

The Solander Islands

By Brett Craik
www.bluevisions.net

Diving in far flung unknown locations in different challenging environments requires a real sense of adventure it is that very sense of adventure which binds the underwater hunters soul and sets spearfishers apart from the average person.

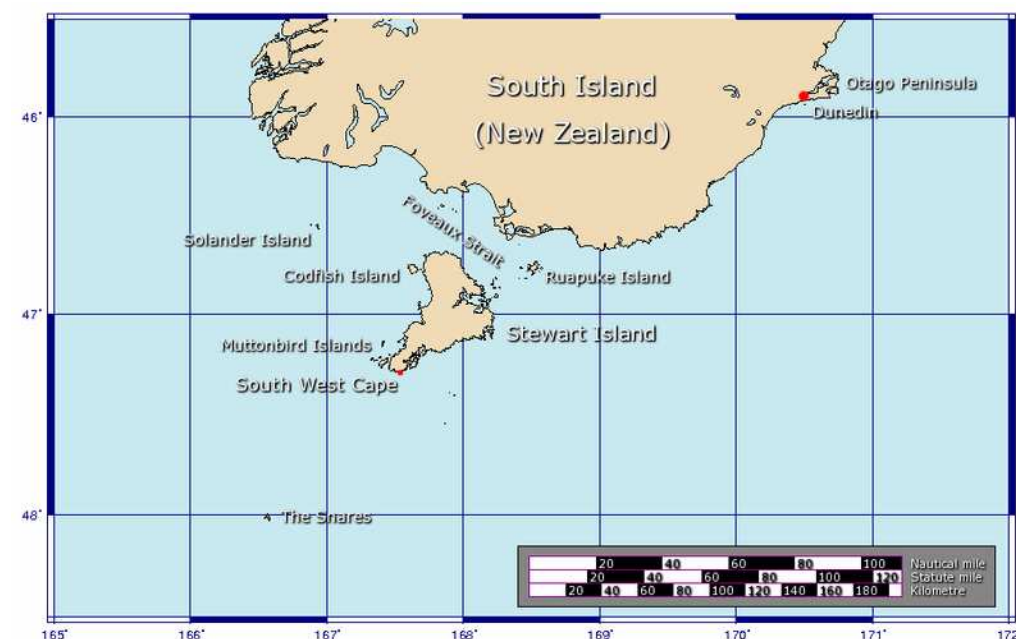
With this adventurous spirit always in the mindset, the opportunity to dive down the south coast of the south island of New Zealand was very exciting for me but it was not received without a slight touch of trepidation being that it is such a remote, cold and isolated part of the world home to many large mammals and also hunters of those mammals, still they were fleeting thoughts because ya just gotta go!

I was fortunate in the fact that my brother had recently taken up employment as a professional paua diver down the bottom end region and had organised with his boss Andrew Parker for me to tag along on a work/play trip. With Andrew having twenty years experience a 7.5 metre boat and detailed local knowledge I knew it was going to be a good trip as long as the weather didn't turn sour as is often the case down there.

Departing Dunedin on an overcast day the crew consisting of Andrew my brother and I plus another paua diver Torsten and a boatie we headed south past Invercargill to a small town of Colic bay near Riverton. The trip is not that long so we had time to get a dive in before taking up accommodation, Centre Island was to be the go in choppy conditions.

Centre Island is halfway across to Stewart Island in the middle of the Foveaux Strait hence the name. The run across to the island was a bit bumpy not surprising since this Strait is considered to be one of the worst in the world. Upon approaching the island we could see there was a fair amount of swell pushing up against it, if I was Spearfishing it wouldn't have concerned me but with paua diving you need to be in fairly shallow so I could tell we were about to spend quite a few hours surging back and forth.

Armed with a small net and a spatula style device I was finding my feet a little, I had dived for paua before of course but not in search or large quantities like this. I was not sure on what a productive collection rate would be but I quickly learned that the guys move fast and they perhaps have a touch of competitiveness in what they do since they get paid on their own specific catch. The surge made it a challenge to get the paua you could see them from the surface but had to time the dive based on where you thought you would end up. A few times I swept past a rock covered in paua being able to pick up one as I surged past the rock then picking up another as I was sucked back past the rock on the return. It was challenging and very different diving compared to deep Spearfishing its far more energetic, up and down getting smashed into the rocks and fumbling the catch at times, it certainly was a learning experience. After a few hours of this Andrew let us have a quick spear to wind out the day before we headed back in preparation for the Solanders the next day.



Launching the next morning further along the coast we made our way first up to an area at the bottom end of Fiordland. The coast line along there was amazing with large cliffs hitting the water, behind them dense native bush further and behind that the snow capped Southern Alps completing the backdrop with not the slightest sign of any human development, New Zealand at its best. Unfortunately the clarity of the water could not match the scenery so our intentions now turned to the gothic like spires that pierced into the sky way out on the horizon, the Solanders lay in wait.

