

DISCLAIMER:

Please note that the events and persons outlined in this diary are the views and impressions of the author, who makes no apology for any unfavourable portrayals, creative embellishments, or inaccurate relating of events.

Also, as it was Always Diving, and specifically Gareth Spurling, that certified the author to dive, and consequently permitted said author to embark on this trip, they should (and not the author) be held liable for any emotional or psychological trauma sustained by the reading of this diary.

Saturday 24th June 2006

I was supposed to have had football today but it was cancelled due to rainsoaked grounds, hence had time to pack instead. This was a good thing since it took me almost six hours.

I didn't try to pack a hair drier or hairspray like most females going on holidays – instead, I had issues with a manifold, reels, torches and the various other equipment required when one has signed up to complete their decompression diving course overseas. The suitcase was dumped because it weighed 4 kgs more than the sports bag but that meant I had to carry the bag as it doesn't have wheels. Finally down to two check-in bags of 20 and 19.5 kgs and two carry-on bags at 7.5 and 8.5 kgs.

Went out for a last supper with my best friend, and following a night of drinking, games and laughs managed to get 3.5 hours sleep before waking to the sound of David Quinn arriving to lend me his large reel for the trip. By the way Dave, the line came loose on the first dive and got tangled around my torch, but thanks for the loan anyway.

Sunday 25th June 2006

Woke early to finalise packing before heading in to work to complete some admin tasks so that my first week back wouldn't be quite so bad – I knew it probably wouldn't work that way, but it was worth a try. My mum and sister picked me up to drive me to the airport, which included a stop at the pharmacy for some Voltaren for a knee injury and some Codral for the cold I felt like I was coming down with.

I shared a good lunch at the departure lounge with my family, only found Ian and Jenny Stevenson moments before boarding and agreed to meet them at the other end. I was blessed with a very generous check-in person and was not charged for excess baggage on the domestic flight to Cairns. My seat was a window seat and next to a beautiful mother of three from Canada living in Brisbane for a year for her husband's work. The whole family was going on holidays to Cairns then Darwin. In between naps I was able to give her some small tips on what to do in Cairns for a couple of their five days.

We had an 8-hour stop in Cairns during which we found it would cost the three of us less money to hire a car for the evening than to actually pay for the storage of our luggage and cab fare to and from town. I paid for the car and Ian paid for dinner – a seafood restaurant on the Esplanade. Getting our entire luggage in the Corolla was interesting and Jenny did well to fit between the suitcases and dive bags. Almost at dessert we got a phone call – Gareth and George had arrived in Cairns and they were hungry! Could we pick up a pizza on the way back (supreme with anchovies), and

another (Hawaiian) for Rob and Graeme? Back at Cairns International and the longest day of my life continued.

Monday 26th June 2006

After being cleared through Customs and a quick wander through duty free to get a price check on some items, Jenny and I had a quick shower, I took another Codral and slept on a couch until we boarded the plane to Guam in the early hours of the morning.

4:00am we arrived in Guam and I was in desperate need of some quality sleep and another tablet. Instead, I was frisked by the US Homeland Security (ie a woman with a gun who has to run her hands all over you). All for a bracelet that set off the metal detector alarm but that I couldn't remove because my hands had swollen from all the flying. Once identified as harmless, I was permitted to proceed to the bar where Jenny and I watched *The Lord of the Rings*, and Ian and Aaron sampled the local beer. We found the rest of the gang at Gate 14 (not Gate 10 as Graham's ticket had misprinted), and boarded for the final leg of our journey.

I was concerned from the sky by the length (or lack of length) of the landing strip in Chuuk, but the Pilot did not fail and we landed without incident – yes, on the island, not in the lagoon! The heat was unbearable for some of us in our jeans and long sleeves, but we were all glad to have arrived – only to be reminded by Aaron that this timetable from hell must be repeated in just ten days. No-one wanted that reminder, especially at the beginning of our holiday!

The bus was boarded (to the sound of the extremely verbose local evangelist) and we made our way through town to the Blue Lagoon Resort – finally arriving 28 hours after walking out my front door! After welcome drinks of fresh (but warm) coconut milk from the shell, we spent that afternoon sleeping, wandering the resort, unpacking, checking out the dive shop, meeting the dive crew, setting up the twin tanks, and paying the Governor for our dive permit.

6:00pm we all gathered in the dining room for dinner – a communal affair where we continued to learn a little more about the odd group that had collectively set out on this journey. For dinner I had grilled fish, which was so good that seven people copied me in ordering the following night.

Early to bed, although not so early for my roommate Aaron who was forced to watch episodes of *House* (the TV series for those who don't know), as I had found a DVD player in our room and decided to use it, not the laptop, for all the movies I had brought along.

