

FLORIDA'S BEST DIVING

Author Rick Bowen

**By
Rick Bowen**

Rick Bowen's
Underwater Explorer
Television Series

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DIVING FLORIDA AND THE CARRIBEAN

“Underwater Explorer,” a television series based on the pilot show in 1993, is planning productions of the show throughout Florida and the Carribean for TV and internet worldwide.

Resort properties and dive services who desire to have their operations showcased are needed to be included in the production. Your property, dive charter service and/or product will also appear in all media releases, advertisements, and titles of credits. This service is provided free of charge.

Your help and advice is most welcomed and appreciated. The show will go out to a potential viewing audience of all internet users.

For further information, contact Rick Bowen at 865) 690-8521, Executive Producer for “Underwater Explorer.”

Sincerely,

Rick Bowen
Executive Producer



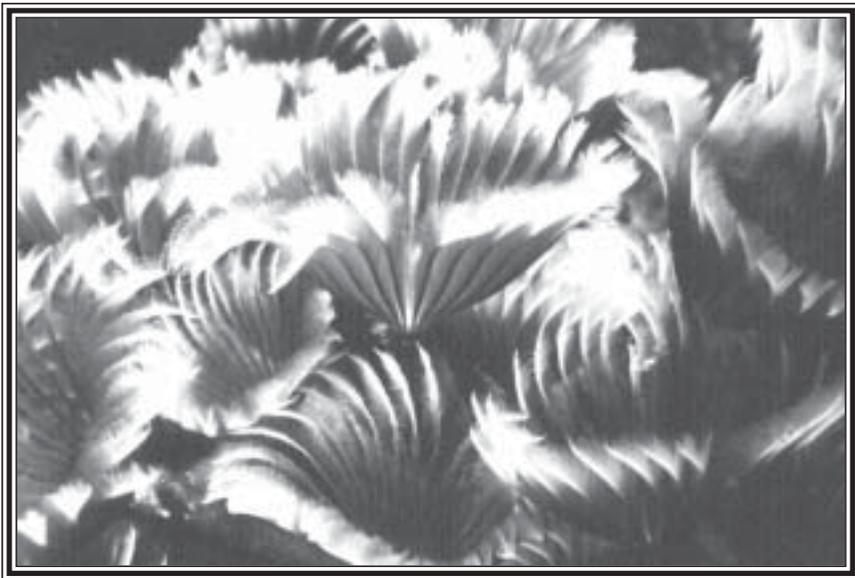
Peacock slough *Jim McNutt*



Ginnie Spring Cafe, Wes Skiles.



Jim McNutt Photos. Tube Sponges, Elkhorn Coral.



I can still remember my first Florida dive at age twelve in incredible Silver River, which flows out of Florida's Silver Springs, the home of production for Lloyd Bridges' "Sea Hunt" and many other underwater movie and TV productions. As I put my head under the water, I was amazed to see visibility as I had only read about and colorful underwater plants flowing in the gentle current along this jungle like river paradise.

Along the shore, the canopy of tropical growth was enhanced by colorful birds and monkeys swinging through the trees. The dive was over all too quickly, and, I went back into fantasy imagination trying to devise a way to get back there as soon as possible! I've been getting back to Florida diving several times a year for the past thirty years and plan to continue exploring this fascinating underwater wonderland as long as I possibly can. It is through this experience that I have come to know the best diving that Florida has to offer and researched and explored every nook and cranny that might have potential for superb diving adventures. Throughout this book, I'll save you time and expense in determining where these areas are in Florida and how to avoid the second and third rate dive areas where the adman's pitch has painted glowing pictures of tropical splendor, unlimited visibility, and exciting marine life, only to have divers be disappointed with diving a great reef composed of a trash pile or a reef that shows relief of about one foot off the bottom with three feet of visibility.

Florida's Best General Dive Areas

Florida's best diving is made up of Northern Florida's pan-handle diving, central and northern Florida's crystal clear springs, and diving in the State's most popular dive area from the Palm Beaches south to the Keys.

Florida Springs

My first encounter with Florida Spring diving was in the aforementioned Silver River, which does require a boat, as the nearest boat ramp is six miles downstream from the headspring, which is not diveable unless you happen to be renting the entire spring for a movie shoot or television special. There are other springs which

offer far easier access and offer unlimited visibility, and, most do not have a fee to dive. As you probably have a week or two enjoy Florida diving on a typical Florida vacation, I will point out the most popular springs in this area that you simply do not want to miss. If you drive to Florida, the best way to break the drive is to dive a spring or two on the way down or back while also enjoying the best reefs that Florida has to offer.

