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The Big Outdoors

If you go to New Zealand, you must dive certain famous sites or risk wasting a very long haul. **John Liddiard** made the most of his chance to do a diving tour of Kiwi country



AFTER ALMOST A DAY IN THE AIR, a 12 hour time-difference and crossing the dateline, I need to chill out, despite managing to sleep through the whole of the LA-to-Auckland leg of the flight. Having skipped Saturday completely, I spend a lazy Sunday in Auckland.

New Zealand is the world capital of anything outdoors, especially if excessive amounts of adrenalin are involved. Nigel and Brent from First Light Travel suggest a rat-line/base jump from the Sky Tower.

I am tempted, but not that early in the trip. I settle for a pleasant lunch at a waterside bar, watching dragonboat races and counting weirdly decorated life-sized cow sculptures grazing on the pavement.

Unusually, I have no trouble waking early on Monday. Jet lag is working in my favour. I collect a rental car and head north. I'm on the road again.

Road signs are, to put it politely, a little ambiguous. Especially in Northland. I don't have too much trouble on the main road - there is only one road from Auckland to Whangarei - but from there to Tutukaka is anyone's guess.

Even with detailed directions from Brent, I make a couple of wrong turns.

Maori names can be difficult to get your tongue round and my mind blends similar names into a single confusion. Tutukaka is pronounced pretty much as it is spelt, but Whangarei is pronounced Fungarei.

Nevertheless, as planned I make it to Tutukaka in time for lunch and an afternoon dive. The Poor Knights are a full day trip, so I have a choice of two inshore wrecks, the survey ship Tui and the Leander-class frigate Waikato, both sunk as artificial reefs. Instructor and photographer Glenn recommends the Waikato, as it



Maori wrasse



Among the kelp at Laison's Reef, White Island

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is a little further offshore and likely to offer better visibility.

We descend a buoy line at the stern and I dip to the seabed at 30m for a quick look at the propellers, then up and along the helicopter deck. An octopus is strolling in a leisurely fashion in the opposite direction and over the side.

Glenn leads the way forward, in and out of various holes. As usual with artificial reefs, everything is well opened up to allow easy access through the wreck. But the real treat comes as we approach the bow; the whole section forward of the superstructure has broken clear and twisted to port, leaving the normally inaccessible magazine space exposed.

Next morning, I get to appreciate the efficiency of Dive Tutukaka. Within an hour of opening, 50 or so divers are checked in, rental equipment and wetsuits handed out and a flotilla of blue and yellow boats is on its way to the Poor Knights.

The journey is 90 minutes of bump and bounce through quite a rough sea, though once at the Poor Knights we have the shelter of the islands.

A benefit of numbers is that I and other experienced divers have a boat to ourselves, so we begin with a look at the famous Northern Arch. Alas, it is too rough, and we head south to dive Landing Bay Pinnacle and the nearby Taruana cave. It's a good start, with cool blue visibility and lots of fish.

The Poor Knights have been a marine reserve since 1981 and completely no-take since 1998. In some ways the diving is reassuringly familiar, in others it's refreshingly different.

The basic scene of rocky walls, anemones, soft corals, sponges and kelp with reef fish is what I would expect from a good scenic dive at home, yet when I look closely, many of the fish are more similar to tropical than to UK species.

After lunch the wind drops a little, so we decide to try diving the Northern Arch. Conditions on its sheltered side are deceptive. Once on the wall and heading through, about all I can do is make slow progress against the surge and current.

As I slosh back and forth, I try to photograph vibrantly coloured sponges and anemones against the background of the arch. A fair number of large kingfish and maomao are holding station, but none of the stingray shoals shown in Glenn's photo on the cover of the guidebook. Apparently some orca had snacked on them a few months ago and a new shoal had yet to establish itself.

Being here year-round means that local divers can pick and choose their moments, amply demonstrated by the quality of photographs on show at the NZ Underwater Photography Society meeting I join that evening. It was just along the waterfront and I couldn't resist.

