



poor knights kelp



meditation wall at poor knights



gem nudibranch  
at poor knights

# Forest Life Is Star Kiwi Attraction

words & pictures  
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**As SCOTTISH DIVER completes a three part series on diving in Canada elsewhere in this edition we launch a new series on diving in New Zealand. In the year of the Commonwealth Games it seemed appropriate to highlight these countries and their amazing underwater life ...**

THERE'S NO getting away from it, New Zealand is a fair way to go for a dive. The flight to Los Angeles is 10 hours and Auckland is a further 12, add all the time spent in airports and it is a long haul. Allowing the Americans to fingerprint and photograph us meant we got the American baggage allowance of 64kgs. It may be an infringement of our civil liberties, but who cares if we can take our drysuits and some warm clothes – not to mention all the camera equipment, laptops and other paraphernalia with which photographers travel.

We were a group of eight, experienced, temperate water divers; Vicki the organiser, Gill and Jane all from Bucks, Paul Kay, professional underwater photographer, and his wife Lucy from Wales, Liz from Dublin, Geoff from Surrey and me from Nairn (although, for my sins, I live in London) – and we had three weeks in which to fit in all the wonders of New Zealand's key dive sites. Every diver has heard of the Poor Knights and they are rightly placed amongst the world's best. However, what we really wanted in our logbooks

was Awash Rock, Preservation Inlet. But, I'm getting ahead of myself ... let me start at the beginning.

We were diving under the auspices of the Marine Conservation Society so were particularly interested to dive some of NZ's 28 marine reserves and to learn how New Zealanders protect their environment. Yes, 28 - NZ is noted for its progressive thinking and action when it comes to conservation both underwater and on land. Cut off from the rest of the world it is home to numerous unique species – many that have suffered from over-exploitation as well as from introduced aliens.

In 1975 NZ was one of the first countries in the world to start designating areas as marine reserves. In each reserve, the marine life is protected, fishing is banned and it is forbidden to remove or disturb anything, living or non-living. The reserves are widely spread across the country, and the Department of Conservation (DoC) aims eventually to establish a network of Marine Reserves to protect the full range of marine habitats and ecosystems. Certainly we were im-

pressed by the profusion and variety of species we saw.

However, we started our diving not in a marine reserve but on the *Rainbow Warrior*. July 10 1985 was the day the French Secret Service sank Greenpeace's flagship in Auckland Harbour – it's one of those dates that is forever etched on your memory. Two years later, she was towed north to the Cavalli Islands and sunk again to become an artificial reef. She now sits proudly on the seabed at 27m with her deck at about 15m. Covered with the growth of 18 years, the *Warrior* makes a fascinating, if poignant, dive. An interesting phenomenon in NZ is that many things are familiar, but somehow not quite.

So the jewel anemones that blanket the boat are very recognisable to us and yet are subtly different. They seem larger and more robust than the British versions ... somewhat less delicate. This being our first dive, I presumed we would see many more jewel anemones, and we did, but never in the same profusion as on the *Warrior* - they were glorious.

It being a wreck, I'd gone in with a

wide-angle lens on my camera but the visibility was rather disappointing so my attempts to capture boat-like images ended in failure. But the fish were friendly. In fact, throughout NZ the fish are almost too friendly. (Are they being friendly? Or are they defending their territory and trying to see you off? An on-going debate! I think we experienced a bit of both).

The Northland locals laughed at us in our drysuits. With the water temperature at 20-22°C, they felt we were a little overdressed. Only when we said we were going to Fiordland did they stop. "We've always meant to go," they said, "but it's cold down there!" Few of the dive operators were used to drysuit divers. They never had enough lead,

The islands lie 24 kilometres off the northeast coast and, with two liveaboards at our disposal, the intention was to spend most of our four days out there. Unfortunately, the rough conditions meant we had to return to the mainland on all but one night.

We still managed some incredible dives and got a real flavour of what was on offer. The islands have a spectacular mixture of sheer walls, massive caves, tunnels and archways. Some of the walls were exquisite. 'Meditation Wall' is a favourite, so called because when photographers find it they remain motionless for hours as if meditating. Or 'Magic Wall', just smothered in sponges, tunicates, anemones, hydroids and corals - a seemingly endless variety of encrust-

south to the Pinnacles and dive Cathedral Cave. The cave cuts deep into the island and the walls on either side plunge to the depths. In spite of rather milky visibility, the views were just stunning. Every inch of rock, every crevice, every crack was vibrant with life.

Hanging at 20m, we drifted along the west wall, into the darkest recesses before gliding out on the east wall and rounding the corner to finish in a kelp forest surrounded by fish. Wow! Amazing stuff, but that was the Poor Knights, and next morning we were off to our next destination.

Lying to the southeast of Auckland, off the Coromandel Peninsula, the Aldermen Islands look very different. The remnants of a volcanic rim, the islands are all rather



red pigfish on the Rainbow Warrior



mottled triplefin at the Alderman Islands



jewel anemones on the Rainbow Warrior

even though we'd warned them we'd need lots, especially with aluminium cylinders being the norm.

We stayed in a house by the beach at Matauri Bay. A quick hike up the neighbouring hill at dawn to the Greenpeace memorial brought home just what an idyllic spot they'd chosen as the *Warrior's* last resting place.

Next stop was the Poor Knights, NZ's most famous dive site and rated by many in the world's top 10 - I have to admit it is pretty special, and yet I don't think we really saw it at its best as the weather was a bit dodgy. Although Northland is described as 'sub-tropical', it is still subject to a temperate climate and the weather can be as unpredictable as our own.

ing life in the most fabulous colours.

Nudibranchs, triplefins - they were all there. Never more than a few inches apart, literally thousands of male two-spot demoiselles guarded eggs. All the time, huge shoals of fish circled us. Even the kelp was special. In the sunlight, it glowed and shimmered, moving through it was like opening a window into a different, more magical world.

The swim round Ngoio Rock was one to remember, the vistas so awesome that I forgot all about my camera. There are times when you just want to enjoy the view (particularly when you've got the wrong lens). But it was on the very last dive that we really understood why the Poor Knights have their reputation.

The weather eased enough for us to go

spiky (the Poor Knights are more rounded) and very dramatic. Getting out to them was equally exciting. The town of Tairua is next to a surf beach. However, our skipper had done this all before and our little steel dive boat was built to cut straight through the waves.

He had us through the surf in a jiffy. Conditions were a bit sloppy when we arrived at the Aldermen but we managed to get in a couple of very fine dives. Less spectacular underwater than the Poor Knights, we still really enjoyed our visit and would have liked to spend longer there (a recurring theme throughout the trip). But South Island beckoned and we had planes to catch the following evening ...

**TO BE CONTINUED**

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