

## Course Report: PADI Cavern, 23– 25<sup>th</sup> January 2010

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I love cavern and cave diving, exploring hidden places, overcoming technical challenges and marvelling at the fantastic structures created by the simplest of factors: water and time. From my very first cavern dive I knew that I was addicted, but it is not a painful addiction. Cavern and cave diving has brought me immense pleasure and enjoyment over the years and whilst I know that it does not appeal to everyone, I also know that all of the divers I have taken for tours exited the caverns with big smiles and 'Oh wow, now I get it' expressions. The problem is that generally a single dive is not enough, so in response to repeated requests to organise some proper cavern diver courses TDNZ teamed up with OceanBlue to offer a unique long weekend experience.

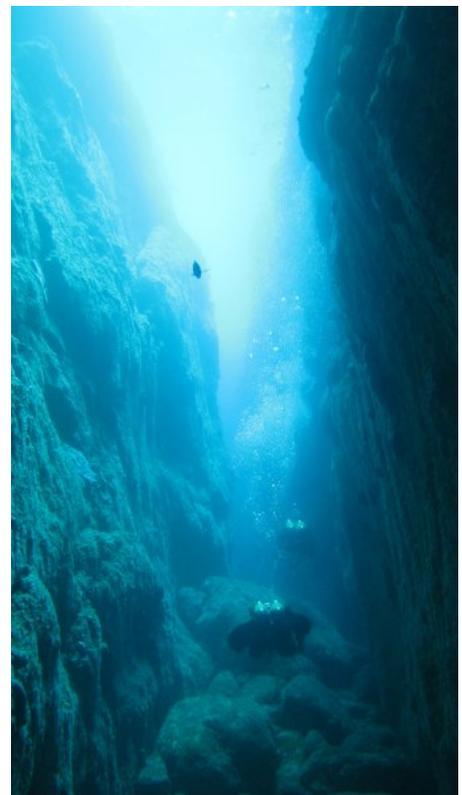


For those of you that may not know OceanBlue is a live-aboard operating at the Poor Knights Islands, run by Kevin and Janine Delonge. Sleeping 6 guests very comfortably, plus a skipper (Kevin) and 1 crew member, it is the idea size for small group exploration out at the islands. By basing ourselves on a live-aboard we can easily fit in 11 dives during a 3 day period (9 cavern dives plus 2 relaxing night dives) compared to only 6 dives if you opt for shore based – and for the same overall cost. It also means that we have more time for developing both skills and experience – something that I believe is crucial if you want to really enjoy your cavern diving. Also, by

restricting the group size it is far easier to go to exactly the dive sites that best suit the progression of the group, rather than compromising with lots of other passengers. Finally to make matters as safe and easy as possible we plan to always run these trips with not just 1 cavern instructor onboard but 3. Along with Jamie who was teaching this course, Mel was crewing and Kev the skipper is also a cavern instructor. Very conveniently Janine is also a cavern instructor, which gives us lots of options.

The students for this first course were John, Rob and Pete. Both John and Rob had done the GUE Fundamentals course with me last year and Pete and Rob had completed the TDI Advanced Nitrox/Deco Procedures course the week before. Excitingly for me this meant that everyone was very familiar with the standard GUE double tank configuration – making diving far simpler and giving us the option of more ambitious dives towards the end of the trip. Also, having taken a class with me before it meant that they were all expecting things to get a little intense in places.

We started the course with some line laying practice in Matt's Crack, also known as Long Cave. Whilst this is technically a cave, which would suggest it is beyond course limits for dive 1, there is actually air above you at all times, meaning that it is never an overhead dive. However, because there are walls it makes line laying more challenging, forcing the divers to work harder at finding tie off points in order to stay within the crack. Secondly because it is a bit dimmer than normal open



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water it ensured that the team got to use their lights to communicate – a useful skill to introduce early. Importantly it is also a very beautiful dive, which is a great way to start a brand new course.

