

Trip Report: Volkner Rocks, 10-12th July 2009

Jamie Obern

In order to celebrate the 17th anniversary of Cas' 21st birthday six of us (Jamie, Mel, Meik, James, Matt and Cas) decided to take a three day trip out to Volkner Rocks. Situated about 5km to the west of White Island this isolated cluster of jagged pinnacles is one of New Zealand's most recent marine reserves (2006) and offers some fantastic diving. Interestingly, although the area is now very peaceful it hasn't always been that way. It is only a little over a decade ago that the NZ air-force was using the pinnacles as targets for bombing practise. If you look closely you can find various shells and other ammunition on most dives.



As it is so far offshore we decided to do a live-aboard, that way maximising the number of dives we could do in our limited time. As the only member of the team to have dived this location before, during a BBC film trip in 2008, Jamie did all the organising. He booked us in with John Baker, aboard his boat Ma Cherie – and it was a great choice. John is one of the friendliest and most welcoming skippers in NZ, as well as being incredibly knowledgeable. If you want a good trip then we highly recommend him.

We arrived in Whakatane on the Thursday night and settled ourselves into our cabins. With the boat due to leave at first light none of us wanted to deal with checking out of a B&B or moving dive gear at the crack of dawn. And so, very early Friday morning, with most of us still asleep, John fired up the engines and we started our 3 hour journey.



The weather on the Friday was beautiful, flat calm seas and sunshine, amazing for the middle of the winter. However, the weather report was indicating a deep low approaching, so we decided to dive the most exposed sites that day. Our first dive was on Lazen's Reef – a pinnacle rising from 100m+ up to 15m below the surface. It was an incredible start to the trip with 1,000's of pink and blue maomao schooling all around us in the 30m+ visibility.

The second dive was Diadema, another pinnacle that rises steeply from 50m to just below the surface. Apart from the very top which is covered in kelp, the rest is stark white rock, full of cracks and crevices that hide a myriad of creatures – barnacle blennies, morays, nudibranches and urchins. The final dive of the day was Red Snapper Rock, another awesome site, which could easily be mistaken for the Poor Knights with its' huge archway teeming with life. On these last two dives we were again blessed with superb visibility.

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When we woke up on the Saturday it was clear that the weather was deteriorating rapidly. Gone were the flat seas, now we had a sizable swell, with chop on top of that. However, with John's local knowledge he still found us two more interesting dive sites to explore. By lunch time the weather report was predicting 120kph+ winds so we knew we had to return home. As White Island was on the way we managed a cheeky final dive at Spanish Arch. My main memory of this dive was the huge difference in visibility that we experienced on either side of the archway, due to the unusually strong winds pushing the sulphur slick from the volcano all the way around to us. Finally it was time to head home – in a hurry.



Waking up in the relative peace of Whakatane harbour on Sunday morning wasn't quite how we wanted to end the trip – but as soon as we looked out to sea we knew we had made the right choice. During the night 150km+ winds had swept through the area and with a nasty bar at the harbour entrance creating 4m high standing waves we would never have been able to get in if we had left it much later. It would have been great to do more diving – but.....

As we headed to our cars for the drive home we all agreed – we'll be back again in the summer.