

Diving without adult supervision; trip Report: 15th May 2011

Christian Stimson

Testing the theory that a bad day on the water is still better than being around your partner's baby-shower or painting the nursery, Tony, Mike and Chris rallied round to take me diving on the pretence that they were doing me a favour! Cheers, Guys!



The general consensus was to 'go local' rather than haul up to Tuts, and as it turned out neither Chris nor Tony had dived this close to home. I had done a couple of scollie dives, serving as a refresher when we first landed in NZ (it's hardly fair on the scollies when you have a twin set and they are in less than 10m of water!), but other than that Mike was the one with local knowledge. He kindly offered to ferry us out into the Hauraki Gulf in his boat, aiming for a mix of exploratory dives off the Noises and hopefully a poke around the wreck of the Minato Maru.

SwellMap was showing a wind across tide situation, with the 75cm seas decreasing later with the turn of the tide. The plan was to pick a sheltered spot for dive one, then head out over the wreck later in the afternoon as the seas died down. We met at the ramp at Half Moon Bay at around 10:00am and as we discussed the plan for the day it dawned on me that, even with a couple of hundred dives logged, this was to be my first dive 'without adult supervision'. By that I mean there was no industry professional, boat captain, dive guide or instructor being paid to look after our welfare!

This, in itself was not a problem – we were all experienced divers and to varying degrees seamen – but the feeling was very similar to my first dive in which my nav was the thing that was going to get us back to the boat rather than following a guide or an obvious route. It was a UK hardboat dive, in about 15m of water, and the site was the remains of a wooden warship from the 1700's called the Irex. As such the diveboat had to pick a mooring 20m or so from the wreck to protect the wreck from ground tackle. With a 20m swim, in sub-5m viz and some slight current over a featureless sandy bottom, our recently attained PADI Navigation Speciality was going to be put to the test! Sounds easy now, but with only 50 or so dives logged at the time it was something of a litmus test! All I can say is we were taught well, as the back bearings and fin counts were spot on!

Mike gave a thorough safety briefing, pointing out the VHF operations, call sign and channels, flares and lifejackets etc. The arrangements were made for a 2-up 2-down dive day, with one pair surface cover for the other. We discussed tide times and that we'd filed a flight plan with those at home and so forth. Lifejackets on, and off we went, into the blue!

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Cruising north from Half Moon Bay, past Rakino Island, we could see the swell was at least as predicted, maybe a little more. With the wind in the NW and the swell from the NE picking a sheltered spot was going to be tricky! Initially we motored into the gap between Motuhoropara Island and Otata Island at the Noises. Here the bottom topography to the south was flat and around 7m (which is precisely where I been scollie diving previously), but the swell was too much. We discussed a drift dive through the gap from the north, but decided against it - dragging SMB's around the place is not great fun. So instead we set off round the top of Otata and found a nice spot tucked up on the eastern side, with flat water, sunshine and an interesting bottom profile leading away from the shoreline. Anchored in 7.5m of water only 10m off the shore it was certainly pleasant for those left topsides.

Mike and I splashed first, finding 5m viz and resetting the anchor in the sand before heading offshore in search of some depth. We slowly cruised down to about 12m on a bearing of 090 before turning north, up current for a while, looking for something more exciting than the couple of boulders and empty shells we had seen so far. Nothing came our way, so we turned and cruised back down tide, then turned inshore as we finally came across some better terrain, boulders standing a couple of metres proud of their surroundings. After spending some time having a good grub around for crays, but coming up empty handed, I decided to check our position



by eyeballing the boat. I broke surface 50m south of the boat, snapped a compass bearing and descended to re-join Mike. A quick swim through what turned out to be some of the more interesting topography (a nice little canyon/cut I nicknamed Low Risk Rock out of deference to its big brother Danger Rock!), and a bit of dead reckoning had us ascending off the back of the boat without having seen the anchor line on the way past!

Back on board we suggested south rather than north was where the best action could be found, and whilst Tony and Chris splashed Mike brewed up some packet soup and I munched cold lasagne. Unfortunately although we had done our good deed of the day the other two hadn't been so charitable. I'm sure that had there been some adult supervision, or a grown up on board, Chris wouldn't have rummaged through my bag in my absence and hidden the chocolate brownies Sian had made for us. But that's another story for another day.....

We tracked Tony and Chris's bubbles for 45 minutes or so, expecting them back with enough gas for the second dive, however they seemed to have found something that was occupying them. We could see lots of bubbles 20m away for about 20minutes and it was only after almost an hour that Tony's SMB broke surface, followed by the two of them. The surface swim back to the boat was peppered with exchanges regarding the size of the crays we presumed they had caught, but as usual it was all just talk. They had found a fair few but they were too canny to be caught!



Once Tony and Chris were safely back on board we upped anchor and motored out to the wreck. Unfortunately the sea state was running at a good metre and the breeze was building not dying, so instead we opted for a little outcrop off Rakino. Mike and I splashed again, into 6m, murky viz and kelp. It was about 2m viz when looking up-sun due to the silhouette, but probably half that looking down-sun! We then had a rather amusing lost buddy drill, which started with both Mike and I nearly head-butting a boulder that came at us.

Mike suggested I lead off round it, which I did, round a couple of corners. 10m further on I stopped to check for Mike's light, but couldn't see it. I turned and scanned my lamp back and forth the way I'd just come and looked up to see if he'd surfaced - no joy. So I took out my back up light and pointed the primary and back up 180degrees apart and spun slowly in the water column doing an impersonation of the Cape Brett lighthouse. Still nothing. So I gave it the one minute and surfaced. Calling to the boat they pointed me toward Mike's bubbles, only about 7 or 8m away from me. I surface swam until I was above them and started to descend down the line of rising bubbles - which of course promptly disappeared! Surfacing again I could see the bubble trail heading off at speed, back where I'd just come from.....this time I sat above them and waited for Mike to reach the same conclusion and surface - which he did shortly after. We had a good chuckle as it turns out he'd done a 'Cape Brett' too, and probably unseen right beside me!

Tony and Chris rightfully declined to do the second dive so we headed home, having survived our day without adult supervision and actively planning the next one. And what did we learn? Firstly we should plan our trips based on SwellMap rather than free weekends, which seem to be cursed with bad weather at this time of year. Secondly that brownies sometimes magically turn up in the strangest of places, in this case Mike's kit box by the time we were at the ramp!