Tuesday 27th June 2006-07-06

Ham and cheese omelette in the dining room for breakfast, then off to the dive shop to meet our crew for the week. Rendy was our dive leader and Jonky our boat driver. On the same boat with me were Gareth, Aaron, Bruce and George. The second boat (although they preferred to call themselves "Boat One") contained Ian, Jenny, Graham, Rob and Alf. Their dive leader was Estos, and boat driver Texerell.

We motored 20 minutes to our first dive site. It was 9:00am and we were off to the *Fujikawa Maru* – very pretty for our first dive, and a nice easy dive for me as I was trying to get familiar with my twins again. Lots of corals and a plane in the cargo hold. The diving was soooooo easy as there was no current, surge, surface chop or any

other weather condition that makes diving in Brisbane so unpredictable. On the way back to the Resort we stopped to snorkel around a plane wreck – 15 minutes in the water but enough time in the equatorial sun for me to be sunburned to a crisp.

After lunch in the dining room we were off again in the boats, this time to the *Heian Maru*. Renny took us down into the wreck which lies on its port side. This was my first dive with my camera in Truk, and despite the tutelage I received in Santo from Jeff, I could already say that even with the beautiful surroundings, a photographer I am not! During this dive I discovered I would need a weight belt with my twins after all. I spent the last 10 minutes of the dive swimming head down to prevent a rather unwelcome and rapid ascent. Now I know what students can feel like at times!

For dinner that night I ordered sushi, and whilst I managed to eat some of it before it was all taken by Gareth and Alf, I can say that Aaron will not be trying wasabi again for a while. Before dinner we had all met up around the sunset bar, the boys drinking beer, Jenny on the G&T and me going hard core on the water (on the recommendation of all who have ever seen me drink!!!).

Life settled into a bit of a pattern from here with a dive in the morning, lunch in the dining room, an afternoon dive, 5:00pm at the bar, then dinner.

Wednesday 28th June 2006

This morning was the *Nippo Maru*. Aaron had developed a cold and was having difficulty with his ears, so he got some sleep instead of diving. However, I certainly didn't get much sleep for the rest of the trip as he was up coughing for the next few nights. But I tried to not complain since I had been feeling unwell earlier in the trip and probably gave him the cold in the first place.

As I had to borrow a snorkel yesterday, today I decided to use what was left in my 5L nitrox pony to “snorkel” on the stopover on the way back from the morning dive. The dive guides especially thought I looked ridiculous with just a pony bottle clipped to the waistband of my board shorts. I thought it was great to dive freely without all the dive gear!

The water temperature was a beautiful 29°C for the majority of the dives so I took to wearing just a lycra suit and 3mm vest in the afternoons (some days I just wore the vest and some shorts, but since we were penetrating the wrecks that is not something a responsible dive con should be promoting, so you didn't hear it from me!).

That afternoon was a relaxed easy double dive on a *Betty Bomber* and *Emily Flying Boat*.

Thursday 29th June 2006

Morning: *Hoki Maru* and a 20 minute nitrox “snorkel” on the *Hoyo Maru*.

Afternoon: *Yamagiri Maru*.

Word got out this evening that I was making a diary of events of the trip and everyone was worried about what was being written about them! I assured them all that I was being very diplomatic, and since I was the one threatening to push divers and our boat crews into the water, and was stealing fins from fellow divers, I was probably going to come out sounding the worst. That would be true until a respected oral health professional-come diveboat operator started WW III by landing me rather

ungraciously into the deep blue. From then on it was every man watch your own back or someone else may throw cold water on it.

Friday 30th June 2006

Today I did my first BIG deep dive – *San Francisco Maru*. Gareth and I spent last night working our tables for the decompression stops, and I went slightly crazy dreaming about having enough air in my pony, which had a leaky valve. I was very excited and keen to get to 60 metres. I felt I had prepared well – drinking 5L of water a day for the past week, being familiar with my gear and mentally rehearsing the tables – probably a bit of overkill but the competitive part of me did not want to screw anything up.

It was amazing – not only a wonderful wreck, well preserved and great visibility, but I saw my first shark for the trip. The only hitch was that I saw the shark as Gareth and I commenced our ascent. I was hanging off the line at 45 metres and by the time I got Gareth's attention to show him, it was gone. I had a really hard time getting anyone to believe me as they wrote me off as narc'd. My bigger concern was how I was going to explain to Stacey that I was unable to draw her a sketch because my slate was full of deco tables.

That afternoon we dived a submarine *I-169*, however I don't remember too much about it because I was still buzzing from hitting 60 metres!

