



Here's how to learn the art of diving and where to go once you know.

It's a chilly evening in Auckland and outside the air is filled with engines, horn toots and steaming red break lights as the city empties out for the day. But the YMCA Tepid Baths in downtown are still bustling with swimmers and those working out along the mezzanine gym floor. In one corner of the pool area is a group of black frogmen, wrapped in skin-tight neoprene, learning how to assemble tanks and tubes. This is the latest group to take the plunge and attend a learners course in scuba diving which will give them accreditation around the world, in up to 18 metres of water, opening up all those amazing dive spots around the world and making postcard underwater pics come to life. The group includes two kiwis, and a trio of guys from Zurich, Switzerland, keen to take advantage of New Zealand's great diving reputation.

This particular course is run by Global Dive and begins with an initial night in the "classroom", an informal semi-circle of chairs in the upper floor of Global Dive's Westhaven headquarters. Classes conducted by instructor trainer Grant Narby dispel the fears of scuba diving from the very beginning.

"The fact is, scuba is as risky or not as risky as you make it," said Grant, adding that only two per cent of scuba divers have ever been injured while partaking in the sport, in line with outdoor bowls. However, there are many out there who skim through the stunning colour photos of diving accounts and are unwilling to take the first step – one which is really so easy.

Class time runs through the realities of diving underwater, the relationship between density, volume and depth, oxygen and nitrogen and dive tables, which illustrate how easy it is to dive within safe parameters. Suddenly, with knowledge as a backing, it doesn't seem so hard.

Back in the pool, students run through underwater language, gauge

reading, buoyancy exercises and fin technic. Education includes proper use of the equipment and breathing exercises and the confidence in the new divers is easily seen after only half an hour under the lapping pool waves.

Once the class and pool time is over, the total of which takes four days, the weekend boasts both open sea and lake dives to put instruction into practice. The initial trip out to Goat Island, just over one and a half-hours north of Auckland City, includes four sea dives with instructors on hand to help students adapt to their body specifics in the water and ensure class room lessons were taken on board. Although these are comparatively shallow dives, another dive at Auckland's Lake Pupuke takes students safely to the boundaries of their certification, 18 metres, to illustrate the changes in water colour and density at depth, to show the differences between salt and fresh water, and to acclimatise students to this depth.

Global Dive train new divers under the guidelines of Scuba Diving International, the recreational diving arm of Technical Diving International, created in 1999, and which handles technical diving courses. Although the first step is a basic comprehension of diving with an 18 metre deep restriction, there are many other courses that are offered, including advanced specialities like depth diving, rescue and wreck diving. Their approach is to streamline the course material to let students study the essential academics but with an ever present emphasis on in-the-water training. As part of the course, students must also be certified by a doctor with diving medicine experience and also receive a comprehensive diving training manual. The 88-page, full colour book is an easy to understand reminder on some of the procedures students experience in the classroom and in the pool.

Once you have gone through the process of getting your scuba accreditation, its time to go and test yourself on some of New Zealand

and the Pacific's beautiful amateur dive spots, including coral and wrecks, beach, open water and lake diving.

First Light Travel is Global Dive's travel counterpart and is an established in-bound tour operator and travel wholesaler. Originally the brainchild of Brent Narbey (brother of diving instructor Grant) and Nigel Williamson, the company recently won US-based *Outside* magazine's prestigious "Trip of the Year in Oceania 2004" for their eight-day Discover New Zealand Sailing / Diving the Upper North Island Package. The win secured First Light Travel's reputation for exciting alternative itineraries in the South Pacific and beyond. Combined with their training regime and travel experience, First Light offer a wide range of dive / travel packages, but mainly focus on off shore wholesalers.

New Zealand is a great place to start diving. It is relatively safe in terms of dangerous sea creatures and conditions, while there is also a wealth of lakes, rivers and coastal sites that are perfect for new divers.

One popular dive activity is wreck diving and as skills progress, divers will have greater access to dive spots. Some of the sites in New Zealand can make for exciting, if not slightly eerie experiences. One favourite is the former Greenpeace flagship, *The Rainbow Warrior*. Bombed in Auckland Harbour by French Secret Service agents on 10 July 1985, the wreck was relocated off the **Cavalli Islands** two years later after the decision that she could not be saved. Now acting as an artificial reef that has matured into an ever-growing host to marine life, the wreck is a splendour of colour. It remains one of the world's most beautiful and famous wrecks.

A favourite of famous underwater explorer and initial scuba inventor Jacques Cousteau, are the **Poor Knights Islands**. Undoubtedly the jewel in the crown of New Zealand diving, this subtropical reef system presents a stunning diversity of marine life. Broken by caves, archways and fissures, they provide many different nooks and crannies for sea life over a wide range of depths. Separated from mainland New Zealand, the Poor Knights Islands are influenced by a warm current that orientates from North Australia's Coral Sea, and the islands are known to have higher water temperature and visibility than in nearby coastal waters. The underwater maze of caves, tunnels and archways are home to an extraordinary variety of sea weeds and friendly, colourful fish, and the result is a truly unique diving experience.

Waikoropupu Springs, known locally as Pupu Springs, rated in the top ten freshwater diving destinations in the world, with a reputation for the clearest waters available. This underwater garden has a wealth of colours and marine life and scientists have measured its clarity, confirming a horizontal visibility of 62 metres, making them the

clearest in the Southern Hemisphere. Pupu Springs are one of the largest freshwater springs in the world and the water is filled with fish, like the Welcome Swallows, Brown Trout and salmon that escaped from nearby farms.

White Island is one of New Zealand's last active volcanos, a steaming smoking, and beautifully desolate island 48km off the coast of the Eastern Bay of Plenty. Underwater vents are a feature of this volcanic island and fish life is extremely abundant including Blue Mao Mao, Kingfish, Golden Snapper, Moray Eels, and Stingray. Being one of the world's top dive sites, it attracts hundreds of divers every year. The island offers some of the country's most spectacular diving with 20 metre plus visibility.

There are plenty of easily accessible dive spots in Australia and the Pacific too, many only a few hours away and all with tour operators that can organise everything from equipment to accommodation.

The **Great Barrier Reef** is one of the most diverse marine environments in the world. A living, growing ecosystem with the largest barrier reef in the world, the Great Barrier Reef is an environment with many varieties of marine life, including sharks, nesting sea birds and green sea turtles. Raine Island in the Far Northern Great Barrier has the greatest abundance of returning green sea turtles for nesting. This location is also a great siren for Tiger Sharks looking for an easy meal! The diving on the outer edge of the barrier into the Coral Sea offers breath taking sea visibility, and is a true diver's and mariner's delight.

Fiji has a vast array of scuba diving spots, many in shallow waters with an average water temperature of 27°C. **The Pinnacles** is a highly recommended site situated north of the Fijian island of Namotu. The dive spot is made up of three deep-water pinnacles with swim-throughs, lots of large roaming fish, like Grey Reef Sharks and Barracuda. It is easily accessible from Fiji's main island of Viti Levu and is surrounded by other great dive spots including Wilke's Passage and the Coral Gardens.

The Indonesian island of Bali offers some great scuba diving and snorkelling, though some of the spots have strong currents running through and you should check which sites are best for your skill level. **Manta Point**, off the coast of South Nusa Penida, is so named for its abundance of Manta Rays. With visibility varying up to 20 metre and depths of three to 24 metres, this is a great beginner spot. Travel time from the mainland is about one hour by speedboat, making it a good day or half day dive spot. During April, May and June, manta rays crowd the reef to mate and give birth and can make for some exhilarating close up experiences.

– Nick Walton



Diving – Great Barrier Reef