For such a small population, New Zealand seems to have more than its share of internationally known photographers. The diving here inspires interesting photography.

Next morning, the sea is rougher still. Only the larger boats can cross to the Poor Knights. A Belgian tourist locks himself in the head and stays there.

I pass the journey chatting to three English ladies nearing the end of a six-month world tour to celebrate their 40th years in style. So far in New Zealand they had been bungee-jumping, canyoning, whitewater rafting, skydiving and cave-diving. A simple open-water dive seemed tame by comparison.



Delicate corals beneath the lip of Tavuana Cave, Poor Knights



An octopus on the Waikato



The bow of the Rainbow Warrior



Leatherjacket among the kelp on the reef next to the Warrior wreck

Conditions limit the choice of dives and we return to Landing Bay Pinnacle. The crew gets the fire-hose out to wash down the head. The victim looks as if he could benefit from a hosing-down too, but disappears to the top deck before anyone can point the water jet in his direction. Everyone else is fit to dive.

Captain Ian reminds those in rental wetsuits that if they are caught peeing in them they get "Swampy" written on their foreheads in waterproof marker.

I do the dive back to front compared to the day before and explore the deeper parts of the pinnacle from 30 to 45m. It works well, feeling like a completely different dive. Back onboard, Ian spots a pod of orca heading south. Murphy's Law prevails. The anchor is jammed and divemaster Jolanda has to clear it.

Thirty minutes later, all we see are a few fins in the distance. Meanwhile the orcas have put on a good display for Dive Tutukaka's other boat as they circled the vessel and munched sting rays.

All over the world, rocks are named after the fisherman who have crashed their boats on them. At Trevor's Rocks, I get to meet some sting rays.

Spotting the first one, I get low on the sand and crawl in from downcurrent. After a couple more I become blasé, waving my buddy into the background to fit the sting ray between us. With fish this co-operative, I wonder why I ever bothered with the cautious approach.

Cousteau put the Poor Knights in his top 10. If you go to New Zealand, you have to dive the Poor Knights.

Two and a half days is nowhere near enough to get the most out of them. Nevertheless, in my packed schedule it's time to drive north to the Bay of Islands and the Rainbow Warrior.

I find Dive North by the pier in Pahia, about 90 minutes' drive from Tutukaka. The boat journey across the bay and round the corner to the dive-site normally takes just over an hour. In the rough sea today, it takes getting on for 150 minutes.

The Rainbow Warrior is a place of pilgrimage for any diver who has environmental sympathies. Mined and sunk by a French secret service team who got away with a token penalty, and a culpable government which got away completely, it is a fine example of state-sponsored terrorism by a nation that holds weapons of mass destruction.

I'd better stop ranting before GW and Tony decide to invade France.

By coincidence, the New Zealand government was using the survey ship Tui, now an artificial reef at Tutukaka, to keep an eye on the same series of French nuclear tests as Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior was destined to disrupt.

The wreck is marked by a buoy attached to a big concrete mooring block off the stern. With the stormy sea, visibility has dropped to the point that from the mooring I can just make out the wreck 8m away.

Inside, I find shoals of cardinalfish, then on the hull some nosy red pigfish and resting goatfish. Some big kingfish circle off the starboard side. It's a nice little wreck with a good coating of anemones.

Under the stern, the propeller is gone, now standing on a nearby headland as a memorial.

I look hard for photographs that differ from the iconic shot looking back along the bow that everyone seems to take.

The second dive is a fairly nondescript rocky reef.

Pleasant and a good chance to snap some fish portraits, but a filler and not the sort of dive that would inspire me to go halfway round the planet. Dive guide Phil tells me that better sites are nearby, but not in today's rough sea.

If Cousteau had still been diving when the Rainbow



The bar of the Mikhael Lermontov - a natural place for divers to explore.



