

Top Diving Experiences in the Florida Keys

Year after year the Florida Keys draw huge numbers of visiting scuba and snorkel enthusiasts from all over the world to experience their gorgeous coral reefs, shipwrecks, and tropical ambiance. Since the beginning of the recreational dive industry, the Florida Keys have been revered as one of the world's most popular dive destinations.

Here is a roundup of some unique diving experiences available in the Florida Keys:

Search for 17th Century Treasure

Adventure-hungry certified divers can work alongside professional treasure salvage experts excavating the wrecksite of the 1622 Spanish galleon **Nuestra Señora de Atocha** during weeklong summer sessions. Believed to be the richest Spanish galleon shipwreck ever discovered, the Atocha sank in 1622 approximately 35 miles southwest of Key West. Approximately \$450 million of the vessel's treasure as well as a significant portion of its structure were discovered in 1985 by the late shipwreck salvor Mel Fisher.

Crews led by Fisher's family continue to search for the ship's sterncastle and the gold and silver bars and coins that are listed on the Atocha's manifest but remain undiscovered. The Atocha Dive Adventure gives recreational divers a rare chance to be part of the historic search.

The weeklong adventure includes training in commercial treasure salvage techniques, behind-the-scenes tours of the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum and laboratories where Atocha artifacts are conserved, and two full days of diving the site alongside salvage experts seeking the galleon's sterncastle.

Any participating diver who discovers gold, silver or artifacts will be awarded a previously conserved Atocha piece of equal value, up to \$3,000, from the Fisher family's private collection.

For more information, visit www.melfisher.com/myadventure

Discover the Sunken Christ of the Deep in the World's First Underwater Park

The Florida Keys have long set the world standard of marine conservation and ecological concern. The continental United States' only living coral barrier reef, the third largest barrier reef in the world, parallels the 126-mile chain of the Florida Keys. The extraordinary reef ecosystem, much like a tropical rain forest, supports a unique diversity of plants and animals.

To protect a portion of the reef, **John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** was dedicated in 1960 as America's first underwater preserve. The park encompasses approximately 70 nautical square miles.

One of the park's most popular dive sites is the nine-foot bronze statue of Jesus Christ that rests in 20 feet of water. The statue is a replica of the "Christ of the Abyss" statue in the Mediterranean Sea and was donated to the Underwater Society of America in 1961 by industrialist Egidi Cressi. Surrounding the "Christ of the Deep" statue, divers can expect to find large brain, staghorn and elkhorn coral formations and a four-foot barracuda who likes to be photographed. The statue has become one of the most photographed underwater sites in the world and is a popular spot for underwater weddings.

For more information, visit <http://pennekamppark.com/>

Explore the Shipwreck Trail

The **Florida Keys Shipwreck Heritage Trail** is a water-based line of notable wreck sites – suitable for both snorkeling and diving – that stretches from Key Largo to Key West. Established by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, the trail was created to encourage an appreciation and understanding of the Keys' maritime heritage.

Resting in depths from 20 to 140 feet, the wrecks on the shipwreck trail reflect a diversity of origins and locations. There are vessels of Spanish explorers dating to the early 1700s, as well as modern cargo and military ships. In recent years, centuries old historic wrecks have been joined by ships that were intentionally sunk to create artificial reefs and now are home to 55 varieties of delicate coral and nearly 500 species of fish in the sanctuary's federally protected waters.

One of these artificial reefs is the **USNS Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg**, the world's second-largest vessel ever sunk as an artificial reef. On May 27, 2009, after more than a decade of planning and funding totaling \$8.6 million, the ex-military missile-tracking ship that once tracked space launches off Cape Canaveral, Fla., and monitored Soviet missile launches during the Cold War, was added to a list of military vessels purposely sunk off the Florida Keys to become artificial reefs, thus preserving a bit of U.S. history.

The Vandenberg, which lies in nearly 150 feet of water seven miles off Key West, is recommended for advanced and wreck-certified divers.

For more information, visit <http://www.flakeys.com/diving/vandenberg.cfm>

Learn to Dive

One of nature's greatest wonders is a living coral reef, and the only one in the continental United States parallels the 126-mile length of the Florida Keys.

Scuba diving is an adventurous sport, which any healthy and active individual as young as age 10 can learn and enjoy. Scuba diving requires sophisticated equipment and instruction by certified professionals. Instruction generally lasts from one day for an introductory lesson to five days for comprehensive entry-level certification.

Also called "Open Water" certification, basic certification requires elements of classroom work and pool training, followed by one or more open-water dives at the reef. Upon passing a knowledge test and completing the required number of dives, the student becomes a certified recreational scuba diver, eligible to rent dive gear and book dive trips with most operations worldwide (please note that some destinations offer dives that require more advanced specialty training).

The price of scuba certification classes does vary throughout the country, as well as within the Florida Keys, but a basic certification course generally runs a few hundred dollars.

For more information, visit www.flakeys.com/diving/learn.cfm

For more information on diving in the Florida Keys and Key West, visit www.flakeys.com/diving



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Please see links to more images below.

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