

Born to be Wild (Part 2)

JUST OVER A MONTH EARLIER, JOHN 'NORBERT' CURRIE AND I MADE OUR FIRST FORAY INTO THE SOURCE OF THE MIGHTY SARAKATA RIVER ON THE ISLAND OF ESPIRITU SANTO, VANUATU. SINCE THEN I'D BEEN SCHEMING AND DREAMING HOW TO GET MYSELF BACK INTO THE CAVE. WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY AROSE TO GET BACK UP TO SANTO FROM MY BASE IN PORT WILA, I JUMPED AT THE CHANCE...



May 2005. Norbert was long gone, back in 'civilization' in Australia, his holiday well and truly over, so I called on the services of my good mate Barry Holland in Santo to support me with the next dive. He's a TDI trimix instructor whose dive shop Aquamarine, primarily caters to those who choose to dive the remarkable wreck of the SS Coolidge. He's logged many thousands of dives on this historic liner at depths to 70 metres and he and I have spent a lot of time laying line in, and exploring this giant rusty 'cave'.

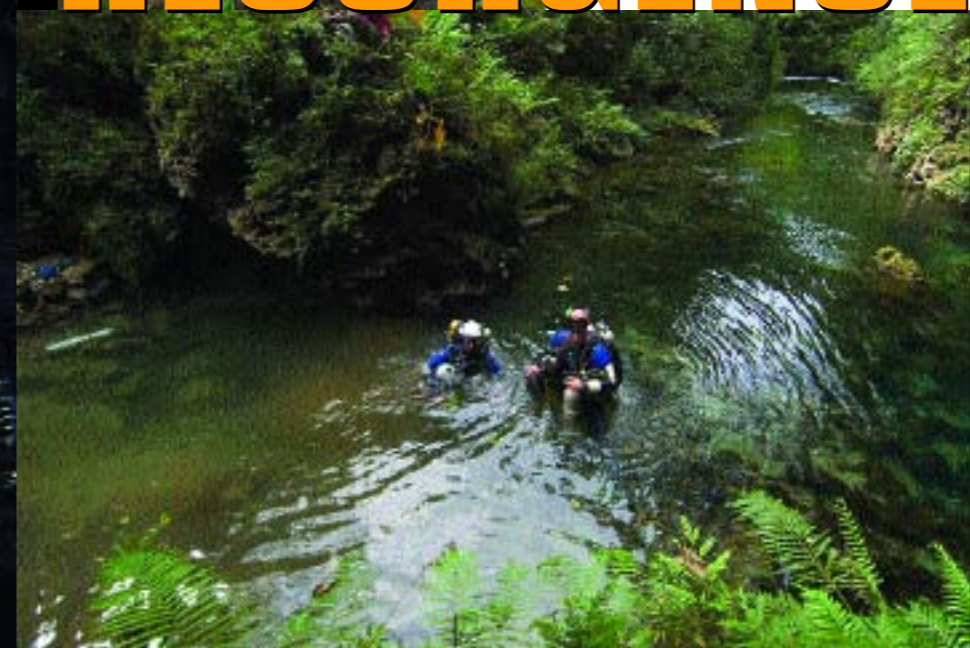
Roma and his trusty NiVanuatu friends came out in force to carry in the increasing volumes of dive gear for the second push and to again cut the track

through the jungle which had grown back in the six short weeks since our last visit. On this occasion in order to increase the distance of my penetration into the cave, I'd chosen to dive my KISS closed circuit rebreather using air diluent and with two 12 litre air tanks as open circuit bailout. Barry would dive with four 12 litre cylinders of nitrox 36% giving him a maximum PO2 of 1.41 in the deepest section of the cave. A cylinder of nitrox 60% would be staged at the cave entrance for decompression. The plan was for Barry and I to reach the large lake chamber (at approximately 580 metres) and then for me to push on as far as possible thereafter. This would leave considerable gas reserves in the lake chamber for us both on the return trip should a problem with the CCR occur. A survey of the cave would be performed on the way out.

The day of the dive dawned bright and sunny and the rain had fortunately held off for nearly a week, so expectations were high! On this day I was armed with a thicker wetsuit, gloves and hood as the memory of the chilly 80-minute decompression after the last dive remained fresh in my mind. Arriving at the resurgence we were greeted by almost crystal clear water welling up from the cliff base, but the water level looked significantly higher than last time. After kitting up and catching our breath in the pool... disaster! I looked down in horror to see my rebreather mouthpiece open in the water. How had I done that?! The rebreather was flooded and useless, the sorb transformed to soup. After all the effort of flying up to Santo, the cost of the porters and the thought of that bloody hill, I could have cried. But all was not lost. Barry valiantly offered me his open circuit gear so I could continue my exploration of the cave, so half an hour later I was kitted up, cheered up, and ready to go.

