

Poor Knights Top Dive Sites

Based on forty years of observation and a decade of video documentation, Wade Doak has written detailed habitat descriptions of ten major diving locations viewed through time and space. Complementary to his fish and invertebrate books these writings take you down there, dive after dive, with vivid descriptions of terrain, behaviours and seasonal change.

Part one Northern Arch

Thrusting towards Mimiwhangata peninsula on the adjacent coast a jagged promontory extends from the tip of Tawhitirahi. Exposed to cyclonic storms on its sunny side, it protects a deep bay to the south from all but the short, sharp fetch of offshore winds.

As tidal currents pass the Poor Knights they encounter this wall of rock and squirt through a narrow keyhole. Above water a low archway rises, just big enough for a small runabout to penetrate. But below an awesome canyon plummets dramatically to 125 feet, with greater depths adjacent to each portal. Like an alleyway between sky scrapers, its opulent walls are densely encrusted with plankton - grabbing creatures, and dissected with ledges, outcrops and grottoes. Current flow between these walls is utterly unpredictable. It follows no normal tidal pattern. It can die away for hours or reverse suddenly within fifteen minutes. At odd times strange turbidity currents have been known to surge up from the depths and cloud its blueness. But food-bearing currents are lifeblood for the archway community.

In summer if there is a flow, masses of stingrays ride the undersea wind like eagles, maintaining a static assembly here for a very special reason. In winter, when plankton swarms diminish, flotillas of off-duty fish park themselves between its walls, finding sanctuary from predators. At such times they may block the light, a seething logjam of fish bodies.

Whatever time of year we dive in the Northern Arch, it feels like entering a major forum of ocean life - a Wall street of energy transactions.

In July 1990, on a perfect mid- winter's day, Jan and I fin across to the promontory from our dive boat, followed by professional cameraman Ian Briggs. Along a sunlit wall curtained with golden seaweeds we head east towards the arch. From experience we know it is wiser to approach obliquely to assess current direction before being swept through. For control it is more practical to head upcurrent than to be at its mercy. Near the threshold we round a corner where *Lessonia* kelp yields to orange encrusting sponge that is pocked with tiny craters like a moonscape. Our breath is cut short. A sapphire blue canyon extends below, seemingly to infinity.

It's a parking mode day; a plankton-free period. As we approach dense clouds of demoiselles peel off the walls. Against our masks the current is moderate. Jan descends the steep eastern wall and we follow. A grey moray flees up the slope like a rippling snake. In the sunlit portal at mid-depth, just below kelp level we glide past a stratum of mauve sea fans, organ pipe sponges, hydroid trees like gnarled bonsai in Chinese brush paintings. I notice some gorgonian fans have been prettily parasitised by the larger, lemon yellow polyps of zooanthids.

A dark void looms ahead, dense with pale weaving ellipses. As our eyes adapt to the twilight we are swimming beneath a massive, richly encrusted overhang and we are surrounded by hosts of pink maomaos, lolly pink in our movie lights. Silhouetted in the portal, backlit by the sun, Jan's head appears to explode with radiating fish. They show no fear, opening and closing around us. A river of fish winds through the arch, pink melding into the iridescent cobalt of blue maomao. It seems the world has tipped on edge as the pink maomao begin to stream vertically down the walls - an avalanche of fish heading into the depths.

Further into the grotto, a group of dazzle- striped mado disorientate us even more: they are swimming upside down, bellies to the roof. A pallid male leatherjacket, trigger erect, approaches a mottled female. Suggestively he waggles his sex -signalling tail at her. She is not ready - yet. Just below in the gloom cruise a flotilla of silvery ghost ships - a band of golden snapper that flash silver or gold whenever stray sunbeams catch their jewel-like scales. For these night feeders of the plankton, this is their day shelter.

[extract ends]