The Solander Islands are a small chain of uninhabited volcanic islets lying about 47 kilometres from our original launching position. They are not that large measuring about 0.7 km² in area, and are

the remnants of an isolated extinct volcano with rocks one to two million years old. The surrounding water is quite deep as it sits on top of a bank with depths to 100 metres before plummeting away down off the continental shelf. The island itself is home to many very rare plant species and a few thousand pairs of the southern subspecies of Buller's Albatross one of only two places you can find them. The main Solander island rises to a peak of 330 metres above sea level with one side covered in trees the other bare white rock giving an indication of the prevailing winds. The island chain was sighted by Captain James Cook allegedly on 15 September 1770 and was named after a Swedish Naturalist one of the scientific crew aboard the Endeavour. The island has only ever been briefly inhabited, and then only due to shipwreck where five European stowaways were marooned here between 1808 and 1813, the longest continual period of habitation for the island group. Interesting the Maori name for the island is Hautere which translates as "Flying Wind" and we were about to learn why.

In search of a clearer water the Solander's were a good option as apparently it is always clear out there and with the ocean very flat and glassy in patches we thought it would be a great run, boy were we wrong. It really is astounding how fast the ocean

changes down there in the roaring 40's, the flat conditions began to get progressively worse the calm weather had changed with gusts now hitting 35 knots the second half of the trip became much more uncomfortable. The island on approach was beginning to take an impressive look, the individual peaks spearing into the sky it looked like something out of science fiction/fantasy story. It had a real wild feeling about it a feeling that human's are just not meant to be in a place like that, something beyond our normal comfort zones.

We anchored the boat in the only sheltered bay in the whole island group, and due to the swirling wind we actually had to throw over two anchors to fully secure it. Several seals played in the bay while further up on the small beach there were more seals in one place than I have ever seen before including one mack daddy of them all he was massive. While we set up the dingy and got our gear ready waterspouts were flying past the boat and then the rain hit coming in sideways, I quirked to my brother in a muffled voice "at least I know what hell looks like now". I leapt over to check on the anchor something Andrew is very stringent on after losing a boat on the rocks in similar conditions before. I was met with visibility of around 12 metres and it was crystal clear with no particles the floor was covered with weedy rocks with plenty of fish milling around it really looked very beautiful, it just had that look of a healthy environment it would have looked even better if it wasn't overcast.

Before the other guys had hit the water I had already located two crays, one of which was never going to be caught the other was possible. I notified Shane and grabbed the camera I was more inclined to film in this location than dive for paua. Shane positioned himself in front of the cray showing his bright white paua gloves he distracted it then grabbed it and began to leave the cave. The cray gave a good kick and Shane momentarily lost it having to chase along the bottom for it before securing it once more, one dive one cray a productive day beckoned.

The boys headed into the shallow hard at work pulling paua a.k.a. black gold, while I hung out a little wider playing with a bunch on seals and taking some great footage in the process. One seal gave me a real fright popping his head out from some thick kelp next to my head, they were very curious I thought they probably don't get to see too many human's in the water down there.

The Paua bounty was certainly there for all the guys as they worked feverishly throughout the day, momentarily I would sense the elements above and lift me head to be hit by some ferocious swirling winds and driving rain. The first few times that happened I looked over toward the main boat to see it lurching heavily to one side the anchor ropes straining as the boat was yanked from one direction to the next, further out beyond the island I could see the ocean was getting bigger and bigger, after a while I stopped looking up I just didn't want to know anymore it was filling me with dread if I thought about it best not to.

After a few hours of working my brother and I took a short break and headed into the a protected piece of water only 2 metres deep it was like a pristine little lagoon full of juvenile fish but nothing big, I soon realised why as several seals leapt off the beach and hurtled over towards us keen to have a play. They were the younger ones zipping around full of energy, we had some fun with half a dozen doing flips around us before we inadvertently stumbled across another patch of black gold so Shane got back to work again and I joined him.

Moving along the bay my brother called me over with cry's of "big crayfish here" I immediately headed over with the camera and from the surface I could clearly see what he was pointing at. A big cray was walking along in the open in only 2 metres of water the orange legs clearly visible, I was gob smacked to see such a massive cray in the open in such shallow water, apparently its quite common down there. I filmed Shane as he grabbed that one it was an easy catch for sure and it came up great on video as the shallow depth and size of the cray were both showcased. Moments later as we put that one in the dingy another one was spotted walking



around which was almost as big, that one quickly ended up on film and in the dingy too along with several others as the guys had gotten on to them as well. Andrew capped out the crays and said we had enough which was fair considering the size of these bugs, huge! I still kept filming other crays I was finding since I had never come across so many big ones in one area before, the Solanders were turning it on.



The fish life at the Solander's were in healthy numbers from what I could tell and they appeared on average to be of a good size, and friendly too so no problems getting a catch. I speared a few then swam myself over towards the main boat to try and fillet them. I had never filleted fish in these conditions before off the side of the boat as it heaved up and down while the wind roared through me. It was insane, I was just pleased that I did not end up slashing myself.

