

Spring
2025

OCTOPRESS

Wellington Underwater Club Newsletter

Topics

- President's update
- Diving Vanuatu Santo by Steve Sanderson
- Next in our selection of Wellington Dive sites – Rocky Bay, Porirua

Octopress needs YOU!

Please email photos/stories/underwater updates/ planned trips/memorable dive sites to judyormandy@hotmail.com or alison-grant@xtra.co.nz for us to share in the club newsletter. See Steve Sanderson's story of his trip to Vanuatu on Page 2.

Upcoming Events

Monthly WUC Dives

Watch your emails and Facebook for our monthly club dives and register your interest. And let us know if there's a spot you really want to explore!

30 November boat trip – dive the F69

Just one spot remaining at press time so be in quick. You organise your own dive gear and turn up for a great afternoon diving with WUC buddies! Advanced Open Water required, and you must have a DSMB.

Member price only \$50. Non-member price... \$50+\$20 membership fee!

Watch out in 2026, if this one goes to plan there may be more...



Judy Ormandy: diver emerges from the HMNZS Wellington/F69 Frigate

November 2025 – President's update

Welcome to our new members! Look, we're a small club, and every member counts, so we're delighted if you've recently joined us in time for our 75th anniversary in 2026, and we look forward to having you around. Come meet us at a club dive in November or December; we have both shore and boat dives on offer, and we have some other events in mind too, so watch this space.

Despite committee members Pete, Judy and Geoff all disappearing off on exotic adventures since our last Octopress, and Alison heading north for some additional sidemount training in the gorgeous Bay of Islands, we're still beavering away in the background on some developments.

Despite the small membership, WUC has a good amount of cash remaining from an era when we were much, MUCH bigger, and our 75th seems like a good opportunity to put some of that back into our community and our membership. At our AGM, the committee proposed sponsoring a defibrillator for the South Coast, as a way to keep Wellingtonians exploring the underwater world safer, and we have completed a registration with Wellington Free Ambulance to do that in the coming months. We've proposed a location around the toilet facilities at Princess Bay (pretty evenly spaced between the those at Marinui Surf Club and the VUW Coastal Ecology labs), but the precise placement is yet to be decided. We'll be inviting you to come and celebrate that contribution to the community with a dive and picnic/BBQ when the unit is installed, so keep an eye out for that.

You might have also noticed the fantastic price on our upcoming boat dives, postponed (by wind, in typical Welly fashion) from 1 November. The club is subsidising the charter for paid-up club members, so if you haven't paid your membership in 2025, this is the time! We hope we might be able to run a few more boat trips on the same terms next year, but this is our "pilot", so if we get plenty of interest on this trip, watch out for more opportunities in 2026.

We're also looking at how we can develop a detailed database of Wellington dive sites, building on the labours of love by a few Wellington divers in the past, so expect to see updates for that, and calls for photos and written descriptions as that project slowly starts to take shape.

Keeping clubs afloat (or even neutrally buoyant) is really tough these days, and underwater clubs all over Aotearoa NZ are finding ways to manage that challenge. Everyone is busy, lacking time for committees, and often without much cash to spare for membership fees. What our membership has told us in recent years is that what you want is friendship, dive buddies, dive opportunities and information/education, and to be part of a group that's passionate about exploring and protecting the taonga that is Wellington's underwater world. Some of that is stuff we can do on a shoestring, or maybe a more dive-appropriate cable-tie, and so we're going to keep our fees low and focus on those areas to nurture our wee club through our 75th and beyond.

Please make sure you're following us on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/WellingtonUnderwater/> and Instagram

Diving Vanuatu: Santo, May 2025

Steve Sanderson's week of wrecks, reefs and camaraderie at Aore Island Resort

Seven days of spectacular diving in Vanuatu's Santo region, based at the Aore Island Resort, delivered everything we hoped for—and more. From the WWII wrecks of the SS President Coolidge, sunken aircraft, and ships, to the surreal chaos of Million Dollar Point, the underwater history was as rich as the reefs were vibrant.

Prepping for Depth

After years of resisting the slippery slope of tech diving, I finally gave in. Preparation began months earlier with a series of technical dive courses—Sidemount, Advanced Nitrox, and Decompression—culminating in a four-day trip with Go Dive at the Mikhail Lermontov. Brent, ever the attentive instructor, quickly picked up on my aversion to mask swapping. Naturally, he made sure we did it on every dive. Thanks, Brent.

To cement my new skills, I joined Global Dive's Tech-Only weekend at Northland Dive in the Bay of Islands. My buddy? None other than Judy Ormandy, renowned for her photography passion and, let's say, adventurous navigation. Paired with my fresh tech credentials, we made a memorable team. Judy was brilliant at managing our 45m depth and deco obligations. Navigation? Well, we may have surfaced on the wrong side of the island once. Just once.

I squeezed in one more three-day dive session with Paihia Dive, making further adjustments to my sidemount setup. The major change: converting my Dive Rite Ray bungee system to a ring bungee setup and adding a butt plate. Everyone has their preferences—this works for me. After 25 sidemount dives, I felt ready for Santo.

