

Marlborough Sounds

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The Marlborough Sounds are located at the top end of New Zealand's South Island, it is an amazing part of the world the region holds over 1,000 kilometres of coastline making up nearly 20% of New Zealand's entire coastline. The vast majority of these sounds are forested by pristine native forests including some Rimu trees believed to be around 800 years old, these forests plunge right down to the shoreline which makes for some spectacular backdrops a great distraction while surfacing from a dive. I was fortunate to have a few days diving planned in the region over the summer holiday period which had me pretty excited, the type of diving there is quite different to what I am used to in Brisbane and different is always good, keeps you on your toes.



Arriving in Dunedin to catch up with family I was up and away with my brother Shane the next day heading north for what was to be about a 9 hour drive seeing us arrive in Picton around 5pm just in time to organise a brief dive with about 4 or so hours of light to work with. Shane and I met up with another diver Brendan as we launched from Waikawa Bay and raced across the Queen Charlotte Sound in the 3.8 metre inflatable. The wind was very strong as we headed across and we copped an old fashioned hammering, it certainly was mask wearing stuff and it wasn't the warmest weather. After running further up the sound we ran into a shallow bay which was out of the wind, and that is the great thing about diving in the sounds there are always hundreds of spots out of the wind. We anchored in a bay just off a small sandy beach and the three of us jumped over the other guys taking guns while I was more interested in finding some scallops, the sounds produces plenty of them and they are much tastier than the ones I have come across in Australia. The water was a little dirty (3 to 4 metres)

possibly due to it being low tide I was not sure and the boys were struggling to find fish. Fortunately I was not having the same trouble finding the scallops on the sand in about 10 to 12 metres, there were quite a few around I gathered about 40 over the next hour before we decided to pull anchor and head in since the wind changed direction making our sheltered bay not so.

Rising the next day we took our time getting ready, there is never much of a rush in summer since the days are so long. Our intention today was to get on the exposed eastern ocean side, the reason for this is we wanted to see some cray's and the protected sounds don't seem to hold them quite like the exposed ocean coasts. With this in mind we made our way over to the east with the launch site being Robin Hood Bay just outside what is known as Port Underwood being basically another sound. The road took longer than expected it is quite corrugated in places and winds its way around the ridge in amongst some fairly dense bush at times it would have been a nice scenic drive apart from the fact the light vehicle was bouncing around the corners rattling all of my fillings out.



After an easy beach launch in a paltry 1/2 metre swell if that we ran across Port Underwood to the north and took up our duties along the exposed coastline consisting of some large cliffs falling down to the water, the sounds of bird life could be heard but no

seals around which was a little strange, a small penguin came past the boat for a look before we jumped in ready for action.



The water varied throughout the day from each cove or bay to the next from 4 metres to 6 metres it was not great but certainly workable since the max depth we would dive was around 9 metres. The rocky terrain was covered in kelp, the weed was constantly moving as it rocked back and forth in the gentle swell exposing to the eye some deep cracks before covering them over again. Swimming along the weedy bottom the marble fish moved away from us as we peered in to the passing undercuts and small crevasses, within minutes we were spotting crays they were under every second rock, but as is common in the area nearly all of them were undersize. Over the summer months while every man and his dog is on holiday and throwing pots in couple with several professional cray operations nearby see's the population remain in a pigmy state. Throughout the day Shane and I worked the area for crays seeing hundreds across the whole area including a couple of cracks which were just packed full, meanwhile Brendan was playing around in the shallow water spearing a few fish for the kitty.

Eventually Shane located a couple of legal's but it required both of us to get them. The old trick of scaring the cray back deeper inside the cave until another grasping arm comes in from a small gap down the back worked a treat on this occasion. My brother picked up another cray and I grabbed a few paua before we decided to pull in at an idyllic little beach for lunch. The sun had

come out at this point and we were able to take out wetsuit tops off and kick back for a while, it was fast turning out to be a perfect day.