After helping the dingy driver haul the sacks of paua on board, the boys then began to clamber on as the day was winding to and end and it was time to head off, we would leave the harsh elements to the seals it is their domain after all. The deck was littered with sacks of paua, crayfish and fish it had a been a productive day and one that I wouldn't forget in a hurry, little did I know at this point it was far from over.

The wind began to howl even more as the last person climbed out of the 3.8 ridged inflatable ready to take the 20HP motor off it when no sooner did a huge gust of wind strike the boat sending the entire dingy up into the air! Fortunately some quick thinking saw Andrew and Torsten lunge forward and grasp the side railing on the boat holding it down just before it headed into the sky.

I couldn't believe it the motor on it alone is fairly heavy, the wind was just that strong. Part of me was almost disappointed it didn't get away because I would have been interested to see how high the boat would have gone into the sky would have been quite a sight although that wouldn't have pleased Andrew. We then quickly took the motor off the dingy tied it up then pulled the dingy onboard, strapped it down then focused on getting the anchors up which took a bit off effort since they had been wound around the boulders on the reef.

Departing the island I took one last look back ecstatic that I had been granted the opportunity to dive such a sensational location yet also pleased to be leaving, my ears were ringing from too much shallow diving and looking to the ocean I just knew sea sickness was imminent, and so we began our run.

There was white breaking water everywhere you looked as the 7.5 boat with a 200HP on the back speed out from the supposed protection of the island, our run of 47ks was going to take a very long time although we were going with it so at least something was in our favour. My brother offered me the position up front next to Andrew to which I said "hell no, I am going as far back as possible" which wasn't actually that far since we had a 3.8 metre boat strapped back there. After about 20 minutes the seas were getting bigger and bigger, I was looking behind the boat to see them breaking it was building and we were only a small fraction into the journey. The waves had increased to a size whereby we could not just go one speed we actually had to start surfing them and they continued to build! It got to a point where I was beginning to doubt that it could be done, I looked back to a huge wave we were running down the front of then glancing forward we were met with the back end of mountain of water, it was like the sky had suddenly disappeared, Andrew later admitting to me that he no longer had control surfing down the waves they were becoming too big. As Andrew started looking behind us I knew he was pulling the pin and abandoning the run the ocean was just too big and he waited for an opportune time to turn, to get this wrong would have been catastrophic. He picked his spot and went quickly it was performed with perfection and as we met the next mountain of water nose first, the heart palpitations were not necessary. The boat heaved up and down like a surfer pushing through a break, now I was feeling really sick especially so when I caught sight of those bloody spires again, the Solander's were not going to let us go that easy.



My mind was racing now did that mean we were going to have to spend the night out here and wait for the ocean to calm down, I was thinking how is that going to go we have no sleeping gear no clothes as they are all in the vehicle back on land. The only flattish piece of land if we needed to go ashore was that small beach covered in dozens of seals which if we needed to could probably push out of the way apart from that massive alpha male he might have said no you're not staying here. The real concern however would of course be just how cold is it going to get overnight staying warm could be a problem, I felt a long way from Brisbane now.

Andrew surveyed the situation then made the decision to give it another crack, this time deciding to run across the waves with the intention of heading north straight towards the South Coast before running east to our point of origin in a dog leg fashion. The decision to run across the waves paid dividends as with some skilled boating from the old sea dog we were able to keep up our speed. It still wasn't easy there were waves smashing over the back of the boat and covering the bow in spray. The wash over the hard top meant that Andrew was intermittently unable to see anything instead he was relying on Torsten hanging out the Starboard side yelling when there was a big wave for him to turn into and thus avoiding us from getting clipped. Meanwhile I was handing out the Port side vomiting watching the waves past us; I couldn't bear to see what was coming towards us from the other side. A couple of those Buller's Albatross followed us from the Solander's they must have thought this is going to be entertaining, but considering the conditions we were doing pretty good there was only the one wave that hit us with force sending a couple of us tumbling across the floor.

The silhouette of the mainland on the horizon began to take definition, the first sign we were actually getting there as the rampant seas began to subside. I was filled with a feeling of relief as we pulled into the sheltered bay we started in from what seemed a lifetime ago.

Back at the accommodation we cooked up some Crays, Paua and Greenbone in a deservedly big late night feed since it was now 10pm and we were quite shattered but very hungry. The next morning we were up and at it again, it is a business after all and you just gotta get out there. It was only to be a half day running along the coast as the weather was predicted to turn sour again, the boys collecting some Paua for a couple of hours before having a spear or as it turned out a competition between Torsten with the gun and Shane with the net. Torsten spearing a nice Blue Cod but Shane came in with three good Bluey's by hand feeding them into the paua net who needs to spearfish! The wind picked up and we jetted off thus ending my trip down the South Coast.



On reflection the Solander's proved to be an incredible place to dive, very wild very clear and everything was big relative to the normal life found along the South Island Coast. An inspiring place to dive but also very dangerous and unforgiving you really need to be prepared for the worst conditions out there, but really that just adds to the excitement factor. It is most certainly a place I will visit again, perhaps this time I will spend a few days Spearfishing and working the more exposed areas if I was to jag some good weather.