Exiting the cave at Riwaka



Moray eel at Spanish Arch



Fur seal playing at Barney's Rock, Kaikoura

Warrior was sunk it would have made for an interesting conflict of interests. If you go to New Zealand, you have to dive the Rainbow Warrior.

Next day the road signs get better as I drive south and east to Whakatane (pronounced Fu-ka-ta-ne) and White Island. On the way, I get a pleasant spread of New Zealand countryside from mountains and forests to fields with cows and sheep to volcanic sulphur vents at Rotorua. If the name sounds familiar, a Kiwi-owned ship of the same name was torpedoed in Lyme Bay in 1917.

I check in with Tony at Sportsworld/ Dive White late on a pleasant sunny afternoon. White Island, New Zealand's most active volcano, is smouldering away on the horizon, emitting the only clouds in an otherwise perfect blue sky.

Overnight the wind picks up slightly, but is nothing by local or UK standards. The boat planes all 30 miles to White Island and a few miles on to Laison's Reef in 90 minutes. Anchor hooked into the top of the reef at 14m, we descend and drop over the sheer side. Geologically, Laison's is an old volcanic plug, the cinder cone eroded to leave a pinnacle standing up from a 130m seabed.

We don't have to swim far. Just pick a good spot on the wall and see what happens. Huge shoals of pink maomao soon get curious and swarm in close, then part as sting rays cruise by.

It's one of those strange problems usually associated with sharks. No matter how deep I go, the sting rays are always a couple of metres deeper.

The converse is also true; ascending the pinnacle, they are still passing only a couple of metres beneath me.

I have some success once we get back into the kelp. Hiding among the foliage and holding my breath brings the occasional ray closer to my level.

If only for my rebreather! I could just about have fitted it into the baggage allowance, but arranging supplies for it could have been tricky. Quite honestly, I have so much diving and camera kit to travel with that I wouldn't really want the added hassle.

We are just beginning to ascend the anchorline when it pings loose. Dive guide Gazza follows the line, while I let go and pop my delayed SMB.

Decompressing at 3m, a cloud of pink maomao ascends to check me out. The sting rays may be fickle, but the maomao certainly aren't.

I have my best dive of the trip so far. Gazza nonchalantly points out that it was better yesterday.

For a second dive we head on to Volkner Rocks, more submerged volcanic remains about 5 miles from White Island and scheduled to become a marine reserve. The site here is Diadema Pinnacle, a shallower and smaller knife-edged reef named after the sea urchins we soon find grazing its sides. The sea urchins may be colourful, but I spend most of the dive mesmerised by the absolutely huge shoal of blue maomao that obscures just about everything.

I have been in New Zealand only a week and can already see why so many people emigrate there. At least half the dive guides and instructors I meet are immigrants or on extended working travel visas, and many are looking to make it permanent. In addition to us Brits, there are also a surprising number of Dutch.

Even on the flight I had been reminded of just what a popular place this is. A UK newspaper article commented that the New Zealand police had let it be known that it had easily signed up 200 officers from UK forces in a recruitment drive.



Enjoying the improbably clear waters at Papu Springs.



A seahorse clings to a lobster pot at Lynch's Reef, Kaikoura



Freshwater crawfish at Puppu Springs

Sunday is busier, with locals out in their own boats. One in four New Zealand households owns a boat.

We dive at Homestead and Spanish Arch, sites on the south shore of White Island - rocky reefs with a crest of kelp and lots of fish. As the name implies, Spanish Arch has an archway through the reef. It also has a resident seal which is keen to play with the snorkellers from another boat, but not so interested in divers.

Both are nice dives, but not in the same league as Saturday's pinnacles.

If Cousteau ever visited White Island, he must have flipped a coin to decide which to list in his top 10. If you go to New Zealand, you have to dive White Island.

I have managed to keep my day shifted about three hours forwards from New Zealand time. Monday morning and I am up bright and early to drive to Wellington. Ahead of the rush hour, if you could call it that.

