

# Keys Traveler

An underwater photograph of a coral reef. The reef is covered in vibrant orange and yellow sponges and other coral structures. A diver is visible in the background, swimming towards the right. The water is clear and blue, with several small fish swimming around the reef.

Dive Edition

**Wreck Trekking  
In the Florida Keys**

**America's Coral Barrier Reef  
Learn to Dive in the Keys  
Spiegel Grove Turns 10  
Dive 'Voluntourism'**

[fla-keys.com/diving](http://fla-keys.com/diving)



Blue-striped grunts gather at Snapper Ledge off Key Largo.

## ... Abundant and Diverse

The Florida Keys boast an unparalleled variety of marine life, abundance of fish species and consistently clear, warm waters to suit virtually every diver.

As well as their accessibility, the Keys' diversity sets them apart as one of the world's most popular dive destinations. Harboring the only living coral reef in the continental United States, these small islands are largely devoted to maintaining the region's offshore environment — a focus of conservation efforts for more than a generation.

Keys conservation efforts began in 1960 when widespread public support laid the foundation for John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park off Key Largo, named for a Miami newspaper editor who championed local environmental preservation.

The undersea park's waters are adjacent to the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, established in 1990 as a marine preserve. Today the sanctuary comprises 2,900 square nautical miles of coastal waters along the island chain from northernmost Key Largo south to the Dry Tortugas.

Marine conservation efforts include the establishment of Sanctuary Preservation Areas, no-take zones that have allowed fish and crustacean populations to grow and thrive.

Iconic blue-striped grunts are typically seen in large numbers around protective elkhorn and high-profile coral heads, as well as other Keys critters such as glass minnows, goatfish, gray snappers, Atlantic spadefish, horse eye jacks, Bermuda chubs, and sergeant majors. French and small-mouth grunts are nearly as plentiful and yellowtail snapper, a favorite of local anglers, cruise the reef in astonishing numbers.

It is not unusual for divers and snorkelers to spot sea turtles, stingrays, Goliath groupers, nurse sharks or bright-

green moray eels on a single trip to the reef.

The Keys have a tradition of preserving marine life. With divers and snorkelers educated in reef responsibility, everyone involved benefits, and the coral reef can remain the Keys' greatest environmental treasure for generations to come.



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## Keys Traveler

Dive Edition

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### What's This?

You'll find this QR code accompanying several stories in this issue of "Keys Traveler." The QR codes can be scanned by most smart phones. Activate the app, aim your smart phone at the bar code and you'll be automatically taken to a website or video for more information. For iPhones and iPads, QR readers can be downloaded for free at the Apple App Store.



Cover photo of the Duane, now a 25-year-old shipwreck off Key Largo, by Stephen Frink



Stephen Frink (2)

Successful completion of pool-based classes, left, leads to open-water training and certification, right.



## Underwater Classroom

# Learn to Dive in the Florida Keys

**C**alm, clear waters surrounding the Florida Keys, a 126-mile island chain located parallel to the continental United States' only living coral reef, offer individuals the perfect teaching ground in which to learn new skills as a scuba diver, providing a lifetime of diving fun, adventure and memories.

Options for learning to dive in the Keys range from introductory resort courses allowing diving for a day, through full certification, a wealth of dive specialties and professional diving career opportunities all with personalized, one-on-one service and training. Here are some basic facts.

**Who** can learn to dive? Scuba diving is a sport, an investment in adventure that any healthy and active individual as young as age 10 can learn and enjoy.

**What** classes are available? The Florida Keys has it all. Entry-level "open water" certification involves three to five days of training and classroom work covering concepts such as basic physics and physiology, ocean waves, marine life and the importance of monitoring time and depth during a dive, followed by pool and open-water dives at the reef. You'll also learn about navigation around natural formations during a dive.

Upon passing a knowledge test and completing the required number of dives, students become certified recreational scuba divers, eligible to rent dive gear and book dive trips to depths of about 60 feet with most operations

worldwide.

Online learning through computer programs also enables students to complete classroom work at home then schedule time in the Keys to complete water skills during open-water dives and explore the reef.

Refresher courses are available to review diving knowledge and water skills for infrequent divers.

For those seeking advanced skills and experience to gain confidence with specific open-water dives, there are dozens of specialty courses. They range from navigation to night diving, wreck diving, digital photography, coral reef conservation and more, as well as training for a career as a dive instructor.

**Where** do students receive their dive training? Some of the first businesses offering recreational dive training in America were opened in the Keys. