

Trip Report: Poor Knights, 5-6th December 2009

Jamie Obern

Although I left almost three years ago I am still subconsciously English when it comes to thinking about the weather. It doesn't seem to matter how many times I experience the notoriously changeable conditions here in NZ, as soon as it starts to rain I assume the worst. I just know that it's going to rain for days and that it's going to be grey, cold and miserable. So when I woke up on Friday morning to heavy rain, which then developed into a torrential downpour as we drove north, my hopes for a great diving weekend were not high. Of course the upside to imagining the worst about the weather is that you are always happily surprised when the day turns out beautifully.

And Saturday was beautiful, a wonderful day to be showing a first time visitor what NZ diving has to offer. Our visitor was Professor Jim Haw, a technical diver from California who was here to give some water management presentations at a conference organised by the University of Auckland. He had got in touch with me via a GUE instructor I know based at Hollywood Divers - yep, in the real Hollywood - and had arranged to extend his stay for a couple of days in order to go diving. (For those that don't realise, GUE is like a mafia family - we all know each other - mess with one of us and you mess with us all!)

For the first day we had decided to go to the Poor Knights and do some scenic diving. As well as showcasing 'the world's best subtropical diving' it also gave Jim a chance to check out his weighting before tackling the wrecks the next day. Plus given that he had only arrived at 9am on the Friday morning it was a little bit kinder on the jet-lag. Joining myself and Jim on this first day was Mel and also Steve - who Mel had cajoled into diving during the club evening on Thursday. This is the first time Steve has joined us for a dive, but as he is also GUE tech trained it felt like he'd been diving with us for years.



Our first dive was at Northern Arch, a dive site which never disappoints. As none of the others had ever seen the small nearby cave we started with a quick tour there, looking for the yellow banded perch that are often in residence and then drifted along to the arch itself. As usual the arch was full of life, this time a huge school of Pink Maomao, with a few Mado and Longfin Boarfish cruising about and a cloud of two spot Demoiselle as well. Part way through the dive a big school of Trevally also came over to check us out, providing Jim with a spectacular introduction to New Zealand diving. By the time we got out of the water he was already talking about organising another trip, this time bringing friends.

Our second dive was at Crystal Cave, also known as Isobella's Cave or Scary Cave - no idea why it needs so many names. Again as I was the only one who had seen this site I lead the way in, pausing briefly at the restriction to make sure that everyone was happy to continue. At the back of the cave there is a large circular chamber which has a halocline - a layer of fresh water sitting on top of the salt water, which is one of the things that makes this cave so unique and is always interesting to see. There is also a lot of silt in this chamber, brought in with the fresh water as it filters down, so we were particularly careful not to stir things up with our fins.

When we finally surfaced it was clear that Jim was impressed with his first days diving. Of course it helped that inside the cave there was also a sleeping carpet shark, which just confirmed what a special place the Knights are. Interestingly, even though the shark was lying on the sand in the middle of the 1m passage that we all had to swim along, Mel had somehow missed it - concentrating on her navigation!?

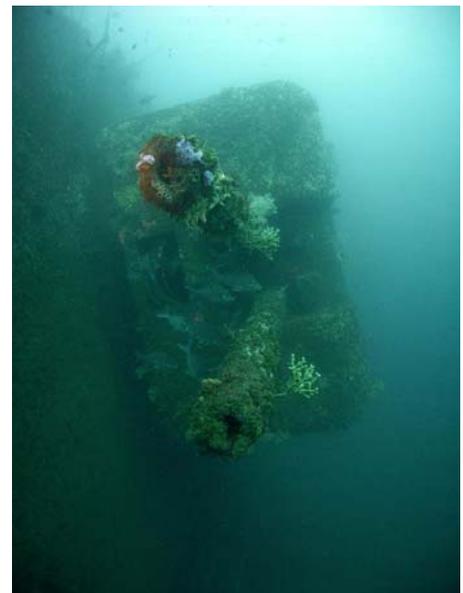
TECH DIVE New Zealand

For our second day we had decided to show Jim the wreck of the Waikato. As Steve could only get a day pass from his better half he had headed home, but in his place we were joined by Cas and Chris. The plan was for Chris to join myself and Jim as we toured inside and for Mel to ease Cas gently into wreck penetration as she'd never dived on the Waikato before.

We started our dive at the hanger, went through the torpedo bay, and then made our way forward to the bridge, exiting through the break where the bow has broken away from the rest of the ship. This is how I usually start these dives, just to check how everyone is feeling and from the big smile on Jim's face it was pretty clear how he was feeling. For the next 20 mins we toured through the rest of the top two decks and then rearranged the group so that Chris could lead for a while. This proved an interesting experience as only a couple of minutes into leading and whilst technically outside of the wreck Chris managed to wedge himself in the 30cm of space between the deck and a lump of jutting metal that he hadn't seen. (Lesson for us all there – just because you are outside of the wreck you still need to keep a good watch of your surroundings.) After a bit of pushing and shoving Jim managed to free him, but not without a minor disaster. At some point during this interlude Chris managed to lose my very expensive dive light – something that I didn't know until we surfaced. I had to take a few deep breaths about that one.

Our final dive started with a search and (thankfully) recovery of my light. It was laying right where Chris had got stuck, still on and shining brightly – disaster averted. I then lead the group over to the bow section of the wreck, taking a tour through the narrow corridors, returning via the guns and then jumping back across the gap to the main section of the wreck. From here we then entered the bridge, dropped down into the control centre and then got ready to explore towards the stern.

Somehow at this point one of the ever present hazards of wreck diving appeared on the scene – the group got split up. One minute I was part of a team of three and the next I was alone. Retracing my steps I assumed I would find my buddies in the same 30 seconds it had taken to lose them, but it didn't happen. Instead I exited the wreck and met Mel and Cas. Our assumption was that Jim and Chris would inevitably head back to the line for their ascent, at which point we'd catch up with them. After a brief search of the likely areas that they may have been, it became obvious that the two of them must have surfaced away from the line and I started my ascent without my original team members. Sure enough, a buoy on the surface confirmed this.



Back on the boat we all met up again and pieced together what had happened. After losing me, Jim and Chris hadn't been sure exactly where they were on the wreck and after a quick search for the line had decided to do a free ascent, popping an SMB on the way. This was a great call as during our dive another boat - Pacific Hideaway - had arrived at the wrecks and could easily have run down Jim and Chris without an SMB. (Lesson 2 – always have an SMB. Anyone that has done the GUEF course with me will recognise this scenario.)

We ended our weekend as usual, sitting in the sunshine with a few beers at Snapper Rock. Thanks to Dive! Tutukaka for another great weekend and thanks in advance to Jim who will now be telling everyone he knows about diving in NZ. Just in case you were wondering, I know Hollywood divers has several mega stars as customers – I'm free to take any of them diving if necessary.