

# Florida Holds The Key

**Caribbean-style diving can be experienced on America's Florida Keys, as Lawson Wood and his amazing imagery demonstrates ...**

## STATISTICS

WILL show you that more Americans dive in Florida, than any other place on the planet but when you consider what is on offer, it is hardly surprising. The Florida Government have been instrumental in sinking some of the world's largest (so called) artificial reefs, but there are also freshwater pools, caves and caverns with a constant warm water temperature all year round, which certainly appeals to winter divers.

There are great encounters with large critters like manatees and of course, the further you travel south towards the Florida Keys, the more the country is influenced by the might of the Gulf Stream. There is great ease of access down to the Sunshine State and more than anything else; Americans are able to experience almost the full range of Caribbean style diving without leaving the country or need of a passport.

There are very good quality coral reefs, albeit a 20 to 30 minute ride offshore, a huge wealth

of marine life and I can honestly testify to the fact that I can see more different varieties of Caribbean reef fish here than most other locations in the Caribbean. All well and good for the Americans, but why should British divers opt for this particular diving destination?

Some of the largest artificial reefs in the world have been sunk off the east and west

coasts of Florida and particularly along the eastern and south-eastern flanks of the Florida Keys. The Department of Tourism which is responsible for the promotion of the 'Keys is so switched on, that it has an annual advertising budget that surpasses most large multi-national companies, such is their power that no wonder tourists make their annual pilgrimage to a long string of sand bars connected by bridges that are really only appreciated in Hollywood Blockbuster movies.

This tourist board will do (almost) anything to get divers down and that includes sinking a large number of derelict ships out in the 36m (120ft) range at the confluence of the eddies which are produced by



Christ statue, Pennekamp Park

that constant flow of the Gulf Stream. This nutrient and plankton rich current is so full of microscopic marine life, that in hardly a blink of an eye, the ships sunk as diver attractions are soon covered in a patina of marine organisms and the ubiquitous reef fish which love those environments: Horse-eye jacks, trevally, barracuda, chromis, creole wrasse, hamlets, snapper, grunt and parrotfish.

Not only are there artificial reefs, old ship hulks sunk as tourist attractions; there are also the remnants of the Spanish treasure fleet which foundered on the shallow shoals and sandbars around the 'Keys. These ships carried so much wealth back to Spain that only 10% of their cargos ever reached the 'Old World' and that 10% bankrupted the country for over 300 years. [If you have time in Key West go and check out Mel Fisher's share of what was brought up – whilst he was still alive – and what is still being brought up today from the Nuestra Señora de Atocha]. That of course leaves the other 90% of the Spanish treasure ships still to be found, many of which are recorded as coming to grief upon the shallow reefs of the Florida Keys.

There are also ships dating back to the American civil war and, as always, ships that get wrecked in shallow waters are not only salvaged extensively, they are always pounded incessantly by the storms which rumble up this coast from June to November each year. However, it is those ships sunk as diver attractions that are a 'must see' for most divers and I can honestly say that I agree with them!

South of Key West at the very end of Highway #1 you can take a small seaplane or boat trip out to the Dry Tortugas, the very tip of the sandbars which created the Florida Keys. The snorkel-

ling here around Fort Jefferson – a former Civil war prison – is excellent and seems so far away from the rather hectic road that connects the rest of the 'Keys.

The Florida Keys are roughly fish-hook shaped and are really an eon old result of the massive outflow of water from the Mississippi River, coupled with the permanent current of the Gulf Stream, combined with the might of the trade winds and the periodic, yet fairly predictable hurricanes and tropical storms which pile even more sand and coral debris onto the shores of the Florida Keys.

Needless to say, virtually all of the diving undertaken is well offshore and most of the smaller diving operators up and down the 'Keys will just not venture out the three or four miles to where the reefs and wrecks are, if the weather is in any way inclement. There are those companies who will get you out there and they will tailor the diving to the experience of the diving group. This may exclude some divers for the safety of the whole group and in all cases; the diving is set to the lowest common denominator, with safety first and foremost at the top of the list.