Of all the dozens of springs in primarily central and northern Florida, the most incredible visibility coupled with many fish and options of camping, boating, and other topside activities has to be beautiful Ginnie Spring, out of High Springs, Florida. The brochures boast visibility in excess of 300' and, they're not kidding!

I first discovered Ginnie Spring in 1968, while on a high school spring break with three school mates, all of whom I introduced to diving. Knowing that their desire was to go to Daytona Beach or Ft. Lauderdale to search out beaches and other subtleties of the educational process, I promised them absolutely no boredom if they would simply learn basic scuba and follow me to several new dive locations. Not to jump ahead, but all three classified that trip as the best vacation that they had each been on up until that time.

In 1968, Ginnie Spring was primitive as a jungle paradise, because that's exactly what it was! Armed with a two page map from a Jacksonville dive store, we eventually found the headspring after traveling sand roads and getting lost several times. The headspring was so clear that we all sat in disbelief after getting our heads wet for the first time. There in 18 feet of water we saw many fish and a cave at the bottom of the basin to which we dared to peer into but not penetrate more than a few feet. There were probably not more than a dozen cave divers at that time in the world, and, no formal cave diving training that we had ever heard of. Upon looking downstream, we could see almost limitless, and, I knew that this was the clearest water that I had ever seen – clearer than all of the other springs that I had dived. We later came to find out that it was purer than the water we drink!

*The author
with Mel
Fisher,
founder of the
\$400 million
wreck of the
Atocha.*



Ginnie Springs. Note the incredible visibility.



A \$10,000 Treasure buried in the Florida Keys by Jim McNutt of Nautilus Journal in 1987. To date, there has been no reports of finding it. (It's off Indian Key). Photo by Jim McNutt



Singer Island of the Palm Beaches.

We were told that there was another smaller spring a couple of hundred yards east of the main spring, but that finding it might be difficult. The Santa Fe River, into which Ginnie and her sister springs flow, was flooding at that time, and we were told to wade through the swamp to a point where we could see a rope hanging down from a tree. Below that rope and under about four feet of muddy river and swamp water, would be another spring. After crawling through this snake infested jungle, we found the rope, hesitated about going under such black water, but, sure enough, we broke through to another incredible spring with the same visibility as the headspring. I only recount early year discoveries to point out the rustic and demanding aspect of some diving in the late sixties. Although I was 6'1" and weighed 215 in shape from hitting the weights and playing football, trudging through that swamp with full dive gear and weights for 200 yards was not what it's like today.

Ginnie Springs was purchased privately in the seventies, and the renovation of this beautiful site is truly amazing. Wooden platforms have been built around the headspring with easy entry, and, best of all, the structures blend right into the rustic setting of the area. Although Ginnie is commercially operated and a fee is charged for entry, it's worth every penny, especially if it's your first time. I would rate this one, if not THE best spring dive in Florida. If you are near this site (It's just 20 miles from Interstate 75) by all means dive Ginnie Spring. It also has one of the most beautiful campgrounds of any spring, as you can camp right on the Santa Fe River or nearby one of the many springs in the area. If you have a boat, there is a boat ramp which will enable you to dive many more springs along this wild and scenic river. However, you certainly don't need one in order to dive Ginnie. Campgrounds are also located just a few miles away and are most reasonable.

Troy Spring is perhaps the next most popular spring, as it has depths exceeding 70' and good visibility. Plus, this dive is free. As the spring sometimes closes by way of land for various reasons, it is best to check with local dive shops before going to the spring by land. By water, access is year-round. If by land, just follow the map location provided by local dive shops and remember to close the gates behind

you, as this spring is on private property, and, the owner is nice enough to let divers use the site and only requests that gates be closed, as he has livestock near the area.

The third best spring diving is called Peacock Spring and is about 25 miles from the town of Branford, which is regarded as the center of central Florida spring diving. The head spring is not commercialized and is owned and monitored by the State. There is a dive shop and restaurant about a mile from the spring, which has a very rustic jungle like appearance to it similar to most of the springs. A cave below the head spring allows safe penetration to experienced and certified cave divers and fish weave in and out of the entrance to the cave making this dive extremely photogenic.

