

What about the kids?

When we told our friends we were starting a family, after their congratulations the next question was, "What about your diving?" Susan, my wife and I were diving enthusiasts and were adamant like all new parents that children were not going to change our lifestyle. Our friends joked that there would be some cheap dive gear coming up for sale very soon.

Susan and I started back diving when Jack was 9 months old. We went with the dive club and still tried to make the weekends away. It soon became, hard work and all too much. We tried just one of us going, but it didn't seem right.

We have two children now, Jack 6 and Tom 3, recently we ran onto an old dive buddy and told him we had given up diving for the time being and couldn't wait until the children were older. He suggested we contact our local dive travel agent and go on a diving holiday to a family friendly resort.

We took his advice, our requirements were simple - we did not want just a diving holiday but a family holiday as well. We wanted Jack and Tom to be looked after but not locked away in a club and spend time with us when we were not diving. I was recommended **Aore Island Resort**, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu. The destination was perfect, diving the SS President Coolidge had always been on our wish list and we had heard great reports about **Allan Power Dive Tours**. The resort seemed to offer everything we wanted so we decided to give it a go and booked for the Easter school holidays!

We flew Air Vanuatu from Sydney to Port Vila; it took just over 3 hours then transferred to the domestic carrier Vanair for a 1-hour flight to Santo. The flight attendants fussed over Tom and Jack, this was our first experience with the local Ni Vanuatu people. We soon learnt that they all love children, it is part of their culture. Timmy from Heritage Tours met us at the airport and we were on the ferry, the Aore Flyer heading for the resort in no time.

It is a responsibility organizing a family holiday, time is precious these days and I wanted all of us to enjoy our time together. This proved to be a great family holiday yet we were able to get out and go diving without feeling worried or guilty. Our diving was pre booked with Allan Power Dive Tours, and we organised not to dive for the first two days and let Jack and Tom settle in at the resort. This proved not to be necessary but was more for our peace of mind than the kids. Tim Gilder, the manager at Allan Power Dive suggested as we had not dived for a while a good option would be to take advantage of the tank hire offered by the resort and go for an easy reef dive right out the front of our bungalow. This was a great idea, we enjoyed the dive with the amazing fish life, it enabled us to regain our confidence in the water and give Jack and Tom a trial run with their nanny, Marie.

The next day was our first boat dive; "The Lady" a 9.5 metre Reefmaster took us straight from the resort wharf to the dive sites in style. We left at 8.30am, to do a double dive on the wreck of the MV Henry Bonneaud and the Bokissa North Reef. We were told it was a magical spot for photos so we hired a digital camera from the dive shop and we were not disappointed. The Henry Bonneaud was an island trader and is now an artificial reef with

lots of fish and soft coral. On descending down the anchor line you see the ship in the distance sitting at 40 metres, it is open and easy to explore. You feel a sense of freedom, dropping into the holds, swimming through the decks and peering into dark cabins. We took some great photos and the best were the bright feather stars. After a relaxing hour enjoying a chat and morning tea it was time to gear up again. Susan was looking forward to this dive, as she loves tropical reefs. Our first sight was of vibrant yellow and blue staghorn coral illuminating the water. We swam over this wonderful palette of colour to bommies with plate coral and one hundred and one varieties of fish. Susan and I hovered over the reef being entertained by their different antics and took lots of photos to show the boys. We even saw a small white tip shark hiding under a ledge. The 45-minute dive passed quickly and we were both reluctant to leave this thriving reef. It was back to the resort in time for lunch and we had the afternoon free to spend with the children.

Our first dive on the President Coolidge was from the shore at Allan Powers Dive site on Espiritu Santo. It is located on the waters edge directly in front of the wreck site of the President Coolidge. Allan over the past 40 years has made the site very diver friendly and Susan although not keen on shore dives found it very easy. Our first dive was the Promenade Deck at 35 metres, we descend down the guideline and saw the bow looming in the distance, then dropped down the side past the 3-inch gun and huge shells, past the holds and on to the promenade deck. We swam back on top of the wreck and saw rifles, helmets gas masks and other equipment left on the ship. Both Susan and I were amazed at the size of the ship and the gear still remaining but the marine life was equally impressive. When we did shore dives Tom and Jack came with us and played on the beach with other children while we dived. They were supervised by a nanny arranged by Tim. This provided the boys with an outing and after diving we enjoyed morning tea at the dive shop and spent a few hours exploring the main town called Luganville.

The next day was a boat dive on the President Coolidge. Marie met the boys at the wharf, the boys looked forward to their time with Marie and she never seemed rattled by Jack and Tom's boyish behaviour. We all became fond of this warm local lady who had made an immediate connection with our family. I wished a number of times we could hide her in our bags and take her home. 'The Lady' picked us up at the wharf and took us to the mid ship mooring, we were able to descend straight into the engine room. We could see that this saved us a 150-metre swim and a lot of air. We did 3 other dives on the Coolidge and they were all as great. We had at first been hesitant to take on such a challenge as the President Coolidge after not diving for years but it is possible to start easy and progress on the ship as you gain experience and confidence. We were hooked on this huge wreck, I was fascinated in the war relics from the days when it was a troop carrier and Susan loved the art deco interior fittings remaining from when it was a luxurious cruise liner. The fish life captivated us and the deco stops on Allan's coral garden with numerous anemones and fish was a great way to finish the dives.

Aore Island Resort was ideal. We stayed in a Deluxe Beachfront Bungalow, they were spacious and we had a separate bedroom providing us with some privacy and quiet times. The bungalow was on the waters edge and the boys entertained themselves on the beach chasing crabs and collecting shells. The large restaurant, Nakamal is very impressive with a Melanesian style high-pitched thatched roof. The food was delicious with local seafood and Santo beef. They have a mealtime and menu for kids. Most nights we took advantage of a baby sitter and dined on the terrace. It is a special setting with the lights from town

reflecting across the water. We were able to rekindle a little romance, say no more. The boys were kept entertained with the pool, kayaking, jungle walks and fish watching in the resort's coral garden. Jack learnt to snorkel and loved it and we have promised him when we return we will get Tim take him on a dive as a Bubblemaker. Tom promised to return and marry Marie.

It was all too easy! **We now spread the news, it is possible to combine a family holiday and diving.**

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