The route takes me back past Rotorua, then follows the volcanic line along the interestingly named "Thermal Explorer Highway". Every other side road is signposted to "Volcanic this", "Hot Spring that", or "Geyser something else".

Side roads in-between advertise numerous opportunities for whitewater rafting and jetboat rides, though maybe not so exciting in the current drought. A maze of shiny pipes emitting steam is the feed to a geothermal power station.

Further south, the road becomes the "Desert Highway" and climbs to a scrub-covered plateau. It doesn't seem dry enough to be a genuine desert. Obviously volcanic mountains off to the west are crested with snow. I am sure I have seen this before in one of the trailers for The Lord of the Rings shown on the Air New Zealand flight. Road signs indicate that the road may be closed during winter; other signs point to ski resorts.

Arriving in Wellington, I drop my luggage at the ferry terminal before returning the car. With a couple of hours to spare, I stop at a web caf  and check my e-mail. Countless spam for porn, loans, mortgages, Viagra and plastic surgery with a similar objective. Somewhat surprisingly, there are no requests from the widow of a Nigerian oil minister to help her move millions of dollars out of the country.

Three hundred and fifty deletions later, I have a few left worth replying to. The good news is that, like everything in New Zealand, web caf s are cheap.

At the Picton ferry terminal I am met by Kevin from the Blenheim Dive Centre, and Jason, a local diver who has kindly offered to show me round.

The freshwater dives planned for tomorrow are reputed to be too cold for the 5mm steamer and hooded over-jacket I have been wearing, so off we go back to the shop and sort out a rental suit.

Next morning, Jason meets me at 6:30 for the drive to Riwaka. It's a couple of hours passing through some incredibly varied and picturesque terrain, ranging from mountain passes to vineyards and hop fields. This is the sunniest part of New Zealand, with Blenheim holding the sunshine record for the past few years.

The roads get smaller and rougher, until eventually we are on a dirt track leading to a grassy picnic area. A stream runs out of a wooded valley. From here on, it is a 300m walk to the resurgence.

Sliding in, I get that "ooh moment" as water floods through the front zip of the wetsuit. It is crystal clear, visibility limited only by the penetration of our torch beams and the walls of the cave. Despite the initial



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE: John Liddiard flew with Air New Zealand via Los Angeles, www.airnewzealand.com.

TRAVEL, DIVING & ACCOMMODATION: Contact Dive Worldwide, 01794 389372, www.diveworldwide.com. New Zealand arrangements were made by First Light Travel, www.firstlighttravel.com.

WHEN TO GO: Any time of year, though January through to March is low season for flights and good for late summer diving.

WATER TEMPERATURE: 22-10 C. A 5mm wetsuit with hooded jacket was fine on the North Island. A 7mm wetsuit or drysuit would have been a better choice on the South Island. Rental wetsuits are good quality.

NON-DIVING ACTIVITIES: Anything outdoors, particularly if adrenalin is involved. Maori culture.

DIVING SUITABLE FOR: Everyone from beginner upwards, though not necessarily on the same sites.

MONEY: New Zealand dollar, exchanged at around \$2.7 to  1. Everywhere takes credit cards.

COST: A two-week tour costs from  1850, inclusive of flights, car, accommodation and diving (depending on exact itinerary and season).

FURTHER INFORMATION: www.firstlighttravel.com

shock, I soon warm up to a tolerable level of cold as Jason lays the line into the cave.

It's only 10 minutes before we are climbing a pebbled slope to the next sump. The section with "no clear surface" could easily be free-dived, except that we stay down longer to enjoy the dive. Stalactites hang from the ceiling, though the best is yet to come.

The second sump is a similar length, this time with a permanent line. Again it could be free-dived, and again we take a comfortable 10 minutes to enjoy the dive. Jason points out an eel that is unaware of our torchlight.