Madison Blue Springs – Perhaps one of the most convenient springs to dive in Florida is located 12 miles west of I-75 on State Rd. 6. This spring has a beautiful basin and cave system. Camping is available in pristine campsites near the beautiful Withlacoochee River and nature trails wind by the river. The area is near the Florida-Georgia border and offers a great way to break up a road trip either on the way down or back. (904) 971-2880

These four spring areas – Ginnie, Troy, Peacock, and Madison Blue will give any diver a complete sampling of the best in Florida spring diving, and, all four can be done in a day or day and a half, depending upon your interest.

Florida Panhandle

For those divers who don't want to drive or fly to the south Florida reefs and Keys diving, the panhandle offers good diving in Destin, Panama City and points in-between. The Panhandle also boasts excellent spring diving about 50 miles from Destin and Panama City.

The one main point you want to remember about diving the panhandle is to call about visibility first! Don't even leave home until you have verified visibility from at least two dive shops, because gulf diving visibility is controlled by wind, rain, and other volatile forms of weather, and can take days to get back to being diveable once the sand is stirred up. I've been to Destin and Panama City and had 50' visibility in the inlet, and also been out to sea on the same day with 2' visibility, so, be sure and call first.

Some of the better diving is found right off the inlets at both Destin and Panama City. The Destin jetty extends out with depths to about 25', and may fish can be found in the inlet. You have to

Contacts

Springs – Northern Florida

Ginnie Springs 800-874-8571
Troy Springs
Peacock
Madison Blue Springs 904-971-2880

Springs – Florida Panhandle

Morrison Springs 904-836-4223
Vortex Springs
Cypress Springs

Destin, Panama City Recommended Dive Shops

Fantasea Dive Shop 904-837-0732 - Destin
Hydrospace Dive Shop 904-234-3063
Panama City Dive Center 904-235-3390

Palm Beaches Recommended Dive Shops

Jim Abernathy's Scuba Adventures 561-842-6356

Key Largo Dive Shops

Atlantis Dive Center 305-451-3020
Quiessence Dive Shop 305-451-0037
American Divers 305-341-0037

Marathon Dive Shops

Halls Diving Center 305-743-5929

Lower Keys

Looe Key Reef Resort 305-872-2215

Key West Dive Shops

Southpoint Divers 800-824-6811
Captains Corner Dive Center 305-296-8865

close at hand for a completely computerized molecular frequency locator capable of scanning, analyzing, and locating a great variety of subsurface anomalies for distances and depths of one-half mile or more.

Side scan sonar, magnetometers, and lazer like gold and silver detectors have been involved in major recent finds and are absolutely crucial to bringing up gold and silver cargos. Very expensive – yes! Essential – definitely, yes! Prior to the development of these type machines, one salvor who was fortunate enough to have made a multi-million dollar find simply by accident, was hounded day and night by would be salvors who wanted to duplicate his efforts. When asked the best way to get into the business (remember, this was before modern technology), his advice was to go get about \$200,000, lease a boat, and buy a six pack of beer. Go out on the boat and pile the money on the deck and sit in a lounge chair and enjoy your six pack while watching the money blow away, ‘cause you’ll save a lot of time and work in this manner! How right he was back then, because the chances of discovery and recovery were far less than today.

Underwater treasure salvage is a lot of work, time, and expense. Remember, it took Mel Fisher 17 years to find the Atocha “Mother Lode.” On the other hand when some sceptic assures me that it can’t possible by done, I recall that saying, “Far better it is to have dared mighty things, even though checked by failure, than to live in that gray twilight that knows neither failure nor victory.”

With that in mind, the best of luck in your quest for riches from the sea.

(Should you have questions or comments, let me hear from you with a self addressed stamped envelope to Rick Bowen, 8 Canberra Dr., Knoxville, TN 37923)

About the Author

Rick Bowen is President of Rick Bowen Productions. Bowen is a certified diver since 1963 and has an interest in underwater treasure salvage. He is also the Executive Producer for the TV Show “Underwater Explorer.)

while in the area. A key to diving these inlets is to look up the tide tables in the newspaper to determine when high tide is. Best diving is done about one hour before peak high tide, as other times when the tide is going out, the visibility drops to zero, Due to the dark water being driven back into the ocean during low tide.

As with most of the best of Florida diving, a boat is necessary to reach the best spots, and, diving has changed for the better over the years.

