

Trip Report: Volkner Rocks, 5-7th February 2010

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Awesome! Completely, totally and utterly awesome! The Poor Knights may be better known, have more operators, more dive sites and more divers, but when it comes to outright gob-smacking awesomeness Volkner Rocks marine reserve offers some serious competition.

We had vowed to go back after our July trip was cut short due to the weather and this time the conditions were perfect. Everyday was warm and sunny, the water was a balmy 21 degrees and the swell alternated between smooth to slight and back to smooth again. But most importantly we had amazing visibility – the worst was probably 15m+, with the best in excess of 25-30m. I can vividly recall dive 1 on Lazen's Reef where at 40m I floated on my back looking upwards and could clearly see the boat and all the divers slowly drifting down towards me – beautiful.



My other crystal clear memory of Lazen's Reef was arguing with my Mel about how many stingrays we could see at any one time – we settled on 13. Maybe it was because there were so many stingrays it was hard to keep track, or maybe it was the clouds of two-spot demoiselle or huge schools of Blue Maomao, or maybe it was the 100's of Kingfish which distracted us and obscured our view of the stingrays – who cares, the dive was amazing. In fact I almost forgot, we also had a Bronze Whaler shark come and check us out – unbelievable first dive.

Our second dive, which we did twice more during the trip because it was SO good was Diadema. This is a very sheer pinnacle that rises to just below the surface from a depth of 50m+. The rock is very white and as it stands alone against the impossibly blue sea the spectacle is fabulous. (Getting a bit worried that I'm going to run out of adjectives here.) We intentionally did this dive at three different times of the day – early morning, midday and late afternoon – just to enjoy the different light and everyone of these dives was magnificent. Again we had Bronzies come to check us out, plus enormous amounts of Blue and Pink Maomao interspersed with two-spots demoiselles and a large school of Koheru. If you are wondering just how good this dive site is – well I would put it as my number 1 in NZ and comfortably in my top 5 anywhere in the world.



In fact almost every dive was incredible. On Red Snapper Rock we had not just one but two big groups of red snapper, plus at least 25 large Blue Moki that kept Cas and Matt busy with their cameras. In fact there were so many opportunities for great photos that it started to become a problem, with memory cards running out of space. Have you ever seen a keen amateur photographers face when they realise that they cannot take anymore shots but they've still got lots of air left? Priceless.

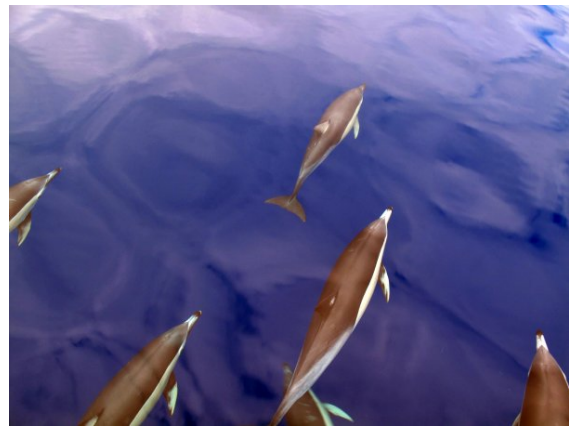
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Now I said *almost* every dive was incredible, however our last dive didn't quite go to plan. To round off such a memorable trip we decided to do the wreck of the Seafire, which was purposely sunk in 2008. None of us had dived this wreck before and given how much I love wreck diving I was quite excited. Unfortunately all the buoys were missing so John our skipper had to try to anchor – not an easy task when the current was running along the length of the ship. Mel and myself were the first two in the water, but when we got to the bottom we discovered nothing but mud, which was being rapidly stirred up by the dragging anchor. After 9 dives in superb vis it was a real shock to suddenly

be down to almost nothing and with the anchor dragging quite fast, visibility still deteriorating and 4 other divers behind us we had to abort. Much as I wanted to do the wreck I decided that after 9 big dives followed by a 'bounce' to 31m it was time to call it a day – maybe next time.

Of course all I've talked about so far is the diving - but there are a couple of other events that also merit a mention. Firstly on the way out we had dolphins to play with, which when combined with the stunning visibility made for a fantastic sight. (Nearly out of new adjectives now.) We also should not forget White Island itself, which is probably the eeriest place I've ever been. Landing at dusk, with the darkening yellow light making the sulphur patches glow and without the babble of other tourists to cover the roaring stream and bubbling mud pools – well let's just say the whole place was telling me to get back onto the boat. Even Aidan who was sea-sick for most of the trip was glad to be back onboard. (It might also have been the hard hats and gas masks that John lent us for the first time – why not last time I wonder?)



Finally we need to thank John the skipper – a wonderful host as always, and Greg the crewman – really helpful and friendly (sorry the South Africans lost the 7's Greg). We also need to thank Cas for organising all the food – enough for 12 people for 3 days or 6 of us for 2 trips – where is hollow legged James when we need him.

A finally finally, if you happen to see pictures of me in a wetsuit and split fins then no you are not imagining it. As I got kitted up on the morning of the second day my drysuit neck seal ripped in half, so I had to improvise. I dived in a hooded wetsuit top, with split fins and hiking socks as there were no wetsuit booties on board to fit me. Thankfully by the time I had surfaced John (also known as McGiver) had managed to temporarily fix my drysuit with superglue and some bicycle inner tube – a fix that lasted for the rest of the trip. Magic stuff – although I will get it fixed before our trimix dives next week!

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For those of you that didn't manage to get on this trip or still haven't mentally added Volkner Rocks to your NZ wish list – THIS IS A MUST DO TRIP! On every trip I've done the visibility has been stunning and the fish list incredible. John the skipper has been diving out here since 65, knows the dive sites intimately and is still diving most days – that's how good it is. Ah hell – if you're still not interested then no worries, we'll easily fill all the spaces on the boat anyway.