I had my first cocktail at the bar that night – just the one but enough for me to uninhibitedly make friends with an American couple, Doug and Jean. They had a few days in Truk before moving on to some other island, the name of which I can't remember. Doug was a diver but Jean was only part way through her open water course. When Gareth learned this, and subsequently confirmed there were no instructors from the Resort who could sign her off, he offered to take her for her final open water dives. So between our two daily dives he went out again. I skipped lunch those days and went along for the boat ride. I would like to say I lay in the sun getting a tan but the weather had been quite overcast and I just got wet in the rain.

Saturday 1st July 2006

Aikoku Maru then *Kensho Maru*.

Maru means 'circle', we learned early in the trip. The Japanese gave this name to all their supply ships assigned a round trip. This is why many of the wrecks are full of water tanks, ammo and other supplies. Because none of us spoke Japanese, and most of the boat names sounded similar anyway, we all became a little creative in coming up with our "*Own Name*" *Maru* interpretations.

I finally saw a lawn crab today. I don't know what they really were but they weren't sand or mud crabs and the lawns around the resort were full of them so I've decided they will be *lawn crabs*. We all noticed the holes everywhere on the first day but it took forever me to actually see one. I would have liked to have seen one of the scrawny cats that were running rampant to have got into a fight with a crab- my money would have been on the crab.

Sunday 2nd July 2006

Just the morning dive today – *Rio de Janeiro Maru*. Excitingly, George and Gareth also saw the sharks with me today! Another 60+ metre dive but I was an old hat at deco now!!! I was quite narc'd however. Bruce pointed out I spent a long time examining the plaque on the main deck yet neglected to see the skulls and other bones sitting two metres away. For a physio who is fascinated by anatomy, I was very upset about that.

For the afternoon we all (except Gareth) went in to town for a look at the shops. I was surprised by how much there was available (even if it was all covered in dust) but the biggest shock was the price of the grog in the supermarket – only \$6 for one litre of Johnny Walker. That would explain why the cocktails at the Resort bar only cost \$6 and are 90% alcohol.

Aaron and Bruce didn't want to wait the half hour to have dinner at the Truk Stop in town so they walked home. The rest of us enjoyed the different menu available (only after we had convinced the staff there that they really did want to open the bar early to accommodate seven thirsty divers).

Monday 3rd July 2006

San Francisco Maru. The plan was to get in a 70 metre dive as I was becoming a little depth hungry. But the sand got in the way and my final depth record was stuck for the time being at 64 metres. This dive I had problems with an O-ring just before our roll-in and because everyone was waiting for me I had a VERY rapid descent. As I told Gareth later I felt sooooo affected once we hit the floor. I think it wore off by about 20 metres but some would argue that it lasted all day! Alf also did his first 50 metre dive under the close supervision of Rendy.

Kiyosumi Maru. A really enjoyable afternoon dive spent playing with bones and looking in the various holds at equipment.

Today was supposed to have been our lunch picnic on an island but when I got out of the water there had already been a decision made to abort the picnic due to the poor weather. I wasn't upset at the time because I was so cold. Bruce had his arm around me the whole trip back to try and stop my shivering. As the boat teams had been rearranged to accommodate those doing the deeper dives, it was only after our boat arrived back at the shop that we learned the other boat did go to the island for the picnic. From then on all we heard from Ian and Aaron was how their boat contained the true sportspeople – the “extreme picnickers”. They did confess to having had a rather rough boat trip to actually get to the island, however I hear it was beautiful and worth the effort.

Tuesday 4th July 2006

Morning: *Unkai Maru*.

Afternoon: *Shinkoku Maru*, the last dive of the trip. I tried to make the most of it and use up all the air I had paid for, but only succeeded in hyperventilating so gave up on that stupid idea.

That night at the bar we bought more drinks for our dive shop crew. I started well by attempting to teach Jenny to cartwheel, but my sister would have been appalled at my demonstration of a bunny hop. I did manage to help one of the Resort staff perform a hand spring flip that he was quite proud of.

That night I met Gemma and her parents Pam and John from the UK. She was close to my age and we were both excited to find someone else on the island who was born in the same decade and also spoke English. The night did get messy however, as we insisted on buying each other drinks. By the way, I now have first hand understanding of why Rendy calls the long island ice tea cocktails, “poison”.

After dinner Aaron disappeared despite being escorted to our room by Ian and Jenny, so Gareth and I embarked on a circumnavigation of the Resort to find him. I was more than happy to try and walk off how I was feeling, but I don't think it worked too well as I was still feeling pretty happy by the time we found Aaron 40 minutes later. He was clueless as to where he'd been, although we all suspect he owes a few different families more than a few pigs for the local girls he may have come across. During his lap of honour around the grounds he decided it would be a good time for me to fit in an extra dive and effectively pushed me into a puddle of water. Gareth had cleverly got out of the line of fire, which I found very poor sport from my dive buddy. It was quite funny until I tried to wear my jeans again and they felt like cardboard! Aaron made island folklore that night, and the following night at the bar everyone (guests, locals and staff) was keen to find out how he felt and what he would be up to tonight.