Decompression diving is discouraged on any of the deeper wrecks and indeed frowned upon and dive guides will cajole you along to many of the best bits of reef or wreck to see before you have to ascend to the obligatory safety stops on the mooring lines. That is not to say that they are wrong, but sometimes I would just like to stay a little bit longer. Some of the diving done in the 'Keys has the potential really for technical divers to get seriously to grips with and with great care taken in the sinking of the artificial reefs, the diving experience is the same as it can be for everyone concerned.

What better place to start than at the southernmost tip of the Continental United States and coincidentally on the largest of the ships sunk along the 'Keys. The Dry Tortugas to the south, where the amazing Fort Jefferson is located, have always been a favourite with divers and snorkellers, but all of this diving involves fairly lengthy boat rides.

From Key West, the wreck of the *General Hoyt S Vandenberg*, once used as a film prop for a Hollywood epic, sunk in 2010 is undoubtedly the star attraction. This former troopship and missile tracker has two huge radar dishes on either side of her deck. At 156m (520ft) long, it can take a number of dives to get your bearings and really appreciate the scale of the ship. You should expect some current, but the ship has several mooring buoys on her and the super-safety conscious dive leaders will make sure they get you back safely and in plenty of time. Large pelagic schools of fish are the norm here and there was even an unconfirmed but very confident sighting of a Great White Shark the week before I arrived!

With its huge American flag constantly flying from its superstructure, the ship is becoming colonised at a rapid pace. Turtle, barracuda, scores of tuna and jacks surround the ship and most divers will do a twin tank dive just to get a flavour of the amount of superstructure that is underwater. Even in rainy windswept conditions and in relatively rough seas, I was kind of reminded of venturing out into Scapa Flow, but the ship lying underneath me was in waters very much clearer than in Scotland – so much warmer, and being able to see huge vistas, is staggeringly superb with plenty of photo opportunities. Bob Holston and his wife Ceecie at Dive Key West are very much the driving force behind the

continued overpage

# Florida Holds *The Key*

continued from previous page

sinking of this ship and its promotion as it takes a lot of time and effort to get to Key West to do this particular shipwreck.

Moving up the keys in that wide sweep of mangrove swamps and sand cays; incredible bridges connect everything and amidst the scene of many a Hollywood blockbuster are the delightful reefs around Marathon. There are more fish species recorded on these reefs than anywhere else in Florida but again these reefs are also offshore and do involve some lengthy boat rides but once you get out to the Looe Key National Marine Management Area, it is all worthwhile. This triangular shaped, shallow reef has a maximum depth of only 12m (40ft) and you can swim around the classic spur and groove reef structure hunting for little critters, as well as enjoying larger fish such as tarpon and Rainbow Parrotfish.

In the channels under the bridges, Bull sharks are regularly seen and whilst fishermen have known of them for a long time, it is only recently that a number of local divers are becoming more interested where the currents push vast quantities of water through the connecting channels and are having amazing creature encounters.

Up in Islamorada a few dive centres will run you out by Alligator Key where the wreck of the *Eagle* is located nearby.

Located at the Postcard Inn, the Islamorada Dive Center's boss, legendary spearfisherman Eric Billups has been taking divers out to the *Eagle* since she was first sunk as an artificial reef in 1985. Laying on her starboard side with her bows pointing north in 33m (110ft) the *Eagle* is 86m (287ft) long and is fairly intact, apart from a large open section in front of the main wheelhouse area where the ship has been broken apart.

Every piece of the surface of this wreck is covered in marine life many layers deep with the most brilliant yellow cup corals vying for space with purple soft corals, brilliant red sponges, gorgeous Queen angelfish, hamlets, chromis, many species wrasse and parrotfish. As the shallowest part of the ship is in 20m (66ft) this is the perfect wreck to do two dives back to back to explore the entire length of the superstructure. I loved this wreck and cannot wait to get back! Eric has promised me a night dive on the wreck which I suspect will have to be seen to be believed!