I can remember diving the Keys in 1968 when diving was emerging as a sport, and about the only way to get out to the reefs was to rent a small boat with two or three other people and take a shot on finding the reef. We were given a map and cautioned not to run aground or get out of the channel if we wanted to make it back. Naturally after being told that “You can’t miss the reef,” we always did. It took over an hour to get to the reefs several miles offshore, and, chances were, when we did find the reef, we missed the best parts or sometimes did the classic “sand dive” having missed the reef altogether. Now, dive boat charters can be arranged from “Six Packs,” (Boats holding no more than 6 divers) to larger boats that take 20-25 divers to the reefs. Although the thought sometimes comes to mind, “I wish I had my own boat here so I could dive when wanted,” keep in mind this fact. The charter services are run by Coast Guard approved professionals who have been to the sites many times and can pinpoint the exact best dive sites without delay, due to advanced electronics, these charters are worth the cost to let a pro take you to the reefs. Use your own boat only if you are an experienced diver knowledgeable of the reef locations. You don’t waste time in trying to find the reefs, nor worry about hitting something in the water, running aground, or being liable for several hundred or thousands of dollars worth of damage to a rented boat.

Panhandle Springs

The two best known springs for diving in the Florida Panhandle are Morrison Spring, which is commercially operated with a compressor on site, and Vortex Spring, also a commercially operated spring.

carry your gear about 1/4 mile to the jetty, but it's a dive you must do Morrison is one of the largest springs in the State with a huge basin going down into a cave at the bottom of the headspring. Camping is also available and also at nearby sites. If you are in the Panhandle region, don't miss this dive, as it is one of the top dives in the area.

Vortex Spring features an underwater cave system. While swimming through this corridor, you will have the sense of swimming through a whale's belly, as the six foot high, rounded corridor has an otherworldly effect, and, this experience is a must opportunity. Camping is also available.

There is a third newly developed spring called Cypress Spring nearby that features excellent visibility and also a cave system. This rounds out the best spring diving in the panhandle area.

Panhandle diving features good inlet diving when the tide is high and the weather is calm. Charters to offshore reefs include low relief reefs with plentiful fish life along with two 500' Liberty Ships. Use the pro charters that can put you right on the sites.

South Florida Diving

By far and away, Florida's best diving begins at West Palm Beach and heads south. I realize that most divers have a limited vacation time to sample Florida's best, and, that's why I won't mention other areas with less than good visibility. There is a reason that West Palm Beach diving is considered among Florida's best, and, that reason is the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream brings crystal clear water laden with nutrients for fish life only a quarter mile offshore that helps visibility average 50' with 100' possible on occasion. The Palm Beaches have great diving and topside activities. You can tell that this is a very special place, as millionaires and wealthy industrialists who could live anywhere in the world choose to spend their winters in Palm Beach. The sweet smelling seabreeze that almost constantly blows keep the climate just about perfect in the winter and summer. Even the inlet on a high tide brings visibility of up to forty feet. The all around diving experience of the Palm Beaches

Primary equipment for the well prepared salvor is a side scan sonar, which can run you about \$50,000. This type machine was used by U.S. Navy ships searching for the Korean Air Lines flight 007 several years ago in the Sea of Japan. The sonar emits pulses horizontally as well as vertically and is towed behind a ship. The ship crisscrosses a pre-determined area and marks the "hits" on a chart. Divers later check out the hits for possible wrecks.

Magnetometers detecting ferrous metals can pinpoint anchors and possible cannons. However, the magnetometer has one possible drawback in Caribbean waters. Often the only telltale sign of a possible wreck are anchors and cannon. During World War II, a tremendous need arose for scrap metal. Salvage vessels combed the Bahamas, Florida, and a vast area of the Caribbean and brought up thousands of anchors and cannons for scrap iron uses, thereby destroying the telltale signs of Galleon wrecks.

Modern detection devices are being built that detect ONLY the presence of gold and silver, bypassing all other metals. One of these machines is called the "Omatron" and was used in detecting the supposed remains of a wreck 515 feet long and 138 feet wide, located at an elevation of 6,300 feet in Turkey. The vessel is thought to be the remains of Noah's Ark, as the size is described Biblically. The presence of iron bulkhead fasteners has been confirmed by metal detectors and ground penetrating radar. It is reported by Dell Winders (P.O. Box 1298, Haines City, FL. 33844), that the device has located over 25 ship wrecks of portions thereof, on the beaches of Florida. The machine is described as a long range, subsurface, discriminating, molecular frequency, metal scanning device. (Whew!) A scientist explains that the machine works on light wave particles. Theoretically, by duplicating and transmitting the molecular frequency of the object that is sought, namely gold or silver, the machine can be programmed to locate almost any solid material. At present, the inventor, Mr. John Fales, of Ft. Ogden, Florida, has programmed the instrument to locate platinum, gold, silver, copper, lead, and iron. The machine is still in an experimental state; however, at present, it gives engineers, archeologists, and treasure hunters an alternate method of surveying sites in a "non-destructive manner." The technology is

mid was a room full of solid gold statues. Now before you go get your swamp boots on, I'd like to hear a little more about that one, as I've never heard of this pyramid existence other than from several specialized research authorities, and this sounds like a job for National Geographic! Get me on the plane when this one takes off, as the so-called "Bimini Road" and Bermuda Triangle have fascinated me since youth.