I sank down through the entrance pool into the opening of the cave. My line from the previous dive lay twisted like a spiderweb around the logs at the entrance... no easy starts today. I battled my way up the left side wall to the 'Garage' laying new line, getting a much better appreciation for the shape of the entrance this time. Then came my first attempt to move out into the main

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■ ■ RICHARD HARRIS



stream-way, and things started to come unstuck. My right stage tank kept undoing itself at my hip D ring due to a faulty clip. The force of the water made it impossible to move forward – far harder than the last dive, even allowing for the increased number of tanks this time. Just then my main light failed and my other back gas reg started to vigorously free flow! My head was beginning to pound from rising CO2 with the exertion. Enough! I could feel my stress levels rising. I beat a hasty retreat and spent a little time relaxing in the base of the pool to settle myself down. Cave one, Harry zero!!

I had plenty of time to reconsider my next assault, as I wouldn't return to the cave for another seven weeks. Using CCR was clearly not going to be easy in the first stage of the cave given the work involved to pass the early restriction, so we needed to come up with 'plan B'. I had my doubts that scooters would be able to battle through the current. After many round table discussions we decided we must visit the cave a couple of days before the expedition with a pony bottle and check the flow. I did that in early July and decided that the flow was fine, the viz was good and all was go. On the day of the expedition the porters failed to appear, the dive was cancelled! Will I ever get to the back of this system?

August 2005. This is it. Five days set aside to tackle the cave towards the latter part of the dry season. Barry Holland, Sean Pittaway, Kevin Green and I planned another assault and only earthquake or flooding would stop us! After the usual slog down to the site we were met with low water levels and good viz, perfect conditions. Barry donned a single tank and swam down into the restriction at 26 metres armed with two lengths of heavy nylon rope to tie off inside. Meanwhile Sean and I donned our gear and readied ourselves for his return. Barry reappeared and gave us the thumbs up; all go! So we started the dive, me on CCR and Sean with five open circuit tanks of nitrox, plus a deco mix staged at the entrance. We flew into the light current and good viz along my old line to the T junction where Norbert and I had turned earlier in the year. Turning left along Kevin Green's orange line, we pushed into new territory for both of us. For the most part the passage was large, maybe 8 metres across and 2-5 metres in height with a maximum depth of 30 metres. In sections the roof flattened down to 1.5 metres, in other areas the ceiling vanished into massive fissures beyond vision, possibly terminating in cave lakes. Around 250 metres from the entrance, we entered an area of magnificent honeycombed limestone with numerous alternate routes open to us. An exquisite square window on the right wall begged to be investigated, but we had no time to stop and smell the roses! We pushed on along the line into the light but tiring flow. On several more occasions the tunnel forked offering an opportunity for original exploration but we stuck to the plan and pushed along the old line. In many sections the line was broken, hanging in the breeze waiting to trap the unwary. This slowed progress significantly as we stopped to tidy the line and made necessary repairs. At 63 minutes into the dive and 450 metres into the tunnel, I spotted a small shimmering lake above us. We cautiously rose into a small air bell about 5 metres in diameter. High fives and a chance to catch our breath in what we assumed was the 'small' chamber described by the previous group. We pushed on into the current, laying new line at this point as the old one was missing. Fifty metres on we rose again into a pretty

“ HAND OVER HAND, I MANAGED TO GET ANOTHER 10 METRES ALONG THE WALL BUT AT ANY STAGE I RISKED LOSING MY GRIP ON THE SHALLOW HANDHOLDS AND CRASHING BACK DOWN THE PASSAGE

chamber, roughly L shaped and around 80 metres long. One end seemed to be a blind passage; the other was shallow with high flow that made walking difficult in all our gear. We sat in the lee of a boulder in waist-deep water to take stock, eat some much-needed chocolate and consider our situation. At this point we believed we were in the 'big' chamber. Beyond here lay at least 500 metres of submerged cave passage. Sean had just started the last of his 'thirds', so probably had about 20 minutes of gas depending on depth before we needed to turn. We decided to stage one of my bailout cylinders at this point and turn for home, rightly figuring that the trip back would be very fast with the current and without the need to lay line. Even with some surveying and photography on the homeward push, the going was nice and easy. Arriving back at the T-junction I decided to briefly explore the other leg, so Sean turned for home and followed the line out. I moved downcurrent and continued on. The old line soon stopped, so I laid new line as I went. Several forks appeared in the steadily narrowing passage, which gradually curved to the right. I ended up at a low flattener better suited to side mount diving and decided to call it quits. I suddenly saw Sean's light on the other side of the restriction!! My immediate concern was that Sean had become lost, had turned and followed me in and had taken another fork to end up on the other side of this narrow flattener. He seemed equally surprised to see me! Whilst thinking how best to manage this potentially dangerous situation, I caught a brief glimpse of a blue rope next to Sean's shoulder... the nylon rope Barry had laid in the entrance! I'd come full circle and was re-entering the entrance tunnel! I decided to test the restriction rather than retrace my route, worrying that if I turned tail Sean might worry about me and follow. Sean saw me



start to winkle through and moved in to push the back of my CCR down to get me through. Once through, I moved away from him into the main passage to give him some space to turn around. He stayed in there, seemingly reluctant to move but later said he had something caught on the limestone and couldn't move!

