

Sunday, 27 January 2013

8th Wonder Fantasy Hole & Rosebud Reef

by Lloyd Borrett, VSAG.

A few years ago, VSAG committee member Graham Ellis came across a very interesting anomaly in the hydrographic survey information for Port Phillip Bay. There was a fairly large hole out from Rye where the seabed dropped from 15 metres down to 32 metres deep. And on the southeast side, the drop was almost vertical! Could this be another site similar to Portsea Hole, with a rocky wall?

Graham started testing the waters by asking other VSAG and Getunder members if they knew anything about this location. No, was the consistent reply.

A few of us would regularly natter away about the potential of this location as a new dive site and kept saying we'd go there to check it out one day. A few times we tried to schedule an exploratory dive

expedition. I'd get envious if the timing meant I couldn't go along. I didn't want to miss out on being in on a new discovery.

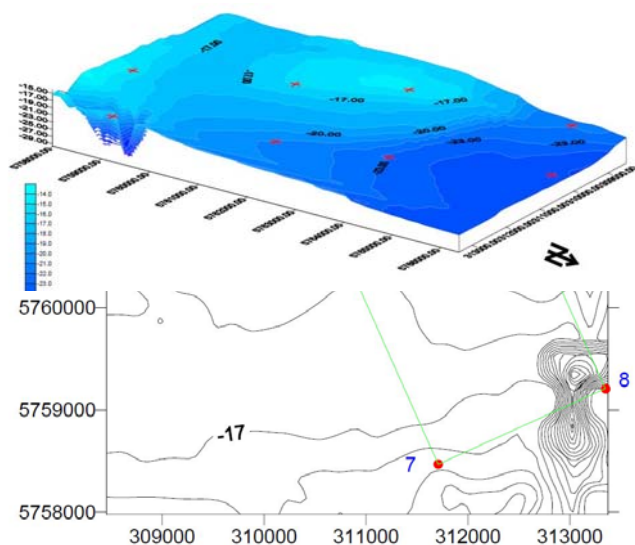
People find different reasons to go diving. For some it's the interaction with marine animals. Others are dedicated to underwater cave exploration, or the history of shipwrecks. For some it's the depth, or just the feeling of getting somewhere no man has been to before.

This new dive site might be my opportunity to go where no other man has been before. However, for some reason the planets never seemed to align properly. Other things kept drawing us all back to the usual dive sites.

Well in the last week of January 2013, Graham was rostered as Dive Captain. The forecast weather conditions were such that a VSAG dive day incorporating checking out the mystery hole was a distinct possibility. Graham put out the call to VSAGers and the available dive boats quickly filled.

Who

Graham Ellis' boat: John Lawler, Benita McDonough, and Denise Ridgway.



Peter Campisano's boat: Carol Campisano, Bob Pavlich, Andrew Quested, and Greg Breese.



Lloyd Borrett's boat "Raydon": Cheryl Lees, Tony van den Blink, and guest diver David Goodwin.



And so it was that on Sunday, 27 January 2013, we all gathered at The Scuba Doctor to load dive kit onto the three dive boats and prepare for the big adventure. Safety briefings done, we headed down to Rye Boat Ramp and launched.

Peter Campisano took the lead and headed out towards South Channel Fort at speed. Graham was still at the boat ramp jetty, so I made my way out of the channel and slowly headed in the same direc-

tion, trying to keep both Graham and Peter in sight.

Eventually Graham was underway. By then Peter Campisano had reached South Channel Fort. I was about halfway between the other two boats. Graham then announced we were headed in the wrong direction! (Maybe, just maybe, we should have shared the GPS marks for the dive site before leaving shore!)

8th Wonder Fantasy Hole

We arrived at our destination and spent some time trolling around, getting a feel for the place using our depth sounders.

Everything we were seeing on the instruments just peaked our excitement. We soon located the top of the almost vertical wall and dropped a shot line in. There was very little current running.

Tony van den Blink and I geared up, rolled backwards over the side and headed down the shot line. John Lawler and Benita McDonough were a few minutes in front of us. (We could tell from the silt kicked up on the silty bottom!) Still, the visibility was crystal clear.

Yes, the silty bottom under us was not very exciting. But any doubts we may have had about the potential of this new dive site were quickly swept away as we dropped over the side of the wall. The transformation was simply sensational. What an amazing underwater spectacle lay before us!

The rocky wall was covered by the most amazingly coloured marine growth. (It's



Tony begins his descent.

