

Southern New Zealand

By Brett Craik

The cool temperate waters of New Zealand's south island could easily scare many divers away from planning a dive trip to the area especially a diver whom hails from the warm mid twenty degree water of Brisbane, but that would be a mistake. These waters teem with marine life and many treasures you simply don't get anywhere else or at least not in the same numbers.

After a rendezvous with family in Dunedin the scene was set for the first dive to be just to the north of the city. Arriving at the location the next morning my nostrils were filled with the unfamiliar smells that come with colder water kelp, weed, sea birds and the seals themselves all mixed in together giving a real sense of the sea.

Launching the boat on a steep slippery ramp we were off to find some reef, this is not difficult to do, all you need to do is find where the kelp forests break the surface they mark where the structure is, in-fact its kinda like having a thousand marker buoys which is fantastic as it means the visibility required to hunt effectively does not have to be that good. The first reef we found was in 10 - 12 metres of water which is more than enough to hold fish. It is a unique experience diving in thick kelp the world closes in around you leaving you to deal with a much smaller more intense area. The enchanted forest always leaves you with a feeling of what's around that corner, what's beyond that swim through. It also takes time to adjust to whole sensation of constantly being touched by the kelp especially for a sub tropical/tropical diver where if something is touching you it usually isn't good. The initial feelings of being grasped at and smothered eventually subsides as time passes to the point where the grasping starts to feel like a gentle caressing and the smothering at the surface becomes more of warm blanket keeping the cool Antarctic wind off your back. Upon entering the water I was greeted with about 6 metres of visibility and a green colour quite typical of the area but in the conditions it would prove to be more than adequate. I decided to take the camera in first up to document the area while the other lads got stuck into spearing some fish. Finding the fish was extremely easy all you had to do was hit the bottom and wait 20 seconds by which time you would invariably have half a dozen fish saying hello these included some juvenile trumpeter, blue moki and the odd blue cod which would pop in from time to time and not forgetting the ever present dopey looking wrasse ambling around in the kelp, the fish would almost serve themselves up on a plate in-fact I swear some of them were swimming around with side dishes attached to them.



As time passed the light northerly wind developed into a fairly strong breeze and subsequently the ocean began to cap up, making it difficult to hold the 3.8m inflatable near the divers. The plan then was to head back inshore to some sheltered rocks where we could start looking for Paua (NZ Abalone). The other guys immediately began searching for Paua in the very thick dense kelp that seemed like far too much work to me so being that the area this area also provides a safe haven for seals I instead began playing with the ever curious fur balls. They were curious but still cautious as they would hide behind the kelp sticking their heads around to get a look at me before moving to the next bunch of kelp. At one point I surfaced right next to a rock embankment where numerous seals were lounging around in the sun, one of the little guys took offence to the camera and bit down on the housing, it was quite funny really when considering the seal was half the size of the others

whom had fled the area, I think the little fella may have leadership potential.

After filming the seal for quite some time I then decided to pick up a gun with the intention of boating some of those tasty little critters that had been milling around me on every dive. Instantly I found myself a nice sized moki which as expected presented an easy shot with a .8 metre Rabitech gun, it was this close range shooting that created another problem. I was stringing every single fish on the mono and they were running into the kelp at times twisting the mono up and giving me a bit of a headache. I then refined my technique to waiting until the fish became bored and moved away from me whereby I would nail it in the shoulder or head from behind this tended to subdue it somewhat rather than the broadside shot, problem was it takes a long time for fish to get bored around here. Once I had my fill I dropped the gun back in the boat and began to work a ledge I had found in about 10-13 metres of water, this was not easy at all while carrying a tombstone around my waist and using only plastic fins, but there were plenty of crayfish hiding in the ledge. Unfortunately I could not get my hands on any of legal size, the vast majority I could see were little fella's.

As I was digging around in vain trying to extract a legal sized cray from the ledge my brother found himself a bunch of greenbone, a shallow kelp dweller that tastes fantastic, Shane was able to rotate guns with the boatie swapping fish and gun for a rigged gun, by the time the boatie had dealt with the fish and reset the gun Shane was ready to swap again. The turn over was quick and in little to no time the chilly bin (Esky) was full, after that little operation we decided to head in with the sun due to set around 10:15pm we had plenty of time to clean up and have a



couple of drinks, in the evening sun.