Once out of the water we exchanged very different versions of the same story. Sean had followed the line home as planned but had ended up on a broken piece of line that led straight into a line trap. He retraced his route, found the correct line and was happily on his way out when my light unexpectedly appeared on his left, suggesting I was apparently 'trapped' on the wrong side of a restriction. Oh for reliable underwater communications!

Day 2. Sean had a rest day pottering around on the *Coolidge* whilst Barry and I pushed the cave. Same basic plan as the day before except Barry armed with 6 bottles of gas including the one staged in the cave. Also, no new line to lay in the first long section so we should make good progress. Instead of 63 minutes to the dry chamber, we made it in 46, well ahead of schedule and plenty of gas to spare. More chocolate plus a brief rest and we prepared for what we thought would be the next big push. I tied off my line and we submerged into the pool at the end of the cave. Ten metres on we emerged straight into another chamber – the true 'big' chamber! Laughing aloud after being mentally prepared for a long dive, the 15-second dive we'd just done seemed fairly amusing. The big chamber was stunning. Calcite straws glittered like jewels on the ceiling; larger shawls and draperies hung in other spots. The chamber ran in a serpentine fashion for 200 metres 5-10 metres wide and the same in height for most of its length. Just 60 metres on a vast domed chamber arose on the left hand side, the glistening decorations on the ceiling reminding me of the Planetarium. Swimming on the lake surface was exhausting in the strong flow. Towards the end of the chamber, large fallen boulders obstructed the passage, with rapids flowing around them. By the time we'd battled to the end we were exhausted and had to rest for 15 minutes to catch our breath.



We prepared again for the long push and started to swim. The character of the cave changed constantly with many different styles of limestone. Smaller tunnels were the rule, plenty of forks and junctions but the main tunnel continued in a south-westerly direction. Finally at around 300 metres past the chamber, Barry signaled he'd reached his gas turn-around and we headed out. An uneventful and swift trip





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out brought us back to the surface at around four hours total time. The KISS scrubber had performed perfectly for over three hours and we were only moderately chilled in the 21°C water.

Day 3. A rest day for my aching bones to recover, fill tanks and plan our third and final dive in the cave. Do we try for the known end of the cave at 1700 metres and beyond... a big challenge without scooters, or to explore some virgin passage to the sides. I hadn't surveyed the passage beyond the big chamber (too tired!). Kevin Green was to be my dive buddy, one of only three who'd previously been beyond the large dry chamber. We decided to go for the end of the tunnel, pushing out the gas rules in the knowledge that the way home was taking around half the time of the way in. Armed with my CCR and

nine 12 litre cylinders between us, we started our long swim into the current. Smooth sailing until the first dry chamber. As I surfaced and pulled the DSV out of my mouth, the open circuit regulator came away in my hand! A very small amount of water entered the loop as I swam over to a rock clutching a handful of screws and parts! Twenty minutes later we were back underway thanks to a couple of cable ties and a knife tip as a screwdriver! Thanks Gordon Smith for making the KISS such a simple and functional device. The swim through the two dry chambers was hard work with all the extra cylinders but we celebrated it with a sit down and a chocolate bar, taking a moment to admire the high ceilings covered in spectacular speleothems.

After the passage Barry and I'd swum two days earlier I was in new territory again. Still Kev's old line stretched tantalisingly in front. The cave continued to branch and narrow, taking us through high oblique fissures (I performed a weird sideways Spiderman impersonation) and then finally a series of high silt mounds and three flat restrictions which took a lot of skin off the back of the rebreather and necessitated the removal of sling tanks to pass. Finally I reached a restriction that I simply could not pass with this gear configuration – the old line sat just in front of my nose wrapped around a rock in a final tie off. The end of the known cave! We had made it with gas to spare and without the use of scooters. 3 years of dreaming had come to an end and I felt a huge sense of relief.

But no time to relax yet, with 1.7km of cave behind me yet to negotiate including 3 tight restrictions in viz that was going to be at best questionable. Ummm...zero would be a better term as it turned out and suffice to say the next 30mins required significant mental effort on my part to stay cool whilst I felt my way out of the cave. Kevin Green never looked so lovely when I finally saw his (worried) face again! After the restrictions we zoomed out with flow, immensely enjoying the view on the way. We noted the location of a major side passage to the left, 60-80 metres from the end of the cave. Methinks the Sarakata has more to offer yet! I might manage a couple of days in October...

That night I managed about 3 beers at the dive shop before collapsing into bed, tired but happy. Success for me in a quest like this only happened because of a big team effort; Our generous sponsors Aquamarine Dive, my buddies John Currie, Barry Holland Sean Pittaway and Kev Green, the cave divers (Craig Challen, Steve Sturgeon and Kevin Green) who previously have reached the end of the cave and laid all that line, Brian Farrell and Andy Larsen for their midnight vigils in the compressor shed, and finally the kastom owners of the beautiful Sarakata River. Thank you one and all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard 'Harry' Harris is an Australian anaesthetist and physician in diving medicine currently living and working in Vanuatu. A keen cave, rebreather and technical diver, he used a Nikon D100 in a Subal housing to create the images in this article. More of his photos can be seen at www.divedoc.net