From the mystical past of long forgotten civilizations, we'll return to factual reality of scientific salvors tools that have made possible several billion dollars of recoveries in recent years – tools that did not exist even several years ago.

You can have the best research in the World. You can even have discovered a wreck site with anchors, timers (if they haven't already been eaten by Toredos Worms), and cannons. However unless you can pinpoint the gold and silver under the sand, and, sometimes for miles around the wreck like the Atocha, you haven't brought home the proverbial bacon.

There exists in Florida well over 50 Galleon wrecks that were known to have carried bullion, gems, and artifacts, some of which was recovered, and much of which has not. Almost any Keys charter dive boat can take you to the wreck of the San Jose, from which much has been recovered, but from which a lot more awaits the well prepared salvor. Modern treasure hunting tools can save lots of time and money that otherwise might be wasted in trying to determine if a wreck contains gold or silver. Used to be, salvors would spend weeks and months blowing sand around wreck sites with 6" vacuum pumps. Later, the "mailbox" was developed, which allowed huge volumes of water blown down from prop wash to clear huge craters of sand to be cleared. Modern developments from the scientific world have come up with technologies that make the first detectors of 20 years ago look like play toys. Without the development of these technologies, one would be an idiot to enter the treasure recovery business. However, these new developments give the salvage diver quite a good shot, provided that his research is substantial.

Palm Beaches – A Diver's Paradise

What if you found an ideal diving area featuring 70'-100' visibility with good diving at 20'-30' depths and fantastic diving at 60'-90' depths that was three hours closer than where you had originally intended to go and fewer people knew about it! Diving the Palm Beaches is one of the most exciting and all encompassing diving experiences in Florida featuring great fish life and dependable visibility throughout both the summer and winter months.

I first discovered Palm Beach diving in 1970 when the rest of the diving community was heading to the Keys. As I didn't have time to drive the extra three hours, I stopped at Palm Beach hoping to catch a quick dive before returning home to Tennessee. I was completely surprised to find that the lush reef life was almost completely unknown in the diving world at that time and offered some of the best diving in the U.S. I was especially overwhelmed to find that even the inlet and inland waterway during high tide boasted a surprising 40' or better visibility!

Today, the Palm Beaches is one of the state's most thriving diving centers due to three factors that all divers take into consideration prior to planning a dive trip. First, visibility, is usually in the 60'-70' range with some days exceeding 100' - top to bottom visibility, as they call it. I have been on the two popular wrecks that lie in depths of 90' and easily been able to make out the freighter below. Even the shallow 20' "Cable Reef" lying 1/4 mile offshore from the Breakers Hotel has 40'-50' visibility on a good day. This shallow reef is a good beach dive on a clam day and takes about 15 minutes to swim from shore. However, one of my recent dives included the use of the new underwater scooter, which is revolutionizing the diving world. Without hardly any effort on my part, the scooter got me to the reef in 7 minutes and allowed over an hour's exploration on the reef that features tiny tropicals, queen angels, and an occasional large nurse shark.

Secondly, fish life in the Palm Beaches is truly amazing considering the huge numbers of reef fish and large barracudas found on the deeper 60'-90' reefs that are constantly bathed in the warm Gulf

makes this one of my all time favorites for Florida diving.

Stream that comes closer to shore off Palm Beach than any other place in North America, and also accounts for the large numbers of fish that are seen on the deeper reefs. You can almost always count on seeing a nurse shark resting under one of the many ledges along the reef and also large sea turtles that glide over the reefs or rest under the ledges. By far and way, your most beautiful reef fish encounter will be with one of the many Queen Angelfish that abound in these waters. Multi-colored blues, yellows, blacks, and combinations of this fish's colorings make one stare in awe of this magnificent fish. You'll see several on both shallow and deep reefs.

