

Dive into the blue

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April 28, 2007 12:00am

Article from: 

AS THE boat motored towards the towering rock wall I could see a small hole at the water line.

As we got closer I could see the hole cut straight through to the other side of the peninsula.

"That's it," said Glenn, our skipper. "The famous Northern Arch."

Well, if I had come all the way to New Zealand to view Northern Arch from the surface I would have been bitterly disappointed. However, underwater was another matter, as Northern Arch is one of New Zealand's most famous dive sites.

Jumping in I was greeted by clear water and a sheer rock wall. When my wife, Helen, joined me, we followed this rock wall towards the arch.

Suddenly I could see it – a huge opening in the wall. That small hole above the surface had expanded into a wide cavern, forming one of the most spectacular underwater arches in the world.

We entered the arch and were quickly surrounded by schools of pink maomao, blue maomao, golden snapper, butterfly perch, demoiselle and trevally. This curtain of fish parted as we swam through the arch and then completely surrounded us. Also swimming around us were large snapper, kingfish, wrasse, leatherjackets, morwong and inquisitive red pigfish.

We then dropped down to 33m to get below most of the schooling fish and could now see the rocky bottom of Northern Arch 10m below us.

Our torches revealed the walls of the arch to be a kaleidoscope of colour. We could see yellow, red and orange sponges, green and blue bryozoans, pink and white jewel anemones and many other species.

Moving closer to the wall we could see numerous ledges and crevasses that were home to moray eels, scorpionfish and many other reef fish. As we slowly ascended the wall a stingray glided past us. I was hoping to see several dozen stingrays hovering in mid-water, as Northern Arch is famous for its summertime stingray aggregations. But Glenn had earlier informed us it was a poor stingray season due to the cooler than average water temperature.

Northern Arch is just one of the hundreds of caves, caverns, tunnels and archways that cut into a group of islands known as the Poor Knights. It was once described by Jacques Cousteau as one of the top 10 dive sites in the world but few Australians know of the spectacular diving and snorkelling found here.

Named by James Cook in 1769 after an English breakfast meal "Poor Knights Pudding", the Poor

Knights Islands are located 24km off the coastline, near the small town of Tutukaka, about 200km north of Auckland. Covering an area of some 200ha, the Poor Knights Islands consist of two main islands, Tawhiti Rahi and Aorangi, plus dozens of smaller islands.

The islands are washed by the East Auckland current, which originates in the warm waters of the Coral Sea. This current brings clear warm water to the islands – the water temperature varies from 24C to 14C – and many tropical species.

The mixture of tropical and temperate species, plus the profusion of fish life, led to the Poor Knights Islands being declared a marine reserve in 1981.

Most visitors to the Poor Knights Islands visit as a day trip, but to really explore these wonderful islands, I would recommend joining the live-aboard boat Mazurka. Owned and operated by Glenn and Tiana Edney, Mazurka is a 14m long steel motor sailing vessel that caters for a maximum of six guests.

Glenn has been diving the Poor Knights Islands for almost 20 years and is one of New Zealand's most famous underwater photographers.

There are some 60 recognised dive sites around the Poor Knights Islands and in three days we had the opportunity to sample some of the best. My favourite dive site was Blue Maomao Arch. This cavern is only 9m deep and is popular with snorkellers. Home to a large school of blue maomao and reef fish, the walls of this cavern are decorated with colourful invertebrate species. The play of light in this cave is just stunning, with beams of light streaming in from three large openings.

When not diving or eating the wonderful food cooked by Tiana and Glenn, we would just marvel at the islands towering above us, watching sea birds glide along the cliff face.

Heavily wooded, the Poor Knights Islands are a nature reserve and home to many plants, reptiles, insects and birds. To protect this fragile environment no one is allowed to land on the islands.

