

## **Trip Report: Northland Cave Exploration, 14-16<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

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It had already been a busy week, with a midweek day trip to dive HMNZS Waikato where Jamie, Mel and I went through the logistics of teaching our new Advanced Wreck Diver course, so I wasn't really looking forward for the long drive north on a Friday night. James arrived in Auckland around 4pm, and he, Natacha and I set off to face the traffic! You've got to love the toll road, even leaving Auckland at 4.30pm it helped us make good time on our way up and we arrive in Whatuwhiwhi around 9.30pm to join Jamie and Mel who had driven up from Tutukaka that morning.

Our plan for the weekend was to go through the logistics of teaching Cavern Diver courses in the area around Matai Bay and also explore a few new dive sites. It was also a great opportunity for James and I to further brush up on our line skills and team protocols before heading in to some of the more challenging cavern sites we have on our list to explore this summer.

On Saturday morning, Jamie was running us through land drills in the carpark at A-Z Diving, going through team positioning and maintaining touch contact for blind line following – whilst at the same time throwing variations of the line at us that we had to resolve and navigate, something we'd be doing later in the day underwater and timing how long it took so it was all good practice before that!



With the dry runs out of the way, we loaded up the boat with our gear – with just four of us diving, it was luxury to have all the space we needed and get comfortable for the short trip out to our first dive site, Cray Cave. Even through we've all dived this many times before, we decided to run a line through and work out how suitable it would be for teaching courses that involve line laying. For the first dive, I went as number one and found a good primary tie-off but as I was about to head into the cave I noticed that the line was going to find it's way into a perfect line trap! Undoing the tie off, we headed in a little further and made the primary tie around a convenient boulder then headed into the cave. As we headed into the cave, I kept the line to the right hand side making tie offs when needed, and James as number two was checking them all. We reached the limit of our planned penetration and gave the turn signal and turned around to see the most magnificent blue filtering from the entrance of the cave to guide us outwards.

Our second dive of the day was in the same spot, after a quick discussion we headed back down, this time with James in the lead. Starting from the same position we took the line deeper into the cave where Jamie started throwing problems at us – our first was a blind line follow exit. As Jamie gave me the signal, I shut my eyes and kept contact with the line and waited. It's a strange feeling, hanging in the dark waiting for your buddy to find you so that you can exit together! After a few moments, I felt James' hand touch mine and check that it was me by grasping my elbow – he gave the signal and we navigated our way by touch alone back to the exit. It was there that we found Mel waiting for us, and she gave us the "where's your buddy" signal. By all accounts, Jamie must be lost in the cave so we headed back in to find him.... and when we did, he gave us the signal to do another blind exit! Finally, with the drills completed we heading back into the cave to retrieve the line and head back to shore.

# TECH DIVE New Zealand



The great thing about diving in Matai Bay is that the dive sites are so close to shore – we'd done two dives with total bottom time of around 100 minutes, and it was still only lunch time! There's only one way to do lunch in the area, so we headed off to Karikari Estate and relaxed whilst soaking in the views and tucked into a delicious lunch. But some of us had more diving to do, as Jamie was putting James and I through more line drills in the afternoon to check we were up to standard for the dives we were planning the next day – so whilst Mel and Natacha had the afternoon to relax, we loaded up the car with all the gear and head back to the

beach for another 80 minute dive! James laid out a line circuit and for our first run around it was a simple blind follow like we'd been doing in the cave earlier – this gave us the opportunity to critique the line placements and tie offs before doing more blind line follows, each one getting slicker and faster. Our final trip around the circuit was a blind follow combined with an out of gas drill – with the aim of managing the long hose, keeping contact with the line and getting the sense of urgency needed for an out of gas exit from a cave! With nearly three hours in the water that day, ended the dive and headed back to A-Z Diving for a well earned beer and an early night.

As Sunday dawned, it was obvious that the wind had picked up a little overnight – we loaded up the boat and headed down to the boat ramp to make the most of the morning, as the forecast was due for it to pick up further. Making our way south out of the bay, Andre kept the boat nice and close to the cliffs as we kept our eyes open for signs of openings both above and below water. Various cracks and crevices kept slipping past us and at each one we'd nudge the boat in as close as the waves would allow until finally, we decided that it was either worth exploring or move on. Full of enthusiasm, James volunteered every time and scouted out three or four sites below the surface – all with the same result that "maybe" it would go somewhere. Heading further and further out of the bay, we finally found what we were looking for – a large entrance that definitely went somewhere, but the question was how far? With the weather worsening, Mel and Jamie geared up and headed into the entrance. After about ten minutes, we saw them surface and give us a big, bright OK signal with their lights – the cave was a go! James and I geared up and rolled over the side of the boat, leaving Andre to the rain and the waves. A long passageway led us into the main chamber of the cave, all with air above our heads. Various rock structures gave the impression of passageways leading into the rock, but on inspection each was a dead end. As we made it further into the chamber, the water become shallower and the surge more obvious. Finally, no more progress was possible so we surfaced to survey a cave that no one else may have ever seen. Kneeling in half a metre of water, we shone our lights around, up and around and then to the back of the cave – all whilst being buffeted by the surge. The chamber appeared to go further back, maybe on a higher tide you could get further in – but not much more for sure. The four of us took in the rock formations, shared some grins and then dropped back below the surface and exited the cave. Weather conditions had certainly worsened, so with all the gear back aboard we raced back to shore settling on the name Canary Cave.



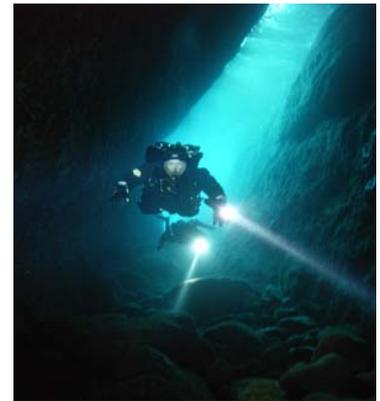
## TECH DIVE New Zealand

Jamie, James and I had all taken Monday off for an extra day of diving, so we helped pack up Mel and Natacha to get them on the road before settling down for a serious evening of playing cards and putting the world to rights, before settling in for some well earned sleep.



On Monday, the wind had eased and with much less chop on the surface we headed north out of the bay. Rumour has it that there was a couple of caves in that area – though our instructions to find one were so vague, that it was unlikely! Instead, we hugged the shore again but this side of the bay had much fewer potential entrances. Finding one possible cave, we threw our “canary in a cage” overboard once more but the site turned out to have no passageways deeper than a few metres. Continuing on, we reached the tip of the peninsula where the cliffs slowly gave way to sandy beaches. With our luck not so good, we opted for a scenic dive.

Rolling over the side of the boat in a spot you know nothing about, so far away from regularly dive spots still has a feeling of exploration about it – not knowing what to expect or what you will find is a buzz in it’s own right. And in that respect, our luck turned again as we found a beautiful spot with lots of fish life and a variety of terrain to keep you entertained. Finishing the dive, it was still only mid-morning so we headed back to Cray Cave for one last dive. Heading in to the cave with the camera, I hoped to get some good shots – my strobes were left in the box back in Auckland, so I fiddled as best I could with the settings as James and Jamie swam in to join me – the best of the shots are on the photo gallery on the website and they do give you a taste of what cave diving really feels like!



As always, we had a great time diving in Matai Bay – we will be back, who knows what we will find next time?!