Although your charter boat captain and dive shop operator are your best sources for specific diving areas, I have found that after making over 1,000 dives in this area over a 16 year period, that my absolute favorite dive is Breakers Reef. Lying 3/4 mile offshore from the Breakers Hotel in 60' of water, this reef has it all! Your charter boat captain will most likely drop you over the "trench", which is a man-made cut through the reef of about 100 yards and about 15' wide with ledges of up to 10ft. A literal aquarium, the ledges are filled with turtles, nurse sharks, queen angels, and tropicals. You could spend an entire dive on this trench alone. Your dive guide then leads you on a fantastic drift dive along the edge of the reef line that features ledges of approximately 10' in height. Most importantly, the schools of grunts, tropicals, and other reef fish is incredible. You literally pass through walls of fish at some points with an occasional barracuda passing through to check you out and certainly vice-versa. As the dive boat follows your group overhead, you glide almost effortlessly in the 1 1/2 knot current through the constantly changing reef terrain during the 40 minute dive. It's amazing how the dive guides can gauge the end of the dive to the exact end of the reef, as the reef and the dive always come to a sooner than wanted conclusion.

A special highlight of Palm Beach diving is the wreck of the Amarylis lying in 90' offshore from the inlet and an approximate 15 minute boat ride. One can make over 10 dives on this wreck, as I

Farther down the West Coast of Florida as the "Ten Thousand" Islands group along with Treasure Island, and other numerous cays exist wrecks in shallow water that have yielded numerous gold coins after storms, several of which no information exists in the Spanish Archives concerning their origin. These sports are best dived after storms when the bottom is radically changed from one storm to the next.

Many shipwrecks due to hurricane were salvaged by an Indian Tribe called the Caloosa Indians, specifically by Chief Carlos and his son, who literally salvaged TONS of gold and silver artifacts. There is history regarding the Cypress Swamp in south central Florida of a massive Indian vault containing over \$1 Billion worth of gold and silver as plundered by these Indians. The gold was transported from the West coast to the interior by 90 foot copper canoes, one of the canoes of which was discovered in a tributary of a river emptying into Lake Okechobe. The boat was cut into scrap and sold only for the copper value, the salvor later realizing he had lost a fortune by so doing.

Finally of site mention is the most intriguing land site I have heard about in Florida. Although it's a land site, it's so unusual that I just have to mention it, and quite frankly, if I found gold on land or while diving, the site wouldn't make one heck of a lot of difference to me!

Dr. Jay Manson Valentine, of the University of Miami, along with Frank Hudson, a Tampa based research authority pertaining to the Spanish Archives, Jack Poorbaugh, a former nine term member of the Florida State Legislature, and former Chairman of the Florida Antiquities Board in Tallahassee, have seen a wall structure in the Big Cypress Swamp in the Everglades that is 8 feet height, 4 feet thick, and one mile long on each side of a rectangle. A sample of the wall conglomerate was sent to the Smithsonian Institution for carbon dating which resulted in a carbon date of 20,000 years old! In the middle part of this wall structure is a pyramid 75 feet high. In 1923 an escaped convict in south Florida lived inside the pyramid for several months prior to his recapture. He stated that inside the pyra

back to Dog Island where he had a pirate camp, and deliberately sink it in shallow water on the lee side of the island by having his carpenters bore holes in the bottom until it sank. He always figured he could come back later and salvage the silver bars in the hold. Trouble is, he didn't last that long! One of his captured vessels lies in the East Pass of Dog Island under 12 feet of sand, as it was sunk by the U.S. Anti-Piracy Squadron in 1824, silver bars were known to be aboard.

One of the most amazing hoards in pirate history lies on the east end somewhere on nearby St. George Island, as a Warship was in danger of sinking, and ended up buying their cargo on 7 TONS of gold bars in a hole 8-10 feet deep in which pilings were put down to bedrock on top of which was put a wooden platform. It is reported that a gentleman discovered this hoard in the early 50's and recovered approximately 2,000 pounds of gold, after which he tried to leave the island and was arrested by government officials, who confiscated the bullion and gave him a one year jail sentence, as it was against U.S. law at that time to possess any amount of gold. It is believed that the balance of the bullion still rests on the island; however, the area is now a state park and treasure hunting is forbidden without permission of Florida State Government. Should such permission ever be granted to responsible salvors, a deep seeking magnetometer along with a sub-bottom profiler could determine the exact location of the gold bars.