Wednesday 5th July 2006

Our off-gas day was spent taking a tour of the island and investigating some of the amazing structures left from when the Japanese were there during the War. It is always humbling to be reminded of how lucky we are to live where we do, and with the conditions and resources available to us. The locals all stared and we gave lollies to the kids and took photos of everything.

After a quick swim we crawled back into the boat for the trip home, which included the revenge event of the trip. In retaliation for all the times I had pushed crew and team members overboard, or taken off with their fins during their deco stop, or poured water down their back, etc etc, I was abruptly face-planted into the water by one of our beloved divers. I accused almost everyone, and in fairness it would have been well deserved, but everyone banded together and I'm still not 100% sure if it was Graham or not! No-one reading this (except perhaps Ross) will actually believe that all these antics really were triggered by a “meek and mild” dentist!

That afternoon I think the week of interrupted sleeps finally caught up with me as I fell asleep by the beach while Ian and Jenny went for a swim. They had a really hard time waking me up. When I asked why we hadn't found this little haven earlier in the trip they reminded me that even had we discovered that particular spot, the weather had been too bad to have used it sooner. It is rather typical of many holiday trips that the weather turns good the day before you go home. Fortunately this didn't impact on the wonderful time we had had, and as Bruce pointed out it probably saved us from some bad sunburn and heatstroke. Visibility on some dives was reduced because it was so overcast but it really mattered little as we were often inside the wrecks with our torches on anyway.

Most of us spent the afternoon spending what was left of our money on souvenirs from the dive shop. My favourite purchase was a jumper I'd bought on the second day as I was getting cold in the dining room air conditioning at every meal. I copped a lot of flack over my insufficient thermo-regulation. Jenny and I had each bought a local dress to wear to dinner for our final supper. We looked ridiculous but all the locals loved our “pretty dresses” (secretly I think they especially were laughing at us).

Ian felt sure with me in the dress he could get at least 3 pigs in exchange for my hand in marriage.

That night Aaron outdrank the locals, one of whom – Doone, who had been our guide for the tour that morning, and who earlier in the evening had affectionately embraced Gareth and declared his love – passed out cold, falling backwards off his barstool. Rendy was almost as affected by his poison, but was still able to tell Aaron (who was concerned for the prostrate Doone) that “he’s OK” (with the hand signals to match).

The rest of us were at dinner at the time, but I had just gone to the window to check on those still at the bar, just in time to see someone (whom I thought was Aaron) fall from his stool. Gareth went to check it out and came back with the real story. Needless to say Doone didn’t drive the boat home that night and Rendy didn’t even make it back to his island.

Thursday 6th July 2006

We spent the morning packing and planned to have lunch then leave for the airport at 12:30. My room had been the messy one all trip and it was still that way by 10:00am. I was watching a movie and slowly putting my gear away when I got a phone call from reception to say the bus was leaving for the airport early as they had overbooked the flight. Thinking I was being pranked I went to check it out, only to discover that I really did have only 20 minutes to get packed and leave.

Early to the airport, we checked in our baggage then returned to the Truk Stop for lunch. Once back at the airport I tried to complete my divelog for the trip and get started on the diary I had committed myself to write.

I do have to admit Aarons prediction about the horror flight home turned out to be wrong. I actually enjoyed the trip as I was looking forward to a good night’s sleep.

Through Guam (where I remembered to remove all of my jewellery this time) and on to Cairns. We converted our remaining “monopoly money” back into Australian dollars. I was so glad to see the end of all those silly American coins- what genius decides a 5cent coin should be three times bigger than a 10cent?!

Friday 7th July 2006

In Cairns overnight (we arrived at the hotel near midnight) but I decided to bail on the session at the bar opting for bed instead. The next morning Gareth and I took a walk down to SSI Headquarters but everyone’s on holidays. We went to the airport early because we wouldn’t all fit on the one bus. I sat next to Gareth on the plane back and tried to read my book; however, I wasn’t very successful as I was too busy hoping my sister was going to be there to pick me up. I was also thinking about the great time we’d had and all the things I would miss about living in a place where time doesn’t matter and diaries don’t exist.

My sister did remember me and after a huge welcome back hug she drove home to the sound of me talking non stop about my adventure.

EPILOGUE:

I would sincerely like to thank all the people who made this holiday what it was: my parents for assisting with the finance and homeland support; Always Diving and Dive Adventures for organising everything; Gradvin and the team at Blue Lagoon Dive Shop; and especially the guys who came along for the ride- thanks for putting up

with me and being part of such a wonderful dive trip. Finally to all of you who have continued to read this far, if you ever get the opportunity to: GO.