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TARGET TUNDA

Andrew and his tuna



Rob Torelli and Rod Seddon, all smiles with a 240 kg prime bluefin tuna

“The bar has certainly been raised when it comes to extreme blue water hunting! Blue water spearfisherman are now researching their target species, employing guides, modifying their gear and techniques and are achieving unbelievable results. The Pacific Blue Fin fishery off the west coast of New Zealand is a classic example of spearfisherman targeting a species with amazing success”

As an enthusiastic blue water freediver who runs a dedicated blue water spearfishing travel company I was amazed to hear about the monstrous Pacific Blue Fin Tuna fishery off the west coast of New Zealand's south island. This destination emerged during the past few years with several of New Zealand's more adventurous spearfisherman venturing offshore to explore these new grounds. Last year I planned the first ever spearfishing charter to this region with amazing results. All four clients managed to get a spear into one of these monstrous fish with the three fish being landed averaging 500 pounds each.

This August I returned to the Greymouth region of New Zealand with a new group of divers. All of them had a reasonable amount of spearfishing experience but they were relatively new to serious blue water hunting. I had the intention of documenting the hunt and learning first hand more about this developing fishery. I was joined by three Australian based clients, Andrew Cutajar, Rod Seddon, Daniel Durovic and an American spearfisherman Brock Eckel. Champion blue water spearfisherman Ian Puckeridge joined us as an extra guide whilst Shane Fitsmaurice from New Zealand was assisting with the underwater video.

Our ultimate destination was the Hokitika trench. The area is named for its abundance of Hoki, a popular food fish which lives in the deep waters of this trench.

The fishing ground is a short 16 nautical miles from the Greymouth Bar and runs north for another 40 nautical miles. Here the sea floor drops rapidly from 145 metres to over 760 metres within a very short distance.

Blue fin tuna have been caught commercially from the west coast of New Zealand since the late 1970s. The catch generally consisted of the smaller Southern blue fin tuna with the occasional Pacific blue fin, *Thunnus orientalis* making an appearance.

Commercial fisherman have noted that when the Pacific blue fin tuna show up, (generally around late July and early August) the Southern blue fin tuna gradually disappear.

Fortunately, due to the poor condition of the Pacific blue fin at this time of year (due to spawning), the fish are not targeted for money by the commercial sector.

This particular region of the south island of New Zealand's west coast is notorious for its foul weather and treacherous bar crossings. Patience was going to be the key so I had allowed a 7 day window of opportunity and had chartered a 70 foot vessel with a very experienced local skipper. As it turned out the Maori sea god Tangaroa was with us and we managed to have five of our seven allocated days out at sea in perfect conditions. This is not the norm and several other groups of divers who had foul weather and had allowed insufficient time and had chartered smaller vessels unfortunately missed their opportunity at a shot at a monstrous tuna. Trips to this region are very weather dependant and good planning is essential, luck also plays a fair part.

Once out at sea we travelled to the Hokitika trench. This trench has dozens of deep-sea trawlers who fish the area until their quota is filled. Many of these huge international factory trawlers working this region process their catch at sea and the mass of waste that pours out over the side is a perfect burley (chum) trail to attract and concentrate the Blue fin tuna. Other predators that are attracted to the vessels and region include New Zealand Fur seals, Mako sharks and a large array of sea birds.

We employed a number of proven techniques to attract the tuna including the use of quality depth sounders, chumming from our vessel and utilising the "ready made" chum trail of the Hoki trawlers. Our skippers twenty odd years of commercially fishing for tuna in this area proved invaluable. Our trip started relatively slowly with the only tuna sighting being on our depth sounder at night. This was no place to be night diving and the occasional appearance of Mako sharks in our deck light did not prompt and night dives. Daniel "Mad Dog" Durovic decided he would attempt to catch his first ever game fish by the more traditional rod and reel method one evening and did not disappoint. His hour long fight resulted in a prime 500 pound Pacific blue fin tuna and perhaps more importantly an opportunity for all to observe the anatomy of the tuna. Opinions varied as to the perfect shot but most agreed if we could get a good shot from above and approaching we would be better off than a side on shot. The reality was we would have to find the tuna in daylight hours first and then see what opportunity the tuna were going to present.

The Australians gear choice for this expedition consisted of their Riffe Blue Water spearguns and 3 two atmosphere Riffe floats. They also utilised Riffe bungy lines between the three floats. Their guns were equipped with 10 mm shafts and 700 pound monofilament with the standard Riffe ice pick slip tips. With the water temperature hovering between 13-14 degrees Celsius they opted for Picasso 5 mm wet suits and suitable gloves and booties.

The information we were getting from the other fishing boats was that most tuna were being caught either on dusk or during the night but several days earlier the tuna had been on the surface during daylight hours. Two days into the trip we were getting anxious about the fact that we had not seen any tuna. We had no reason to worry though as we had the time and weather on our side. Our skipper devised a new plan to chum the tuna to the surface early the following morning and Andrew "Cutters" Cutajar was up first.

Upon the call from our skipper, Cutters, the guides and cameraman entered the water and to our immense pleasure we were greeted by





approximately a dozen or so tuna varying in size from 500-700 pounds. Amongst the chum and tuna were plenty of seals and dozens of diving birds! It was quite simply one of the most amazing sites I have ever witnessed underwater.