Photo: Lloyd Borrett.

at times like this I wish I knew how to properly identify marine life so as to be able to better describe it to you.) If you thought some of the spots on Lonsdale Wall or the Great Barrier reef were colourful, then this was twenty times better.

Massive schools of small inquisitive fish and the less sociable weedy sea dragons were all loving their rainbow coloured habitats in this lush sanctuary. Brightly coloured, incredibly delicate and beautiful iridescent nudibranchs were everywhere.

There were huge schools of the larger bay species we're all familiar with. Flocks of old wives and flights of blue devils. Squadrons of bronze whaler sharks out in the middle distance, massed seven gilled sharks trying to mimic a slow-

moving juggernaut, and a flight of large eagle rays watching the show.

Ledges cut deep into the rocky escarpment were like apartment blocks for the monster crays crammed along them. I'd heard tales about the size and quantity of crays at Cape Jaffa, but this had to be twice as good. I could image the eyeballs leaping out of JL's sockets and bouncing around in his mask at the sight of it.

As we came to the end of the wall we found a gently sloping decline carpeted with huge, plate sized scallops. We'd better not let the Black Rock club know about this site or it will be cleaned out within a month!

We ignored the plentiful swim throughs and moved back onto the wall where at a depth of 25 metres we found a 3 metre diameter entrance to a cave. I signalled to Tony, asking him if he wanted to go in. He signalled "OK" and followed me.

The cave was completely dark. Switching on our torches, I thought to myself that this was not so much a cave, as it was a curved tunnel, about the size Steve McQueen might have crawled through in *The Great Escape*.

My heart rate increased. My mind filled with trepidation. Then the tunnel opened into a flooded chamber about the size of a small church. Stalactites and stalagmites untouched by human hand contrived a magnificent scene. It was a cathedral, dressed in what looked like white marble.

I turned around to see if Tony was still there. He signalled he was okay. Then something bumped into my back in the dark and I quickly spun back around. Nothing to be alarmed about! It was only a huge Potato Cod, about the size of a VW minibus! It had obviously come to investigate the bubble blowing divers who had disturbed it from its slumbers. The Potato Cod looked on as the two of us passed it by. I gazed back at it after we'd passed. To my amazement, it came up behind Tony and opened its mouth. It opened its mouth wider and wider. The animal had teeth reminiscent of piano keys. It then plunged down and encompassed Tony's head in the voluminous opening. Oh my God!

I hit the huge animal as hard as I could. It was like hitting a sofa with a paper handkerchief. It didn't seem to make an impression, yet it had the desired effect. The Potato Cod released its victim, looked at me reproachfully, and swam off offended. Tony continued on unfazed. What a cool dude!

Later at the surface, Tony asked me what had happened in the chamber when everything went dark. "I think I accidentally turned off my torch," I replied. Some things are better left unexplained.

Everywhere we shone our dive torches, the chamber revealed more of what no person had ever cast their eyes upon. It was a visual treasure.

On the far side of the room I spotted a small exit tunnel with a glimmer of day-

light at its end. We made our way into this 2 metre diameter passage, illuminated by the blue window of daylight from the cave's end.

After exiting the cave's second opening, I was looking back, waiting for Tony to come out. A large pod of bay dolphins came by to take a cheeky look into our new discovery. They seemed excited that divers had finally found this underwater secret spot.

The dolphins distracted me from the delights of the cave entrance and the vibrantly coloured wall in front of me. As I turned my back to the wall I was surprised to come almost face to face with a baby humpback whale calf and its mother. The calf was barely 5 metres long.

It was surreal to see this leviathan mother, about 15 metres in length, suspended just 5 metres away. Then with her massive pectoral fins she moved forward and gently pushed the baby calf, riding the pressure wave just above her head, towards me. She stopped and watched on as the inquisitive calf came up and nudged me. I stopped breathing. My mind was racing.

Then I was suddenly aware that the bottom was no longer 5 metres below me. My fins hit something solid and I looked down, thinking I'd been nudged by the whale calf onto a rocky ledge of the wall.

Wrong! There was a massively huge male humpback whale directly below me, having been masked in the gloom before. He now had his sights on moving up to

place himself between his family and me. This monster of the ocean was directly between my legs! I had always wanted a close whale encounter, but this was ridiculous.

I moved back toward the wall and the male humpback continued to rise, stopping when I could look the big guy in the eye, just a metre away from my face. He articulated his gaze and sized me up. After about a minute, that seemed like a year, he slowly moved away.