Just to pique your interest is the nearby wreckage of the *Alexander Barge* sunk in 1984 in 31m (103ft) of water. The sinking of this boat was really the start of the artificial reef programme and as you can imagine this is also well encrusted in marine organisms. Overall a much

deeper dive and most would opt for the easier option on the *Eagle* as she is so close. Also nearby is the *D&B Barge* wreck which is a natural shipwreck and absolutely covered in marine life and is a great spot for fishermen, so watch out for loose fishing lines.

Concentrating on the wrecks, there are a number of historic ships and anchors littering the shallow barrier reef, but for most divers, it is the wrecks sunk as dive attractions that get the eel's share. Some of those anchors have become the focus for a dive and names such as *Pirate's Anchor* are really only to pique your interest.

Key Largo in the north is considered the epicenter for the majority of divers and in fact this long stringy island gets customers both travelling south and north, giving divers a second chance to get where they want to go, with most people diving on both the wrecks and reefs, subsequently there are more dive centres located here than any other island in the Keys. However there are also a lot of 'tourist boats' who take literally hundreds of families of snorkelers out to the reef and whilst they may be a nuisance to get your boat anchored up at a favoured dive site, they do not create any impact on the marine ecosystem at all.

You cannot dive Key Largo and the



Vandenberg, Key West



Vandenberg, Key West



Diver on the *Eagle*, Islamorada



Duane, Key Largo

great variety of wrecks there, without first visiting the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State National Marine Park. Founded in 1960 the marine park is located in an area known to have the most extensive coral reefs in the United States and covers over 75 sq miles of ocean. With over 500 species of fish recorded amongst the shallow reefs and protected mangrove forests, the shallow reef plateau has an average depth of only 8m (27ft) making it accessible for everyone.

The first marine preserve in the United States is celebrated by a wonderful statue known as the Christ of the Deep or Christ of the Abyss. Located 10km (6miles) east-northeast of the South Cut on Key Largo, the statue is a replica of that created originally by Italian sculptor Guido Galletti for Edidi Cressi who presented it to the Underwater Society of America. It has been underwater since 1961 and has been visited by literally thousands of divers and snorkelers.

This region of a large horseshoe-shaped reef often has poor visibility, but nothing detracts from the statue or the condition of the reefs themselves. Nearby Mollasses Reef to the north is however well known for its excellent visibility underwater and being so shallow gets lots of sunlight to brighten up even the dulllest day. Mollasses Reef has been undergoing

something of a transformation lately with newly seeded coral species being 'planted' on the shallow reef platforms and of those I viewed, most appear really healthy and vibrant.

Further to the north on a reef known as Wreckage Reef or The Elbow are the remains of the *City of Washington* in only 6m (20ft) of water. This steel freighter ran aground in 1891 and was pounded mercilessly by the annual storms until she was well broken up and encrusted in low hard corals, sea fans and literally thousands of Christmas Tree worms. Better known for her role in rescuing the survivors of the *Maine* when she blew up in mysterious circumstances in Havana harbour, the *Washington* is a great shallow dive in an area synonymous with clear water and good quality corals. There is a resident friendly moray eel on her as well as Hawksbill turtle.

Close by are the wooden remains and anchor chain from a ship thought to be the *Towanda* which sunk during the American Civil War. A 17th or 18th coral encrusted anchor is also found in the same vicinity. Located also in the marine protected area are several other ships also sunk as part of the artificial reef programme: the *Duane*, *Bibb* and the *Spiegel Grove*. Notwithstanding a large number of ships which have sunk naturally (or

accidentally!) these ships sunk specifically as dive attractions are a natural magnet for everything.