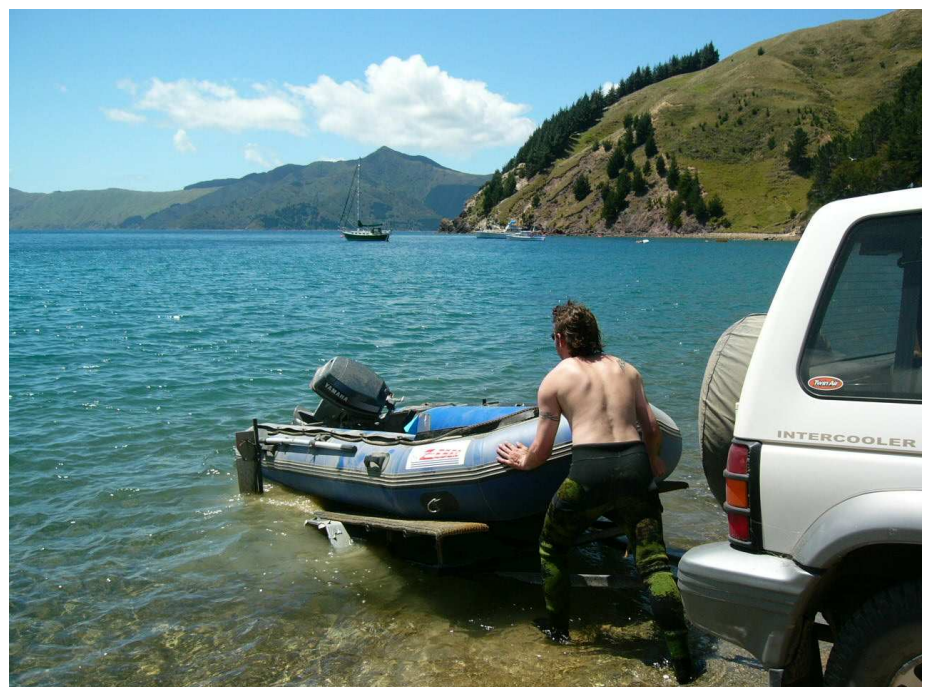


After the food settled we pushed off the beach and cruised further up the coast finding clearer water and some fascinating boulder structure. The boulders together formed an endless series of caves and a myriad of swim throughs. This complex structure in turn provided us with plenty of entertainment from swimming through large caves with bolts of light streaming through lighting it up like a cathedral, to eyeing up several crays hiding in the back of dark crevasse it was heaps of fun and before we knew it hours had passed. With a catch on board we cruised back and began to fillet the fish on the rocks much to the delight of several dozen sea gulls that if you turned your back would jump on the board and somehow swallow a fillet whole in a flash something I found out the hard way.

Later that evening we sat down and mulled over a beer trying to work out a plan for the next day, the mulling appeared to take a long time and it wasn't until 10pm we decided to make a run up through Havelock the next

morning to a place known as French Pass. French Pass is a notorious stretch of water, I had heard many horrific stories over the years about this place with many people being dragged down 100 metres to their deaths. Geographically the pass is a narrow gap between one arm of the sound to Durville Island, the water here falls from 3 metres in places down to a hole not much more than a couple hundred metres across and about 105 metres deep. The current has been recorded at times to run through the pass at up to 10 knots and when water moves that fast over a hole it creates a whirlpool action which over the years has dragged people down from the surface and caused mayhem for small boats. I would have loved to do a drift dive there as I think it would have been quite fishy but I didn't fancy my chances of getting back from 100 metres.

The road into French Pass took us a couple of hours as it winds up once again through some dense native bushland before peeling out onto some pastoral farming land. The course of the road took us up on top of the ridge where we were able to pull over and take in some more brilliant scenery a recurring trend while in the sounds. For the first time we started to get an idea of the amount of muscle farms that were spread throughout the region, apparently they now number over 1,000 farms and it has become a huge industry. But economics aside the muscle farms provide a good habitat for the kingfish which arrive here in the summer months, something we were keen to investigate. The road continued on further up the ridge to a point where you could see both sounds on either side and it was where we got our first glimpse of the French pass chaos, even from a few kilometres away you could see the water was ripping through there.



The French pass settlement was quite small since it acts as more of a gateway to Durville we were met with a small camp ground set amongst some trees providing some shade from the biting sun. Locating our site we set up the camp on what was a warm beautiful day. The camp was full and we were very lucky to get a spot in such a protected bay leading out to an enticing view of Durville Island and further afield Cook Strait. After we had got ourselves organised we cruised out across towards Durville and headed north to dive in the shallow water in search of some Blue Cod, Shane a keen hunter was looking at the landscape of the island on the way up rueing the fact he did not bring up his 308, since it looked like prime pig territory, next time perhaps.

We began in the water with about 8 to 10 metres vis, the reef was predominantly rubble with the odd large boulder with a few pieces of kelp hanging off it. The fish life in the sounds is very plentiful but they are often undersize I am not sure if this is to do with fishing pressure or that they move out of the sounds and take up residence on the more exposed ocean coastlines, treating it more as a hatchery.

We were hitting the bottom in about 10 metres to have up to 20 Blue Cod circling us within 2 to 3 metres. They are a funny fish, kind of remind me of coral trout only much more approachable and that's saying something. They would mill around us almost in formation then get bored of swimming so they would find a flat surface then set up their pectoral fins like tripod legs.

