



THE ROCK



: JOHN McLENNAN & BARRY ANDREWARTHA

> A TINY ISLAND IN THE SOUTHWEST PACIFIC IS ONE OF THE BEST KEPT SECRETS IN THE DIVING WORLD. EVERYONE KNOWS WHERE FIJI, VANUATU AND TONGA ARE, BUT FEW ARE FAMILIAR WITH NIUE. FORGET THE GOLDEN BEACHES SCENARIO, NIUE IS A LIMESTONE PINNACLE RISING OUT OF THE BLUE PACIFIC JUST THREE HOURS NORTHEAST OF NEW ZEALAND. THIS UNIQUE ISLAND OFFERS SOME OF THE CLEAREST WATER IN THE WORLD AS WELL AS SOME UNIQUE DIVE SITES.

In early October, *Sportdiving/Dive Log* Editor Barry Andrewartha and I flew to Auckland on the first leg of a dive trip to Niue.

After a three hour flight from Auckland, we spent our first afternoon driving around the island. The settlements are all on the coast, and the interior is mostly forested. Next morning we walked next door to our resort accommodation and met with Ian and Annie Gray, two Aussies who own Niue Dive (www.dive.nu). Ian has worked with Mike Ball and at Heron Island, and Annie worked at Lady Elliot Island. Ian and Annie have been on Niue for 10 years, and we dived with them each day, other than Sunday which is a day of rest all over the island.

Niue has the world's clearest water, with visibility greater than anything either of us had ever seen. There are no rivers on Niue, and so no run-off into the ocean. Dive sites are all less than 20 minutes from the different put-in spots from where

we dived. On most dives we encountered banded sea kraits, sea snakes which grew to about 1.5 metres in length. In one special cave area, the snakes were congregated into groups of up to 10, and swam to the surface every 20 minutes for air – we were entranced by this curtain of banded snakes.

We swam into a large cavern, then swam up and broke out of the water and into a very large cave. With torches we could see many of the sea snakes on ledges around the cave; it was here that the snakes laid their eggs away from any predators. Recently a BBC Wildlife film crew were here to film the breeding kraits for a documentary to be called 'Life'.

We saw a few humpback whales, but the majority had already left to go south. September is the best month for those divers seeking whale encounters, but interaction with spinner dolphins is a regular event with Niue Divers, who will stop for the interaction with both these mammals.



In the afternoons after diving we visited the many chasms and caves around the island, and spent an interesting two hours on a nature walk in the Havulu Forest with a local guide. The limestone forest floor has dropped in many places, and the cave systems are perfect hiding places for large numbers of coconut crabs.

Our favourite dive sites were:
Limu Twin Caves: A great photo opportunity - A chimney drops down into a huge cave area with two outlets to the

OF POLYNESIA

- 1 Central coast diver John McLennan checks out the local sea snakes.
- 2 Local canoes are used for fishing & stored above high water mark.
- 3 The Limu twin cave system is a spectacular dive site.
- 4 Blue pools along the coast offer safe snorkel diving sites.
- 5 Anemones & clown fish were common along Tamakautoga Reef.



1 Rugged limestone pinnacles along the coast.
 2 A local lady weaves a basket - Niue is famous for their fine weaving baskets.
 3 The Havulu Forest is a National Park of limestone caves.
 4 John McLennan swims across the entrance of the Limu Twin Cave System - the blue, crystal clear water is a magnificent sight.
 5 Divers from all over the world find their way to Niue, here divers from Sweden, Italy, USA & Australia enjoy the spectacular visibility of Niue.

6 A roadside sign caught our attention!
 7 An oasis of palms & white sand among the limestone pinnacles is a beautiful & unique sight.
 8 This popular spot was the swimming hole for royalty. Warm tropical water, shady spots make it a perfect snorkelling, picnic spot.
 9 A local village elder prepares coconut drinks for visitors.
 10 A typical reef scene at Tamakautoga Reef... unlimited visibility & colourful reef fish.

ocean dropoff. There are all sorts of smaller caves and ledges within the Limu system. Lots of fish and crayfish hide within these areas. For photographers equipped with a wide angle lens, the photo-ops are endless. In fact, the more divers in the cave with you the more spectacular the images! We were using a Nikon D200 with a 10-24mm f/3.5-4 lens and the images we got were spectacular. Remember if you're taking photos try to be the first down the chimney; the sight of fellow divers descending down to the Limu Twin Caves can bring some spectacular images.

Tamakautoga Reef: This dive site has amazing visibility. Seeing divers up to 100 metres into the distance is difficult to imagine, or for that matter to even explain! Its almost surreal, it's like the water isn't even there. The amazing healthy coral reef continues down past 40 metres and it is so easy to go deep you have to keep a close eye on your depth gauge and dive computer. Schools of barracuda and trevally are common along this area with all the usual coral reef fishes. Because there is no river runoffs on Niue, all the rain falls onto the



6



limestone island and is filtered until it is as clear as spring water before entering the oceans surrounding the island. The down side of all this amazing clear water is there are little or no nutrients entering the coastal regions and there's a shortage of critters such as nudibranchs,

IN ONE SPECIAL CAVE AREA THE SNAKES HAD CONGREGATED INTO GROUPS OF UP TO 10, AND SWAM TO THE SURFACE EVERY 20 MINUTES FOR AIR

crustaceans and small coral reef fishes such as you'd see in PNG or the Solomon Islands. But there is one particular critter there big numbers.