Another Key site of potential recovery lies on the several islands that face the mouth of the Suwannee River. Pirates used this river for escapes from English and American gunboats, and tales exist all along the river of pirate hoards being buried and found, especially on high dune areas. Pirates always looked for high ground to bury their goodies, hopefully with Cabbage Palms or other trees to hold the ground together, so as the site would not be radically disturbed by Mother Nature before the boys came back for their loot. Pirates were also a very superstitious lot, and never buried only one chest. They always buried chests in groups of 3's or 5's. So, if you are fortunate enough to locate one chest, mag around the area, and you'll usually find several more on land locations.

tour of their home leading you through doorways and large holds where mostly natural sunlight easily penetrates. Most definitely bring or rent a camera for this dive, as it's one of the most photogenic of dive sites, offering several rolls of photo possibilities.

You've made your morning or afternoon dives and still you want more. You can't wait for tomorrow and you just HAVE to have one more dive for the day. Check the tide tables for high tide, go to the Palm Beach inlet or inland waterway with your dive flag and you'll be surprised to find an enjoyable dive in 15'-20' depths with microcosms of small reef structures in these waters that approach 40' visibility during the one hour prior to high tide. Bet you didn't know beach diving exists in these parts! A perfect way to cap off or start a day of Palm Beach diving.

The third reason for choosing Palm Beach diving is the close proximity of EVERYTHING you need in connection with a great diving vacation. There's tons of things to do and see for the non-diver as well as diver. Hotels on Singer Island, dive shops, restaurants, and boat ramps are all within a mile of each other. The Sheraton usually have special divers rates in conjunction with the leading dive charters including Franks Dive Shop, Divers World & Sea Pro.

After your dives there is much to do in the Palm Beaches, including a car tour of the incredible mansions on Palm Beach and the World reknown shopping on Worth Avenue. Lion Country Safari is also a nearby recommended adventure featuring a "drive through" an African like park with lions, hippos, monkeys, etc. You'll never be bored after diving, as restaurants and entertainment feature endless varieties for your enjoyment ranging from easily affordable to completely out of sight!

In summary, if you're looking for great diving featuring superb visibility, massive fish life, and good times after dives, check out the Palm Beaches. Discover drift diving in one of America's fastest growing dive centers, and its almost guaranteed – You'll come back!

have, and never be bored with the scenery, as walls of fish constantly hover in and around the wreck. The wreck can be safely entered and explored, and several large grouper will sometimes offer you a guided **Ft. Lauderdale – Miami Area**

Ft. Lauderdale has long been a dive center, even before the dive development of West Palm Beach; therefore, only a brief summary will be made here.

Due to the fact that the Gulf Stream flows farther offshore here, the water visibility is not as good – It's okay, however, usually in the range of 25-30 feet. Perhaps the most noteworthy dive site in the Ft. Lauderdale area is the wreck of the Mercedes, the ship that ran aground in the back yard of a Palm Beach socialite, and was later towed to Ft. Lauderdale and sunk. Although the wreck has not been down long enough to attract a major fish population, the Mercedes is still a good area wreck dive along with other wrecks diveable in the area.

Miami is now recognized as having some of the best wreck diving in Florida with additional wrecks being sunk each year. Most of these wrecks lie in 100 feet of water with visibility 40-50 feet. Any of the many dive charters can get you to these sites, and, a listing of several of the best follow in this booklet.

Florida Keys — Best US. Diving

The best diving in the United States and Florida is, of course, the Florida Keys. When I began diving the Keys in 1967, there were few dive shops and many people thought that you could dive from the beach. As most divers can tell you, a boat is necessary to get to the reefs some 5-6 miles offshore, and, today, there are scores of dive shops throughout the Keys, and many of the most popular dive sites have buoy moorings, so as to pinpoint exact locations of the best spots on the reefs and to minimize anchor damage to the reefs. The Gulf Stream runs close to these reefs and visibility averages 40-50 feet with 100 feet not uncommon during the summer months.

The relief or height of the coral reefs in the Keys can be excep-

by amateurs with only fins, mask, and snorkel. I loved the true story of two boys snorkeling off Vero Beach, Florida in the early 70's. While spearfishing, they disturbed a sand shark, which, upon swimming away churned the sand and exposed a shiny, object, which turned out to be a gold coin. By fanning the ocean bottom, the boys found over \$200,000.00 worth of coins that day and bought themselves a dramatic case of "gold fever" for a lifetime!