The small fish were beginning to frustrate the boys so we moved further up the island finding a series of jagged rocks extending to a point that was home to some much heavier structure and as we soon discovered some larger Blue Cod.

Breaking up some Kina on top of the boulders we then sat back and watched as the reef below us came alive, the guys performing several dives in amongst the concoction of fish life trying to find the bigger blueys that were coming and going. In the mean time I was just freediving with two young seals that had noticed us in the water. They poked their heads up out of the water looking curiously in our direction then proceeded to bolt over in our direction within seconds they were circling us at great speed and agility, they move so quick compared to the older seals whom tend to just lazily roll over. I would see them moving along the bottom ducking and weaving between the rocks then they would rise beneath me as I fell down veering off at the last minute they were all over us, great fun.

With a couple of fish in the boat and a lack of sizable fish around we pulled anchor and began to head in stopping for a quick look at one of the muscle farms for a kingie but there were none around, the water in the sounds was possibly still a bit too cool for them. Diving the muscle farms however was a bit of challenge, the big arms plunge down into nothingness or so it seems in the lower vis but once we took the time to relax we explored them a bit more they appeared to stop around 12 meters then I think the bottom was 30 plus metres where we were, kind of aerie hanging off the bottom looking down.

Back at camp we set about cooking up our fish while swilling a few beers and chatting to another spearo we discovered was in the camp he even knew the guys we were going to be diving with over the next few days, everybody knows everybody it seems. The camp site had about a dozen weka's running around the camp site poking their beaks into everything, funny little birds they kind of look like lean kiwi's with shorter beaks. They went on to cause a bit of havoc overnight choosing to fight up against the tents, nothing a fist couldn't stop.

The sun greeted us upon rising the next morning after a deluge overnight which was welcomed as it washed out the wetties, always a bonus. We got ourselves suited up and then surveyed the horizon where we could see our target the Trio's a long way out for a little inflatable but no doubt worth a shot and we were all keen so it was on. The run out to the Trio's was not too bad we just coped a bit of spray but nothing serious we were however quite exposed if the weather turned bad NZ style so we had to



keep an eye on it. It was kind of funny being out there the four or five other boats that we could see all had tenders off the back that were as big as us, you just knew they were thinking these boys are mad, those perceptions tend to come with the territory for the true spearo, risk is all about perception anyway.

As we geared up to jump in and discover what the Trio's had in store I realised the mono in the gun I was going to use had somehow been cut during the boatride, I was now going to have to free shaft a challenge was keen to embrace. As is the case in the South Island you will always find fish usually within the first two or three dives and the trio's was no different, although faced with fre shafting I was required to take more care on my position before taking the shot, in essence I had to wait for something to fall behind the fish to stop the shaft. The shaft upon being released was then quickly followed up with a mad rush from myself, it was a race as I had to get to the back end of the spear before the wriggling fish worked its way up there. There was a fair amount of life

moving around including a bunch of seals that kept appearing from nowhere spooking the hell out of me, one coming flying is so close I instinctively taped him on the head with the back end of the gun, he stared back with those 'what you playing at' eyes. Eventually I moved away from the shallow weed to start diving a rocky point in about 13 metres of water, it was here that applying the fre shafting technique I was able to stone a very nice sized red moki. Not long after that we left the Trio's and began to work our way back, finding plenty of undersize fish on the way but nothing fancy.

Finding ourselves back at French Pass later that day we packed up our things and headed to Nelson for a New Years Eve bash a tall order with all the travelling and diving we had been doing over the past week but it only happens once a year. Upon our arrival in sunny Nelson we realised there was no wind we also realised we had a few hours to spare/spear so not surprisingly we thought 'oh well gotta get wet again'. This time choosing to dive a location called cable bay which has something to do with power or phone lines connecting the North Island. The South Island generates most of power for New Zealand hence many jokes about cutting the cable they even have a song called cut the cable. Cable bay proved to be a bit of a disappointment from a diving perspective there was very little in the way of fish life, I did see a few small schools of Terakihi but that was about it in the way of fish. The whole area was absolutely covered in Kina, like a plague they covered the entire reef in places, we did our best to reduce the population by breaking some up for burley to no avail. Having said there were no fish around it still made for some fascinating diving with plenty of large caves to explore and I managed to come across some fairly large Moray type eels the weirdest thing was finding a cave full of crabs all piled up on top of one another, I had never seen that before. Back in Nelson later that day we kicked back with several brewski's followed by some more toxic liquors soaking up the festive atmosphere it was a great night, although all the diving and drinking caught up with me quite heavily the next day with both the mind and body screaming for a chill out day to recover.

