



# Stranded on a rig among the seals

A morning tour to a natural gas field turned into an overnight stay when media visited the Maui A offshore platform last week, writes **Matt Rilko**.

**T**o set foot on Taranaki's Maui A offshore platform you must first learn to cheat death. Not all forms of death, just helicopter crash death, which is a very real possibility when flying 35 kilometres out to sea to land on the relative pinhead that is the rig.

My one day of training, in a pool of warm salty water in Spotswood, cost about \$1100 and in my case was paid for by Shell Todd Oil Services.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Rob Jager," said STOS boss Rob Jager when I met him at 6.15am the next morning in the Helicopter NZ hanger at New Plymouth airport.

I was one of three media types going to the rig that day. The plan was to fly out to the rig, walk around, see the flash new fully automated drilling operation, have a biscuit or two and fly home again.

By 7.30am everything was going to plan and we were on the rig talking with rig boss Greg Lester about safety. There is hardly a wall of his rig free of warnings and directions to ensure no-one so much as cuts themselves shaving. "Unfortun-

ately 84 days ago someone twisted their ankle. That is not good enough," Greg told us gravely. "Guys, you are duty bound to intervene if you see something up there that is unsafe. You have to say."

It was serious stuff and it made Rob smile from ear to ear. As chairman of the government's Workplace Health and Safety Taskforce and boss of Shell New Zealand, health and safety is Rob's main squeeze.

There is much to take in on the rig, from the yellowing 1970s decor of the living quarters to the sumptuous lunch menu to the mournful squeaking of a wind sock on the rig's helicopter deck 40 metres above the Tasman Sea.

"There's a seal eating a fish down there," I said in a not altogether seemly level of excitement. "He's got a gurnard."

"We used to fish off here. It was good fishing," said Greg. "But we would break our line and the submersible would get tangled in it so it had to stop."

From the helideck we could also see the machine that brought us to the rig in the first place – the automated well drilling technology. It removes humans from one of the most dangerous jobs on any rig.

The particular well operation we were watching it drill was targeting a pocket of gas 4000m under the sea. After 34 years the big easy gas is gone, Rob tells us. Pockets are all that remain. But with all the infrastructure already in place, even a pocket can reap a profit. How long they will be able to keep finding these pockets is a matter of some conjecture.

It could be two years, it could

be 10, it could be even longer. There are so many variable factors determining the life of the rig it is nearly impossible to know when it will be shut down.

The best part of the visit arguably came after that when we descended to the walkways beneath the drill floor, about 20 metres above the sea. From here we could see the famous seal colony. About 30 of them swam in rows like fat glistening sea sausages bobbing in the push and shove of the deep blue water. It was heartening to see nature had been able to incorporate the ugly industrial island that is the rig into their life.

By 11.40am we were sitting down to eat lemon chicken on rice and being told the wind had got too strong for the helicopter to pick us up.

"You might be stuck here for the night," Greg said.

That "might" turned into a definite by 2pm and, in the following 24 extra hours we were forced to stay on the rig we read 23 magazines each, watched one Super 15 game, played two games of Yuka, slept for eight hours in a bunk, participated in one 5am evacuation alarm, had two helicopter rides home cancelled and ate six times.

The last meal was a steak the size of a book and though I didn't really need it I ate it anyway. What else was there to do.

"You were getting into that suit a piece of cake when you came yesterday," said Rob as my steak-filled legs struggled into my bright orange survival outfit with the ride home finally on its way.

"Now you can hardly get it on." Fairfax NZ



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PAGE 2 of 2



**Rig boss:** Maui A team leader Greg Lester talks with reporter Matt Rilkoff (green hat) and Jacqueline Baker of Shell Todd Oil Services on the helideck of the Maui A rig off the Taranaki coast.