While I was wondering if I was suffering from a severe case of nitrogen narcosis, all three whales moved off into the distance. I turned around to see Tony, with his head sticking out of the cave entrance, and his eyeballs out on stalks!

We both started to breathe normally again and dropped to the bottom of the wall. There we found seas of waving sea grass, drifts of bright green sea lettuce and kelp on the rocky bottom with abalone attached in the rock crevices.

As we ventured away from the wall over the 32 metre bottom, we noticed a large dark foreboding shape in the distance. Upon moving closer, I started to make out the shape of a submarine. Surely not? But yes, there right before us was a small submarine, covered with bright yellow coloured marine life. It was less than half the size of the J-class submarines we regularly dive on outside the heads.

How is this possible? We moved in close and inspected it from end to end. There

was no obvious signs of why it had sunk. All of the hatches we found were closed shut.

I found what looked like some Japanese or Chinese markings on the small coning tower. Could it be that a Japanese mini-sub had made its way to Melbourne in World War II and come to grief in our treacherous bay? Or could this be the rumoured Chinese submarine that was speculated to have kidnapped Prime Minister Harold Holt on Sunday 17 December 1967 from Cheviot Beach on Point Nepean near Portsea?

Bottom time up, I shot my SMB and we reluctantly started our ascent. A deep stop completed and then a safety stop, eventually we were back on the surface, taking in the fresh air, bathed in warm sunlight.

Had we just had an amazing experience diving what must certainly be the eighth wonder of the world? Or, had it all been a fantasy, fuelled by the excitement and anticipation of exploring a new dive site?

Back aboard the boat, Tony and I were speechless. Just how could we relate such an experience and have anyone believe



Raydon moves in to pickup Tony and Lloyd.

Photo: Lloyd Borrett.

us? The others fired off questions, but we just couldn't provide answers.

Over the radio we heard a report from Graham's boat that there was nothing below but a boring, virtually lifeless, uninteresting mud hole. Obviously this was the work of the wily John Lawler. The cagey bugger wanted to keep all knowledge of the wonders and mysteries of this too good to be true dive site in the hands of as few people as possible. He'll now be extremely upset with me for having revealed all.

We waited for the divers from Peter Campisano's boat to surface and then recovered our shot line. Meanwhile, Graham took off to Rosebud Reef.

My mind was still reeling from what I'd just experienced, but it was time to put all of that behind me and continue the dive day as if it hadn't happened.

Rosebud Reef

With our shot line safely aboard I looked up the GPS marks for Rosebud Reef and found I had two: one just inshore from the Hurricane; and the other some distance east of that. I headed to the latter one and Peter followed, not having marks for Rosebud Reef in his GPS. Graham informed us on the radio that they were already on the dive site.

As we closed on the mark, Graham's boat was no-where to be seen. A radio call to them revealed they had gone to the other mark but hadn't found the reef. We arrived at our destination and found the

reef on the sounder, so Graham's boat headed over to join us.

Rosebud Reef is a lovely shallow dive situated about a kilometre offshore from Rosebud. An area of shallow reefs rising two or three meters off the seabed in an otherwise sandy oasis. The masses of fish all congregate here to feed. This in turn attracts some lovely harmless sharks predominantly the wobbegongs and the seven gills. Port Jackson shark eggs are often found on the site. It's just a great dive site.

Peter Campisano anchored on the mark, Graham deployed a shot line, and I deployed a buoy line. Cheryl Lees and David Goodwin went in. Graham and Denise Ridgway were to join then, but I was later informed that didn't happen. Tony and I ate our lunch.

Cheryl and David covered a lot of ground to the west of the mark. JL kept wondering why they were still down, as all he could see on the sounder was a flat sandy bottom. But Tony and I kept finding



Bob Pavlich on Rosebud Reef.
Photo: Andrew Quested.



Marine life abounds on Rosebud Reef. Photo: Andrew Quested.

some reef structure close to where the divers were, so we were confident they were having fun. And indeed, that was the report when they surfaced and were safely back aboard the boat.

After a suitable surface interval, David, Tony and I tumbled back into the water and explored the reef. It's always just such a delightful dive with plenty of interesting small stuff to look at.

We came upon a large school of old wives. The others moved on, but I stayed there and gradually the old girls accepted me, with some moving in for a close look.

Eventually it was time to go back to the surface. With everyone aboard the dive boats we headed to Rye Boat Ramp, and then back to The Scuba Doctor to unload gear, get air fills and have a chat on the couch.

Yet another magnificent VSAG dive day that will never be forgotten. ❖