

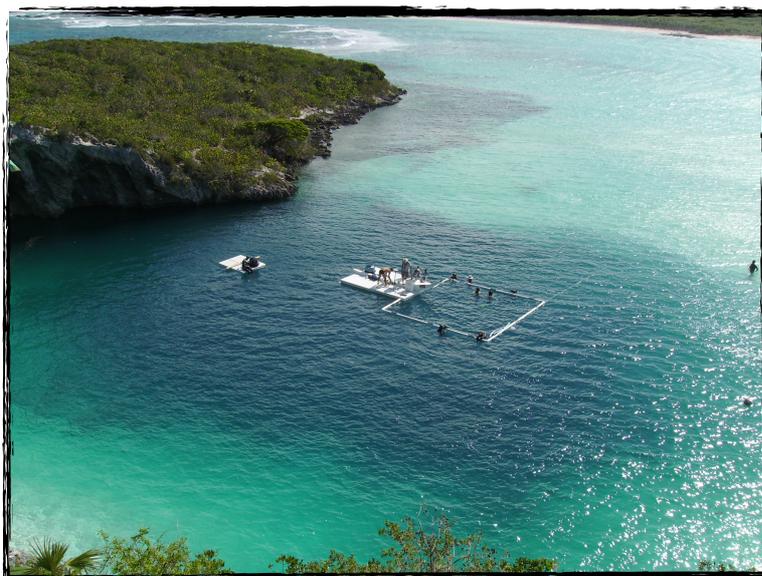
## From Sam Barnes

The Bahamas and its famed Dean's Blue Hole have become part of the lexicon of divers world wide. Whatever a diver's passion is in the waters of the ocean the renowned clear, warm water of the Bahamas is an attraction most have heard of and would like to experience. This yarn and photos are from one who made the journey, Sam Barnes.

In November 2012 around 50 international freediving competitors met at Dean's Blue Hole in the Bahamas for the Suunto Vertical Blue World Cup event. I was one of 4 with a

NZ attachment, but unlike well known competitors this was my first visit to the famed Hole. I'd planned it as an opportunity to tick off a bucket list item and while there hopefully notch up my first 61m (200ft) dive.

While the four of us had NZ links we are nevertheless, an ecumenical 'lot,' living and advocating for freediving in various parts of the globe. For example, William Truebridge spends about 6 months of the year in the Bahamas teaching freediving when he's not in the USA, Ant Williams now lives in Australia, while Jonny Sunnex comes from small town Ngaruawahia, down the road from me in Hamilton. I own an Aussie passport and attach AUS to my competition profile. But I've lived in NZ for 25 years, bipartisan to the core, so I'm an ANZAC diver in my newly formed Australia and NZ Apnea Club!



Dean's Blue hole is one of the most stunning of freediving venues. As Mecca is to the Muslims, Deans Blue Hole is to the world's free divers. Formed around 15,000 years ago during an ice age when oceans were much lower, the limestone formation (karst) was then able to be dissolved by fresh water. It has created a small 25 m wide hole in the roof of an enormous underwater cavern that plummets to 202 m. The entrance to that hole is in a small tidal lagoon which is surrounded by cliffs. As the photos show, the cliffs ably protect it from on-shore

wind and waves. The surrounding area is private land and is currently for sale at US \$12 million, but Bahamians gather there in the weekends for beach picnics and swimming in the shallower area rather than the hole itself.

At the time of competition there is an official tent set up on the beach where you sign in a minimum of an hour before your dive time. Dive results are all recorded there along with a food stand selling conch salads,

conch burgers, coconuts and a few other things. Then there are a couple of other tents where athletes can rest out of the sun before their dives. Competitors choose when they want to make the fifteen metre swim to the competition zone's warm-up pontoon, while spectators can swim out there also to hang onto the PVC pipe perimeter to observe divers. Some spectators are always on hand. But when the big dives were being done there were a lot of people watching and I guess an unknown number around the World with their computer screens switched to the first live internet broadcast for a freediving competition.



Each dive is done under the watchful eyes of a minimum of two freediving safety divers. It depends on the nominated depth as to how many and at what depth they meet the diver. So for the 100m plus dives the first safety would meet the diver at 30-40m and the next at 25-30m. Once on the surface the competitors have to remove their mask or goggles and nose clip, keep their mouth and nose out of the water, give the OK signal and say to the judge "I'm OK" if the dive is to be officially recognised. The affirmative result is signaled by the Judge with a white card. But as I found out, even the red card is not necessarily all bad. I did do a Constant Weight 61m dive, tag in my hand which meant I had achieved my goal of 200 feet. One small glitch though. I surfaced a little too far away from the rope and as I grabbed it my mouth dipped just below the surface. Result, a red card. It just meant I would have to do it again to get it into the record books.

So it came down to the final day of competition, my last chance to get a white card at 61 metres. I felt very confident. The dive started and about eight kicks took me to negative buoyancy and into freefall. Taking a big mouthful of air from my lungs at about 25 m to keep the pressure on for equalising, I closed my eyes and just kept falling. I managed to equalise easily all the way to the plate where I grabbed a tag and headed back to the surface making sure I stayed close to the rope. Safety divers met me about 25 m accompany me all the way to the surface where I had nice clean surface protocol and finally a white card. 200 feet done and dusted and now officially recognised. Next target 65 m in the New Zealand Nationals in February 2013 !

As I reflect on the experiences of that competition, a standout feature was the camaraderie amongst the competitors and the goodwill towards all athletes irrespective of the depths they were diving. Top performers such as Alexi Molchanov (RUS) and Will Truebridge (NZ) who both achieved PB's of 126m (413 feet,) obviously liked to win. But there was almost the same level of



congratulations from all the athletes whenever someone achieved a PB from 40 to 126m. Precious egos did not seem to exist.



**Success!! - Sam after completing 61 metres (200 feet)**

Hopefully some of NZ's spearo's might try the sister sport of freediving soon and make the pilgrame to 'Mecca' to boost the Kiwi presence..

It was a great trip. I'd love to go back so I'm not sure my bucket list of places to visit has actually got one crossed off!