The stream flows from beneath a massive pile of boulders banking up into a huge gallery. We shed our dive gear and spend a half-hour or so clambering up the boulder slope and examining various cave formations. Some of the cracks lead back into a dry cave system that could take a few hours to explore if we were not on a tight schedule, with more dives to fit in.

It's another hour's drive to Pupu Springs, a beautifully clear pond fed by underground springs and flowing out to a river. The water here is reckoned to be the clearest fresh water in the world. From the side I can see sand and pebbles bubbling as 910 million litres of water per day flow from beneath the ground. Kevin says this equals 40 bathtubs per second.

It's like diving in a brilliantly lit fishbowl. Various pond weeds adorn the rocks. Small freshwater crawfish potter about and are easily approachable.

Eels are more difficult to approach, while other fish can easily be seen, but only from across the pond.

Jason has warned me to watch out as I cross the bubbling sandy patches. Surges of water push me off course or towards the surface. At only a few metres deep this isn't a safety hazard, but I do have a cool-diver image to maintain!

To protect the spring from over-crowding, divers are limited to four in the water at a time and maximum dive time of 15 minutes. The diveable area is smaller than many swimming pools, so 15 minutes is not a problem and there is only one other group of divers.

For a final dive, we had planned to do a drift down a nearby river, reputed to be more of a thrill than a dive, but with the current drought it isn't really worth it.

I change lenses, reload film, and go for another 15 minutes in the spring.

As far as I know, Cousteau didn't dive either of these sites. If you go to New Zealand, you have to dive Riwaka Caves and Pupu Springs.

In the evening we rendezvous with Kevin from the Lermontov Lodge. From the main road it is a couple of hours bumping in the dark along a gravel track to the lodge in his 4x4. There are possums all over the road. Introduced from Australia by settlers, they are now out of control.

I am woken in the morning by a crop-duster flying along the hillside. The sunshine sparkles on a beautiful view across the bay at Port Gore, a misleading name for a sheltered inlet with no actual harbour and land access by farm track.

The wreck site of the *Mikhael Lermontov* is just out of sight round the corner - but not for long, as it is only a five-minute boat-ride away.

I have been itching to dive this 22,000 tonne Soviet cruise ship since it went down in 1986.

The wreck lies on its starboard side in 40m, the port side rising as shallow as 14m. Our first dive is forward to the bridge, where labels on many of the instrument panels are still visible, then below to the Bolshoi ballroom, which spans two decks.

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Bar stools and tables are still fixed to the deck and a rigid chandelier projects horizontally from the ceiling. Kevin is a self-confessed Lermontov nut, having dived the wreck hundreds of times. It would be hard to find a better guide.

Between dives, I browse through Kevin's extensive collection of press-cuttings, books and videos. He has even made a model of the wreck. When the *Mikhael Lermontov* struck the rocks at Cape Jackson there was quite a scandal over the errors the pilot made, then subsequent investigations were all a bit half-baked, causing further allegations of a cover-up.

It's a fair swim back to the swimming pool on our second dive. With the Lermontov cruising southern waters, the pool is enclosed in a glass arboretum that opens to the stern deck. From the swimming pool, we follow a windowed corridor forward to the cinema, rows of decaying seats all lined up. Outside is a video games arcade, complete with what's left of antique Space Invader machines.

Swimming back to the buoyline, I notice just how much white paint is still there beneath the growth of kelp, hydroids, bryozoans and sponges. If you need to paint a boat, see if you can acquire some old Soviet paint!

For a final dive, we explore the engine room, in through the ventilators, down between the engines, then out through a corridor to the side of the wreck. I am sure they have always been there, but it is only towards the end of this dive that I realise just how many fish there are swimming among all the sessile life clinging to the wreck.

As the sun sets across the bay, the crop-duster is still taking advantage of the good weather. From the lodge on the hillside he is actually flying below us.

We wave as he goes past and he puts on a few stunts. This is someone who has a job almost as good as mine.