Awaking the next morning I walked outside to discover a nice temperature and a light northerly, time for another dive! This time heading to the south to dive around an island known to hold good fish, the launch was made from a sandy beach in a small cove where we had almost no swell to deal with 15 minutes later we were found ourselves facing the island. The cry's of a thousand birds could be heard, not being an ornithologist I could not say what they were that is of course for the web footed characters with the little fins for wings, these penguins (yellow eyed I think) were scattered all around the island going about their business. They are incredible fast I watched as one leapt into the ocean and in a flash he was way offshore on a hunting trip, they lead not too bad a life. There is however something about diving around penguins that makes you feel instantly cold it must be an association, your left with a feeling of 'this is not right'.

We anchored on the seaward side to the east of the island, immediately several seals leapt off the rocks and began circling the boat they had played this game before, I was intrigued but one of the other guys was no so he was on the lookout for Sea Lions a much larger and more aggressive contender he had experienced these in full flight before and does not dive when they are around, fortunately for him we established there were only seals in the group so all was fine.

The visibility was a little less here than the dive the previous day but it was still certainly workable. After a brief search the boys and I came across good numbers of green bone they were milling around a little further out from where we anchored. I find it quite odd how they survive or even chose to live in close proximity to a seal colony you would think the ever present threat of a rabid marine dog would scare them away.



With two guns in the water blazing away it did not take long for the seals still sitting on the rocks to see the fish floating on our rig lines and in they came sliding under the kelp. After several seals began to swarm around us nipping at the fish as we pulled the floats laden with green bone, unlike sharks when we pulled the fish near to us they did not back down, eventually we thought stuff this time for the boat and a change of location. Moving to the inside of the island, as we pulled up two penguins standing on the rocks were flapping their wings and shaking their heads which resembled two blokes in tuxedos clapping us. The standing ovation spurred us on as we leapt in with vigour immediately locating an excellent drop-off which appeared to slope down from 6 or so metres to beyond 25 metres on about a 45 degree angle which was just what the doctor ordered. I did a couple of dives half way down the ledge to around the 15 – 16 metre mark, these dives were very difficult to come back from as I was very heavy at that depth plus the crappy fins did not help but it did give me a chance to work out where the majority of the fish were, they happened to be around the

10 metre mark, perfect. I set about working that depth the fish just kept appearing it was like a procession the greenbone in the boat were very quickly complemented by some Blue Moki, Trumpeter and a few Blue Cod. We quickly devised a method for bringing in the trumpeter, it simply required lowering down a free shaft and jiggging it the trumpeter would then mass around it while they were unknowingly being flanked by the other divers, it was a good method for us to secure a descent feed of these prized fish. Next up the focus turned to the shallows and finding some paua, this took some time as they scattered across a large area and there did not appear to be any large grouping it was more a case of finding individual shells. One of the guys collected a few kina, and proceeded to cut one up on the boat for us to try. The fermented sort of taste was far too strong for me and it actually took me a couple of hours to get rid of it, each to their own thou I guess but ya gotta give these things a go.

The following day the wind had come in hard, it was blowing around 50 knots gusting to about 60 knots, in-fact some parts of New Zealand had registered 100 knots definitely a bit of breeze around the joint. Having taken in consideration the wind we still thought maybe there is a chance of a dive somewhere, the Otago Peninsula just outside of Dunedin was the area we were looking at as we figured there may be some protection from the wind. Getting to a place to launch proved to be more difficult than initially thought as the severe weather had wiped out several roads some from mudslides and others from huge trees that had fallen across the roads. That sort of thing does not fill you with confidence when you are looking to take a 3.8 inflatable boat out into the ocean, no I would say it more or less instils you with a we're doomed/ dread sort of feeling. After an hour or so we eventually found our way to a spot where we could launch from, the run being only 10 minutes to the bar. As we rounded the last corner of the inlet the bar became visible well of sorts, it actually resembled more of a beach break in Hawaii, still we pushed on, yeah I think we left our brains behind that morning. The increased wave action had obviously excited several seals whom appeared to be leaping for joy in amongst the standing waves and turbulent white water they were having a great time while only metres away we were getting the crap kicked out of us. With the point of no return fast approaching we quickly discussed the matter and decided while we would probably make it through the bar some or all of the gear in the boat would most likely be lost overboard in the process, considering we had some expensive camera equipment on board we conceded defeat and turned around.