Another shipwreck in the immediate vicinity is the *Benwood*. A casualty of a German submarine attack during WWII and was subsequently rammed accidentally by a 'friendly' ship, later, several bombs exploded in her amidships and sent her to the bottom. Part of her superstructure was still above the surface and she was latterly used for bombing practice before her bows were blown apart as she was becoming a navigational hazard. Lying from 7.6-16.7m (25-55ft) of water, as you can imagine she is well broken up and very much a part of the extensive shallow coral reef platform.

Nearby the Mollasses light tower, the *Duane* and the *Bibb* were sunk deliberately on November 27 1987 as diver attractions. Former US Coastguard cutters, they are both 98m (327ft) long and were sunk in relatively deep water, over 30m (100ft) to be certain that they would be navigation problem free, subsequently these dives are regarded as deep wreck dives and with time underwater always a problem on these dives, that just means that you have to return several more times to get the full appreciation of the wrecks.

Having only limited time to visit these wrecks due to the onset of bad weather conditions, I was advised to dive the

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*Duane, Key Largo*



*Duane, Key Largo*



*City of Washington*



*City of Washington*

# Florida Holds *The Key*

continued from previous page



Eagle, Islamorada



Duane, Key Largo

Duane out of all three new wrecks. Not only does she have the best coral growth and fish life, her superstructure is more interesting and her crow's nest comes to within 15m (50ft) of the surface to allow you to start your safety stops, yet still be able to do some photography. Amazingly her entire uppermost steelwork is literally covered in golden cup corals (*Tubastrea coccinea*) giving the outline of the ship a golden, fuzzy appearance.

The Gulf Stream undoubtedly has a huge influence of these wrecks and oc-

asionally the unpredictable currents and eddies just rip along the shore here making diving on them virtually impossible. Dive lights are always recommended on these dives to allow you to penetrate further into the ships, but I am always quite happy to bumble about on the outside enjoying the coral growth and the fish life surrounding them.

Amazingly, when the *Spiegel Grove* was first sunk further north from the *Bentwood* and *Dixie Shoal*, she ended up on her port side, making her a difficult if not interest-

ing dive. However a few years and a few hurricanes later, she was put back up on an even keel, making her even more remarkable. Current, as always, can be a problem when you are so far out in the Gulf Stream, but the rewards are utterly amazing and I have to say that these wrecks to the east of the Islands in the Stream have to be on everyone's diving list. I only visited them briefly, but I am determined to return and also dive them at night as the colours, often hidden during the daylight hours will all be revealed in their glory after dusk.

## FLORIDA KEYS NEED TO KNOW

Lawson Wood was supported by the Florida Keys Tourism Association and the Postcard Inn in Islamorada and dived with Dive Key West; The Islamorada Dive Center; Rainbow Reef Dive Centre; and the Pennekamp State Marine Park.

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### Best Time To Go

Diving is available all year round. However there are periodic storms from the southeast which can strike the Florida Keys any time from June through to November but the summer months also yield the best visibility.

Strong currents and eddies from the Gulf Stream can cause problems on the deeper wrecks and due to the fact that the reefs and wrecks are all so far offshore, the sea conditions have to be near perfect before any dive boats will venture out into the Stream. Off shore storms along the east coast of Florida are always a problem, but for the most part, all of the reefs and wrecks are manageable.

### Underwater Visibility & Temperature

The inshore reefs along the Keys average around 15m (50ft) with greater visibility variable the further you travel offshore. The underwater topography undoubtedly has an influence on the visibility as on two back-to-back dives at the Christ Statue and then the nearby City of Washington wreck which was in shallower

water, the difference was at least 15m (50ft) better on the shallow reef where the wreck is found.

The sea temperature rarely drops below 22.2°C (72°F) in the winter months and increases by 10° on average, depending on the strength of the Gulf Stream.





Goose Barnacles (*Lepas Anserifera*) on the Eagle, Islamorada



Green Moray Eel (*Gymnothorax funebris*) on the Duane, Key Largo

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