Also common treasure lore is the fisherman from Miami, who while returning from a trip to Key West, drifted off to sleep in his boat only to be awakened when the boat ran aground in 4 feet of water in 1939. Getting out of the boat, he saw in the clear water hundreds and thousands of pig iron looking bars weighing about 70 pounds each. He threw one in the boat for ballast and returned to Miami. Several weeks later, he accidentally cut into the bar which was black on the outside, but proved to be silver on the inside! Trying to figure out where he had run aground weeks before, his best calculation was that he was just off the bank near Tavernier in the Keys. He went back many times along the coast to find the spot, but never did, as storms often cover and uncover wrecks in shallow water. The bars are still there for the taking. With modern equipment, the spot could be relocated with all the new nuclear resonance and lazer developments available that we'll get into later in this article.

Although wrecks exist from Massachusetts to Key West, I've found the most potentially attractive sports to south of Vero Beach on the East Coast of Florida and most of the panhandle locations due to clear water. There's no sense in trying to work a site in zero visibility with the presence of sharks. A favorite potential site exists in the panhandle and composed of three islands that reportedly contain over \$75,000,000.00 in Spanish and pirate booty in caches on these islands. The islands are St. George, St. Vincint, and Dog Island. Pirate activity was great on these islands, as pirates such as Billy Bowlegs didn't like to wait for storms and hurricanes to wreck the Galleons – the wait was too long. He just went out and found a heavy laden Galleon, robbed the vessel, killed the crew, and burned the ship which sank with no witnesses. Thus originated the pirate saying, "Dead men tell no tales." Sometimes Billy would capture a ship and take it

It is estimated that over one third of all the gold mined in the New World lies in less than 30' of water near shore due to shipwreck, which amounts to well over \$2,000,000,000 (\$2 Billion) in potential recoveries. Mel Fisher, discoverer of the \$400 Million wreck of the Atocha off Key West summed it up best when he recently stated, "I've dived the coast of Florida from Jacksonville to Key West, and, it seems like there's a treasure wreck about every quarter mile. I've found mine. How about coming' down and get yours!"

Spoken by a man who lived his dream and made it come true, this inspirational story has sparked interest in lucrative Spanish and pirate riches beneath the sea, including the discovery of a \$1.6 Billion Dollar shipwreck off the Bahamas named the Maravilla by Memphis, TN. businessman Herbert Humphreys, Jr. and Art Hartman of Ft. Pierce, FL. The two have taken over \$3 Million thus far from the and are reportedly getting closer to the discovery of a life-sized Madonna weighing over 2,000 pounds of pure gold along with a 400 pound gold table inlaid with emeralds and diamonds which was listed on the cargo manifest. As it turns out on many Spanish Galleons, the actual gold and silver found may exceed the listed cargo manifest by as much as one third, as many passengers and crew members smuggled gold aboard to avoid paying the King's "Royal Fifth" or 20% tax.

The two keys to successful underwater treasure and artifact recovery are research and sophisticated electronic equipment. Before any expenditure is made searching a potential site, the Spanish Archives are searched for clues to locations. On each ship sinking, the Spanish kept vast records, often exceeding 10,000 pages on each wreck along with a site description as best they could. Often in shallow water shortly after sinking, the Spanish would salvage much of the cargo before later storms sanded over the site. Key West was such a salvage base, as were many of the Keys areas. Much of the early salvage was performed by native Bahamians, as they could hold their breath longer. Women were regarded as better divers than men, because they could stay in the water for longer periods of time without the effects of hypothermia. However, in many cases, the galleons were sunk in remote locations and rescue was sometimes impossible. These virgin sites remain to this day, and are sometimes discovered

tional, often rising 15-20 feet off the bottom in some areas.

The Keys are divided into three main groups – Upper Keys with Key Largo being the center of diving activity, The Middle Keys, the center being Marathon, and The Lower Keys, with the main diving area of Key West and Looe Key, about 27 miles northeast of Key West. As any of a number of dive charter services are available, I will offer a sampling at the end of the booklet. The most popular reefs in the Keys are Mollasses Reef off Key Largo, French Reef off Key Largo, and Looe Key, off Big Pine Key in the Lower Keys.

What About The Rest of Florida?

There is diving in these areas such as Jacksonville, Daytona, and the West Coast, but it is not near as clear as the waters of the springs and coral reefs of South Florida, and often requires long boat rides to the nearest reef or wreck. As you have a limited time to dive Florida, only the best areas were included.

This will conclude Florida's Best Diving, and I hope that years of trying to find the best dive sites at the best rates will help you in your quest for great diving. These sites can provide many years of great diving opportunities, and I hope that you will enjoy diving these beautiful underwater springs and reefs.

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TREASURE DIVING

**By
Rick Bowen**