Whilst the run back was one hundred times more pleasant from a boating point of view the fresh taste of defeat on our pallets soured the mood and it almost felt like the seals picked up on our predicament and decided to mock us by repeatedly leaping full clear of the water right next to the boat amongst the standing waves in celebration. Back at the boat ramp well I say boat ramp but it was more of a depression where the river almost consumed the road, we jumped back in the 4WD still in our wetsuits determined to find a location which was now going to have to be in the actual harbour. About 40 minutes later we were launching again just in time too as we were starting to cook in the suits. As we rounded the rocks near the boat ramp we were met with several spirals of water extending some 30 metres into the air there was a nasty chop too, it appeared the wind was so strong it was created an impressive swirling effect even when on the protected side of the island, I use the term protected loosely here as the reality was there was little protection anywhere. We only had to go 300 metres but the spray was slamming into us hard it felt like a thousand needles piercing the face. Finally we got behind a rock wall and jumped in to a not so pleasant 1 – 1.5 metres vis I tried to do some dives but around the 6 metre mark it went almost completely black, I had concerns if I went any deeper I would struggle to find the surface again, hats off to the freedivers whom descend into the deep black it must take a great deal of courage. I then had to try in the shallows for crays staying less than 3 metres deep, it did not take long to find them and catch a few but they did not reach legal size, still it was very rewarding to catch something in such trying conditions and must be testament to just how much marine life there is in the area. With the powerful wind set in for a long stint it was a case of doing some drinking and hunting on land for the next few days before heading north to Kaikoura a gem of a diving location where I had a few wet days planned.

Three days latter and after a long haul north towing the boat Kaikoura greeted us with some favourable conditions for the first



couple of days anyway, the water we dived most of the time proved to be quite shallow but it was packed full of marine life with some nice fish hiding in thick vegetation while the seals played above, it made for some really interesting dives and the crayfish well they were everywhere the problem was the summer season had seen all the holiday makers take most of the legal crays in pots so the masses of crays were mostly small. The crays were that prevalent you could almost bet on their being some in almost every rock or ledge checked, they were however a little tricky to catch in that structure but a few did find their way into the boat.

One of the great things about diving this area is the marine mammals they congregate in massive numbers on that part of the coast largely due to the proximity of the continental shelf providing an up welling of nutrient rich water more so than in other areas. On one particular day we dived right next to a large seal colony where we had the pleasure of being surrounded by Dusky or Hector Dolphin I can not sure but they were everywhere including the little tykes so close you could almost touch them. Judging by their proximity to us I can only assume that they interact with humans on a regular basis, such a pleasure to dive with. As the dolphins moved away we approached the seal colony to see dozens of them leap into the water within seconds they encircled us zipping here zipping there the whole time while rotating and doing it with such ease, they left me wishing I could move like that. Playing in 5 to 6 metres of water I would dive to the bottom and watch as the seals would charge down at me from above only to veer away at the last possible moment, it was truly exhilarating and went on for quite some time. One older seal was simply spinning around and around at the surface, the strange behaviour had me puzzled, I thought perhaps he is just trying to make himself dizzy to get a buzz? I was able to

swim right up to and touch without causing any real concern, he must have been totally out of it. As I was playing with the older seal two others entered the fray and began fight or playing or mating I really don't know, but they were biting and chasing one another it was exciting to see, I even came close to being collected on several of their bolting runs through the kelp.

Eventually they tired of me and climbed up onto the rocks just as the boys began burleying a dropoff in about 12 metres, so I thought it an opportune time to leave my furry friends and re-join the hunt. My first dive coincided just as the burley hit the deck, what an incredible response it had received there were masses of greenbone in all directions with a few blue cod mingling amongst them, armed only with a camera at the time I took some film before heading back topside to find a weapon for the next descent. It did not take long for the burley to be totally consumed, there were just so many fish working it, consequently the drop returned to normal quite quickly not to worry as we had already had a few besides the boys were ready to go hunt some goats and pigs, such is life in NZ.

The next day a final dive was sought on a pinnacle which rose from 30 odd metres to 6 metres, there was a ton of life on it and this was magnified once we set a berley bomb on top of the pinnacle, with no current present we were guaranteed to haul a few up from this spot. This presented some challenging diving for myself as I quickly found some crayfish were hiding in a ledge at 12 metres down the side of the pinnacle, this required crawling into a tight and dark space, one also had to be careful on descent not to go too deep as the weightbelt was proving to be very heavy at these depths the thought of falling off the pinnacle to the sand some 30 plus metres below was ever present as I was unsure how deep I could swim back from with the crappy plastic fins I had on. The crayfish were a real challenge and I did manage to extract a few which I was very pleased about, we then had the opportunity to watch a seal tear up a fish it had caught throwing it high in the air as it torn it up, the seal then lying on its back wiped its mouth clean with its flippers they are such funny creatures, Kaikoura is such a magic place, the rewarding dive capped off a great trip good people, good hunting I could not have asked for anything more.