The next favourite dive site was...

Snake Gully: This is Niue's classic dive site! The unique Niue sea snakes, the banded krait, are alive and well at this popular spot. If you have a phobia about snakes, this could be the place to cure you forever. This dive site has it all, swimthroughs and caves packed with

hundreds of sea snakes. There's a saying, "Did you see the veil" of sea snakes - dozens of snakes swimming up to the surface for air then returning to the reef below. As you look all around you, all you can see is sea

snakes mid water, hanging like curtains all around. The snakes swim into underwater cave systems with air pockets to breed and a guided visit with torches is an unforgettable dive experience. Snake Gully has to be our second best dive after Limu Twin Caves.

Humpback Whale Paradise: Whale season runs from late June till late September with the best months being July and August. Unlike the popular whale encounter locations such as



9



10

HUMPBACK WHALES AT NIUE: Humpbacks are believed to have been visiting Niue since time immemorial. Their annual calls were recorded by the first missionaries in the 1840s. Colonial administrators from 1900 noted the humpbacks presence. Early whalers scouring the seas for the majestic cretaceous mammals often called in to Niue for water and food. Some were shipwrecked on Niue, previously known as Savage Island. There are no records of processing whale blubber on the island; that seems to have occurred in Tonga and New Zealand where traditionally the humpback was hunted and killed during its annual migration north from Antarctica to tropical waters.

Niueans have a chant welcoming the arrival of the humpbacks, usually around June/July. It calls on the mother to throw her baby out of the water so all can see it. Many elderly Niueans still recite the chant, recalling it from yesteryear when families fishing on the narrow fringing reef or looking out to sea from the 30



metre high cliffs would witness a humpback with calf gliding near the reef edge and in unison begin the chant... **Ulu tapekelei!**

Lisihake e tamahetekula ke kitia no e! There are no records of Niueans hunting whales or eating whale meat. This would be due to the lack of suitable chase vessels, difficulty of harpooning a whale in open waters in a small canoe and hauling the large mammal up onto the reef. The humpbacks, which grow to 25 metres and weigh up to 70 tonnes, feed on krill and herring in Antarctica before heading north to tropical waters off Tonga, Samoa and Niue. A whale's mouth spans four metres and food is filtered by baleen growing from the bony pink of the mouth. In recent years their arrival in Niue is later than the traditional April/May. This is probably due to rising water temperatures created by the climate change around the planet. Humpback females give birth at Niue and are often seen with their calves in Alofi Bay.

Tonga and Vavau, Niue is not crowded... Dive Niue have the only dive and whale watching boats, so you'll never be affected by other craft encroaching on your encounters. It is laid back leisure whale watching at its best. The inhabitants of Niue have never hunted the whales that come to their crystal clear, unspoilt waters and the peaceful encounters are an absolute joy.



THE ISLAND

Niue is just 270 square kilometres in size and has a population of 1400 people. Situated 2400 kilometres northeast of New Zealand, it lies in a triangle between Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands. Niue is a limestone island surrounded by a coral reef with steep cliffs along the coast. Many caves undercut the cliffs with lots of interesting dive sites. Captain Cook sighted the island in 1774, however after three failed attempts to land when permission was refused he named it Savage Island. The Polynesian inhabitants painted their faces with the native red banana, which Cook thought was blood.



ACCOMMODATION IN NIUE:

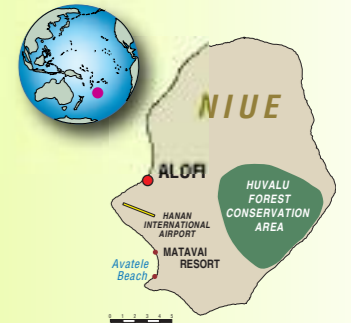
There are various styles of accommodation on Niue, ranging from guest houses, fale accommodation overlooking the sea to motel style accommodation. We choose to stay at Matavai Resort as Barry had stayed there before and John wanted Kevin 07's room he'd had during the recent South Pacific Forum. Low key, 4-star, swimming pools and stunning views over the ocean, particularly during the whale watching season. We fully paid our own accommodation.

As Niue is a New Zealand protectorate, currency is NZ\$ and all power points etc are NZ/Aust. style. While there are normal stores, it is recommended to take an ample supply of batteries and NZ\$ cash. There are no ATM's and banks are only opened during normal business hours.

The magnificent Matavai Resort, a delightful location to relax between dives & observe humpback whales in the evenings.

DIVE INFORMATION

All diving on Niue is done from Dive Niue's inflatable dive boats. Launched from two or three locations, most dive sites are five to 15 minutes from the launch sites. Dive operators Ian and Annie Gray offer full hire and servicing of gear and work as a great team. There are over a dozen dive sites regularly dived. Our week went quickly, with diving in the mornings and exploration in the afternoons. We flew with Air New Zealand who give divers an extra 10 kilogram allowance, and we booked with Dive Adventures.



LINK> www.niueisland.com