Cousteau didn't dive here. If you go to New Zealand, you have to dive the *Mikhael Lermontov*.

Rather than rent another car from Picton, I travel south by train. The schedule is simple; it travels north in the morning and south in the afternoon.

I spend most of the journey to Kaikoura in the observation car, a carriage with a roof and walls but no seats or glass in the windows.

"Good as gold," says Ben from Dive Kaikoura when he meets me at the station. It's a phrase I am starting to get used to in New Zealand.

Kaikoura is the whale- and dolphin-watching capital. Signs everywhere proclaim offshore trips to watch whales, inshore trips to swim with dolphins and shore excursions to snorkel with seals.

We start with an early-morning boat ride to Barney's Rock. It's a bit like diving Porthkerris reef, with kelp on horizontal surfaces giving way to anemones and sponges on the vertical surfaces and beneath overhangs to a seabed at 15m on the seaward side.

The other divers set off on a circuit of the rock while I stay in the shallows in front of 20 or so New Zealand fur seals hauled out on a ledge. After 20 minutes watching them doze and achieving little, I decide to go for a swim and set off on my own circuit in the opposite direction.

Halfway round I meet the others, a seal having appointed herself a member of the dive group. Visibility disappoints on this side of the rock, so I continue the rest of the way back to my starting point and clearer water.

Still no luck with seals, until the others complete their slower circuit, bringing their seal with them. As they

climb back on the boat she transfers her attentions to me and puts on a good show of acrobatics.

It's a grey day. The month of zero rainfall has ended at last. The seals just don't need to get in the water and cool off as they would on a sunny day. On the journey back across the bay, we pass a small pod of dusky dolphins.

For a second dive we head for the north side of Kaikoura. As on most of my dives in New Zealand, the other divers are a mix of backpackers, shorter-term tourists, Kiwi tourists and locals out for the day.

Rounding the headland, a seal is thrashing on the surface, tearing a large octopus to pieces for lunch. Octopuses are a favourite food of the seals and one of the few inshore snacks they eat. For fish, they prefer to hunt further offshore.

On the inshore reefs the fish are quite bold and not at all timid, but octopuses are justifiably very cautious.

It is low tide, with lots of room for the seals to haul out and snooze at Lynch's Reef. In the drizzle, they just don't feel like playing. I zig-zag back and forth along the face of the reef, popping up occasionally to see if they are moving.

I can almost feel them snoring through my wetsuit. Then the seals are forgotten as I come across a lobster-pot - not because of the crawfish inside it but the seahorse anchored to the bars.

As a major stopping-off place for backpackers, Kaikoura is pretty lively in the evening, especially as it is the weekend again and the locals are out for a beer. Ben introduces me to a host of local divers and regular weekend visitors and the party is soon going strong. The pub has live music and I end up dancing with his bank manager.

On the way to my last dive, the dolphins are out in force. A massive shoal of 1000 or more has gathered in the bay. Boatloads of dolphin-watchers are heading for the bay as we make for the reef again. Taking a philosophical attitude to seals on a grey morning, I decide to concentrate on fish and sea tulips. If the seals want to play, so much the better.

A wrasse entertains me, attacking his reflection in my strobe, the dome of my camera housing, then in the chrome of my regulator. All highly amusing until he darts in and takes a bite out of my lip.

At the right time of year there is some cage-diving for sharks further offshore, but not while I'm here. In March, I get a vicious man-eating wrasse. I bet Cousteau was never savaged by a wrasse.

On the flight home I reflect on the highlights. If you go to New Zealand you have to dive Kaikoura and the Mikhael Lermontov, Pupu Springs, Rikawa, White Island, the Rainbow Warrior and the Poor Knights. And all the other places I couldn't fit into a hectic two-week trip.

I also reflect on the perversity of the International Date Line. On the way out I had missed Saturday. On the way home, I get two Monday mornings.