The next day we headed down to a vineyard estate near Blenheim to meet up with another keen diver Reid Forest whom we would be spending the next couple of days diving with. Reid put on a good spread that night which included some fish he had speared earlier and we kicked back at the vineyard for the evening ready to head up the sounds the following day. Going from a 3.8 metre inflatable to the 8m boat the next day equipped with a kitchen and hot shower left us with a smile on our faces a mile wide. There was to be no more riding on the trampoline getting sparyed with a fire hose well for a few days at least. Reid's boat





with 3 to 4 metres vis a pleasing result even if I wasn't going to get any fish. Diving underneath the muscle farms was interesting the bottom was just covered in the discarded shells that they must prune off on an ongoing basis, and when I say covered I mean it was like diving on top of a mass grave of shells couldn't see anything else just shells. Not a heap of fish there but apparently snapper are commonly caught feeding under those farms.

After then providing some freediving training for one of the girls we brought along with us the remainder of the evening was spent fishing for snapper off the jetty while my brother scampered off Rambo style into the bush in search of a kill. The temperature then began to drop which was perfect as we all gathered almost ritualistically around a traditional cozy log fire and wiled away the night it was a great setting. The next morning I felt fresh and alive as I turned over the embers from last night's fire to cook toast from for breakfast, the sun beginning to break through it looked like we had another big day ahead.

It was kina smashing time I thought as we stumbled across a heap of them nestled down at about 7 metres. Its just an easier way to work the water as the fish not only come exceptionally close to you if you spend time they will even sometimes amazingly take food from your hand. After breaking up a few dozen my brother and I became inundated with mostly juvenile Blue Cod as you do, thinking that I wasn't going to capture on film him shooting anything I got distracted which proved to be a big mistake. Moments later Shane hit the bottom surrounded by the sparse metre high weed he could see a shape passing on the edge of the vis, a shape he was quite familiar with a Blue Moki, a common fish but this one was much larger than normal. The fish began slowly moving away so Shane crept forward using a large rock to shield the line of sight he then pulled himself over that rock and let fly with his brand new .9 metre freediver gun. Striking at maximum range the flopper just toggled in the gill plate of the fish although there was still a bit to do as it ran and became tangled in the weed. Of course I had missed all this so when Shane yelled out to me that he was swimming back to the boat with a large Blue Moki I thought yeah sure what's large for a Blue Moki, back at the boat I was quite stunned at how big it was since all the Blue Moki I have ever seen were smallish. It looked somewhat surreal on the floor of the deck, size really is a relative thing you get used to it as we had been spearing heaps of small fish over the past couple of weeks, fish that in Brisbane would be considered baitfish size. Blue Moki are a very prevalent fish around New Zealand waters spearfishers will come across the other Red & Bronze varieties at times but it is the Blue Moki that will appear at nearly every coastal dive location. While not a fish that is specifically targeted due to their eating qualities not matching that of the Greenbone and Blue Cod they are acceptable for the table and present a very easy catch like most fish in these waters.



The Moki was speared early in the day and we did not have any scales on board so it had to stay in the boat as we continued to dive spearing more Blue Cod and Greenbone. It was not until the end of the day after the fish had spent several hours drying out that we had a chance to weigh it, will the scales tipping 9.6 kilos. After a bit of a search I realised the New Zealand Spearfishing record for Blue Moki was 10.22 kilos taken way back in 1958, which gives you an idea of just how good a fish it was and I am sure if we had been able to weigh it more promptly it would have pipped that record.

And so rounded out a great diving experience in the Marlborough Sounds, it is a breathtaking part of the country with plenty to offer the outdoor adventurer. The diving is fascinating, from seal action, weedy kelp lines, boulders, muscle farms, tasty table fish and as it would seem large Blue Moki, plenty to keep the diver interested one other bonus is you can always get out of the weather which is a very useful thing especially down in the South Island. I will definitely head back there, next time a kingie will be on the menu.

was a pleasure to be on that was for sure, while not really being set up like a rugged ocean going vessel it was a great holiday boat ideal for the sounds. A forty minute run or so later we were tied up at the jetty unloading the gear at one of Reid's holiday houses. The holiday home (batch) had fantastic views, it looked like a great location for both diving and hunting. After we had quickly thrown our gear in the house we ran back down to the jetty keen to get changed and get in the water. It was about this time I fell in love with the hot shower what a godsend that proved to be in cool conditions.

The other boys jumped in not to spear but to go nuts on the jet ski we had at our disposal, while they were doing donuts trying to throw one another off I began finning over towards the nearby muscle farm for a look with kingies on my mind. The water was quite dirty as it was a fair way from high tide making it a bit freaky diving next to the muscle arms but after a while I managed to build up my confidence before finally hitting the bottom in 16 metres for a 1:51 exhale dive in 15 degree water