For the final two course dives on this first day we concentrated on more line skills – following a line with closed eyes, both individually and as a team, using touch communication, maintaining buoyancy and trim, navigating tie offs and using good fin kicks to stay in close contact with the line without ruining visibility. By the time it was dark the team were really looking forward to night diving without me – a chance to relax.

Blessed with great conditions I decided to give the guys a treat at the start of day two prior to starting the course again. Cave Bay Wall is always a spectacular dive and as none of the group had been there before I took the opportunity to give them a short tour. If you navigate well it is possible to lead a group until they are almost at the edge of the wall before they realising where they are and then without warning you can 'fall' over the edge, zooming vertically downwards, only stopping once you hit a comfortable depth - preferably before you hit the bottom at 60m+. What I also love about this dive is that very often there is an up-welling of cold water which makes for great visibility once you reach 30m, which exactly the situation on this day. Being able to see 30m in all directions was almost too much for Rob and Pete - who are more used to Wellington conditions.



Once I had herded everyone back to the shallows I laid another line course, this one a bit more challenging than day 1. The terrain at Cave Bay offers far more scope for depth changes and line laying between boulders, meaning that the team would have to work harder at communicating and staying together. They did a great job, despite me trying to cause as much havoc as possible.

For the next two dives the focus was again on line laying (spotting a theme here?) inside the cavern zone, with the team enjoying dives at Big Eye Cave and Mineshaft Cave. With everyone on double tanks we had the luxury of a huge amount of time, which we used to complete all the required course skills and then to introduce a few failures – loss of primary light, loss of backup lights etc. Again by the time it was dark everyone was ready to relax, with a gentle night dive in Blue Mao Mao Arch.

For the final day I wanted to help the team build confidence and experience, so we tackled Taravana Cave and Scary Cave. I lead and navigated the Taravana dive, allowing the team to get comfortable with a longer penetration than previously, but for Scary Cave the plan was to let the team do their own thing. They would have to navigate without help from me and obviously do everything else that you'd expect for a safe cavern dive. Amazingly although I said that Kev and I would both be in the cavern with them, our lack of lights and position at the roof of the cavern meant that they quickly forgot we were there – at which point things got interesting.

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It's still always amazes me how much confidence students get simply by having an instructor in the water with them, even when the instructor is doing nothing. In this case what was interesting was watching the stress levels rise, followed by an immediate drop in awareness. Kev and I watched as what had been a very tight team started to drift apart slowly and then most amazingly how they all missed the perfectly placed tie off (a tree right in the middle of the cavern – which one of them was holding onto) in favour of a horrible tie-off in the narrowest part of the cavern. It was so difficult just to do the tie-off that we couldn't see how the team would ever negotiate it in an emergency. Most illuminating of all, was when the team finally called the dive, unsure of whether they could continue up the passage and convinced that there was no one to ask - as Kev and I had obviously abandoned them. At this very point I was floating less than 50cm directly above the team – it's amazing what task loading can do to people.

Back on the surface it was clear that the team felt a bit deflated, but as the instructor and driver of this long weekend course format this was exactly the point of the experience dives. I want dives to understand how stress can build up, how awareness can drop and how this could lead to problems – or at the very least dives that don't always go to plan. The fact that the team had realised that all was not well and called the dive rather than continue was a good sign of their maturity as divers. I was pleased.



We ended the weekend with a different type of overhead dive, this time inside the HMNZS Waikato. I lead the team on a convoluted tour through a significant portion of the wreck, showing them just how exciting overhead diving can be when stress levels are under control and everyone is relaxed. It was an awesome dive and great way to finish the weekend.

Looking back on the weekend we all agree that it was a big success. We visited 6 different caves, spent nearly 500 minutes in the water practicing and refining skills, plus everyone enjoyed themselves – me included. Considering that this is the first time anything like this has ever been run in NZ I don't think we could have run things much smoother – which shows that teaming up TDNZ and OceanBlue was a good idea. We will be doing it again.