The tuna were busy feeding in the sinking chum varying from depths of 5-15 meters. Cutters was overwhelmed by this magical sight and knew he needed a good shot and he was not going to take any chances. Unfortunately, the tuna dispersed quite quickly and we were all left with an empty feeling. No time to dwell upon things, we knew the tuna were in the region and we regrouped and tried again. Twenty minutes later a similar scenario had presented itself and our skipper made the same call. The same group reentered the water and this time Cutters was better prepared after learning from the first sighting. Cutters maneuvered himself above the sinking chum and waited for an incoming fish. As the fish approached Cutters dived and at about five meters down let fire with a penetrating shot on a tuna of approximately 450 pounds. He had aimed for the head region from above and ended hitting the fish approximately half the way down the body. The shot however penetrated the spine and sent the tuna in a spiral towards the surface. We were all very conscious of the ability this fish had to burst off into a deep dive and perhaps entangle one of us in the process. Over the next few minutes we all watched and filmed in amazement as the fish made several breaches and circled Cutters. A second "kill" gun was handed to Cutters and he quickly ended the brief fight. Cutters had landed his dream fish inside of ten minutes. This amazing video action can be viewed at: www.diving-action.com or my web site, <http://www.bwhi.com.au/blue-fin-tuna-trips.html>

Brock had been diving without a gun and was that impressed with the mighty sight of the Blue fin tuna that he elected not to want to shoot a fish. We all respected his decision and this left Rod with the last chance to land his tuna.

On our final day at sea the skipper worked overtime to try and provide the final client with a chance to land a tuna. Rod was up at 4am and was preparing his gear and the skipper was sounding the area we had found the tuna. Before long and with still an hour or so before sunrise the skipper had chummed the fish to the surface.

"We all watched in amazement from the back deck board as tuna upto 600 pounds broke the surface and engulfed the chum being fed to them."

This continued for a while and the temptation for Rod simply become too much. Rod calmly entered the water and within seconds had shot a huge tuna. With marginal light Rod was unsure of the quality of his shot. I entered shortly after with two guns and swam with Rod in pursuit of the floats. The dark and chummed up waters were calm but we both later admitted to being concerned about the Mako sharks we had been seeing during the night. The tuna had taken just one of the Riffe floats down and it was keeping solid pressure on the floats and bungy system. Rod loaded his kill gun and the crew from the mother ship had launched the tender to follow us. Rod waited patiently for the sun to rise to allow an inspection dive on his fish. He did not want to put too much extra pressure on it until he could see the fish clearly. Some thirty minutes later Rod decided to advance his bungy towards the surface to get the fish within distance to inspect his shot. He did this after considerable effort and made gradual headway. Initially, he could feel the fish running and vibrating but it was eventually tiring. Some 45 minutes after Rods initial shot he made an inspection dive to see that his fish had basically died and he was battling dead weight to raise the fish to the surface. Rod promptly put an extra holding shaft for security and towed the fish back to the nearby mother ship. Moments later he tail roped the fish before four of the crew hauled his mighty catch aboard. Rods fish weighed in at 240 kg or 528 pounds and was approximately ten times larger than his previous personal best catch. To say that both Rod and his close mate "Cutters" were stoked with their amazing catch would be an understatement.

The fish were all carefully cleaned and prepared by our crew and chilled down. Some of the tuna were smoked and the remainder vacuum sealed for a longer shelf life and shipped back to Australia.

The trip turned out to be a huge success and is the second trip that my company has run where by all the clients were given the opportunity to spear a "once in a lifetime" Blue fin tuna. With the assistance of the experienced crew and competent guides it is possible for divers with limited blue water experience to still land a dream fish such as a massive Pacific Blue fin Tuna. This area holds great potential not only for Pacific Blue fin tuna that grow to 450 kg but also for Southern Blue fin Tuna that grow to 150 + kg. I am sure we are going to see and hear a lot more about this amazing fishery in the years to come.

Blue Water Hunting International has booked several Blue fin tuna trips for August 2009 and should you wish to join them contact us at enquiries@bwhi.com.au or check out our web site at: www.bwhi.com.au.

Blue Water Hunting International
invite you to hunt
Blue Fin Tuna
off New Zealand in
August 2009



A World First...
Blue Water Hunting International are proud to be the first spearfishing charter business in the world to offer a "guided" charter to hunt monster Pacific Blue Fin tuna off the West Coast of New Zealand in August 2009.

"Join the Blue Water Hunting International experienced team of guides on the ultimate blue water spearfishing expedition.

The 2007 & 2008 trip led to AMAZING results. Here we hunt massive 600 pound plus Pacific Blue Fin Tuna off New Zealand's West Coast. We have two 7 day packages to choose from in August 2009."

Blue Water Hunting International are very confident of success and expect each client will have an opportunity to land a Monster Blue Fin Tuna. (Weather permitting)

We are strictly limiting numbers of divers. To book onto a charter or to customise your own private charter, contact Rob Torelli at Blue Water Hunting International.



Rod Seddon - 240kg bluefin tuna -2008

BLUE WATER HUNTING INTERNATIONAL

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Boating the fish was a real team effort!