.



Matt saluting the passers-by?

I will however take credit for the next series of problems.

Once Matt and Peter passed the pinch they entered the main chamber. This is where the fresh water meets the sea water and also where the bottom changes from heavy sand to fine silt. It was clear their stress levels had risen considerably – so much so that when I turned off one of the primary lights they didn't notice. Oops – they noticed very quickly when I turned off the other one! Time for a sharp exit. Quickly they were both on back-up lights and giving the thumbs up. At this point I started to take the back-up lights until they were down to just one for the team. Once they were through the pinch and into the main tunnel with the sandy bottom the last back up light went. At this point in the cave it is pitch dark – thankfully their line was well laid.



There are many many different caves at the Poor Knights Islands, big and small, both above and below the water.

For our second foray into Scary Cave Peter was again the lead diver. My plan was to throw valve failures into the mix as well as light failures, and to culminate in an out-of-gas exit. It was at this point I had 'the moment' for this course. When I give a student a valve failure I am expecting them to turn off the problem valve, a situation which has to be managed carefully given the overhead environment. The student then continues the dive working on the assumption that the valve is now 'dead', but as the instructor I always ensure I turn the valve back on before anything else goes wrong. (This is always briefed at the start of the course.) My plan for this dive was to give a second valve failure to the same student, thereby dictating an out-of-gas situation. What I didn't expect was for the student to have forgotten about the first valve failure and to try to shut off their other valve whilst simultaneously continuing to swim out of the cave and away from their buddy. Had I not turned on the first valve it could have been 'very interesting', to put it mildly. As it was the student realised halfway through and signalled out-of-gas. Learning experiences all round.

So overall how was this first Introductory Cave Diver class?

Firstly as an instructor this is definitely one of the most fun and rewarding of the courses I can teach. I love diving in caves and I love introducing other divers to the cave environment. It's a real joy to watch students build their skills, so they can successfully resolve problems which at the start of the course would have been impossible. Compared to other classes Introductory Cave Diver takes students on a long learning journey. Secondly the Poor Knights is a great place to do this training, with a wide variety of caves available as potential training sites. Regardless of the weather we can always find a cave to dive in and with so many to choose from I can always find one which none of the students will have ever visited before. And finally there was the moment, in this case not simple, successful or comical, but sobering. Cave diving requires planning, concentration and control – thankfully I ticked all these boxes and what could have been a difficult situation was simply routine. I tell all my students not to get complacent – I must also take my own advice.