Arrival in Santo

Our group of six arrived via Solomon Airways from Auckland, with only Andrew and I certified for deco and advanced nitrox. Aore Island Resort made for a seamless base, and right next door was Aore Adventure Sports, run by Paul White. Paul's operation is the only one using a boat to access the Coolidge, which also opens up a range of other dive sites—WWII aircraft, shipwrecks, and pristine reefs.

Each morning, Paul's team collected us from the resort jetty at 7:15am for two dives, returning just after midday. Between dives, we were treated to a generous morning tea—an unexpected but welcome luxury.

The Dives

Over the week, we explored the President Coolidge five times, starting with the 1 & 2 holds (~30m) filled with Jeeps and machinery. We progressed to deeper sites: the iconic "Lady" at 40m, the Cannons at 45m, and on our final day, the Engine Room at 50m.

While the Coolidge is undoubtedly the star, I found the WWII aircraft—remarkably intact at around 35m—equally captivating. Further offshore, we discovered reefs bursting with colour and life. As for Million Dollar Point, it's a fascinating, if chaotic, underwater dumping ground of discarded U.S. military equipment—a relic of a bygone era.

Final Thoughts

This was a phenomenal dive trip, and I'd return in a heartbeat. A few tips for future divers:

- Boat diving is a game-changer—far easier and more versatile than shore entry. Access to multiple dive sites.
- Shore divers to the Coolidge looked exhausted, especially those lugging sidemount and deco tanks.
- Tech diving here is well supported, but plan ahead—nitrox is limited.





Dive spots of Wellington

WUC is slowly collecting info about our many wonderful dive sites. If you have a favourite, write it up or send some photos. Maybe we'll be inspired to make a monthly club dive out of it!

Dive site: Rocky Bay, Porirua

Freedivers are ahead of scuba divers on this one, and perhaps no surprise; there's considerable commitment needed to haul your scuba gear down the short bank and between the rocks at this site (stop for the samphire if you're the foraging type.) Add in the need for "just so" conditions and lack of great back-up dive sites nearby if the bay turns out to be undiveable, and it's one of our more underappreciated dive sites. It's a shame, because as the freedivers know, Rocky Bay is geologically and ecologically varied, extremely pretty in spots, and well worth the effort, and the carpark above the bay makes for very relaxed donning and doffing.

There's really only one entry point; you'll almost certainly make your way down the same channel as the last scuba divers who ventured out, as there's only one that's vaguely inviting with a tank in tow.) Perhaps the simplest navigation from here is to head out as westerly as possible. This takes you into 3-8m channels that are home to the usual Wellington south coast suspects: juvenile cod, spotties, banded wrasse and all the usual triplefin species abound in the weed here. ~~Wheke~~ are common in these channels, though more shy than their bolshy and diver-seasoned south coast counterparts. Unlike Taputeranga Marine Reserve, eagle rays also frequent the area, nestled beneath stands of kelp in the shallow channels. It's mostly an easy out-and-back navigation, unless you overshoot the exit channel, but it's shallow enough to find your way back with a bob to the surface.

If, instead, you take a wide arc to the north on your way back, you can drop from 6-8m to 12-14m relatively suddenly, having been tempted down an interesting swim-through or two. Here, both the terrain and the ecology starts to shift towards sponges and encrusting life.

Alternatively, you can head north, or north-north-east from the entry point, to get to this terrain directly; just don't swim too far, or you'll hit the tidal currents beyond the bay; there's plenty of time to do both west and north. If you dive anywhere to the north-west and happen to pop up on the far side of the pinnacle that juts above the bay to get your bearings on the way back, it can feel like you've somehow misnavigated to another bay, as the track to the carpark is blocked from view. Don't panic! All Rocky Bay dives are navigated best with a stubborn trust in one's compass and depth gauges.

West from the most common entry point the rocky channels are much narrower, and replete with encrusting life, shy crustaceans and surge-happy sea tulips. If you're short on time, or on your way back from the north-west, these channels are a really good use of your time and air.

Where Rocky really starts to feel more like Kapiti than Taputeranga is directly out to the north-west; swim out between the rocks until you find the white sand. Visibility can be challenging here if you happen to hit milky water and low western sun in combination, but the currents around the point bring in kingfish, kahawai, large schools of jack mackerel and trevally; club divers have seen carpet sharks, and freedivers swear they have met bronze whalers out here as well (photos or it didn't happen.)

Given its' popularity as a spearfishing and cray-gathering spot, Rocky Bay's ecology seems to be in surprisingly good health, perhaps protected by prevailing northerly wind and swells that prevent consistent diving, and the wide variety of possible routes in one small area.

Rocky is best dived when the southerly winds and swells have been in for a few days, and at mid-to-high-tide (for ease of entry.) Expect that the round trip down to the water and back is going to add substantially to the total trip and don't do it in a rush. It's a different dive every time, and generally delightful. And if you happen to find Rocky Bay has belligerently large waves rolling in, despite supposed southerly swell and winds (it's happened to the writer more than once) then Titahi Bay town centre has some excellent cafes.

Photos by regular Rocky Bay diver Camilla Caton. Clockwise from top; jack mackerel, nudibranch of a pretty but unidentified variety, carpet shark, puffer fish, John Dory

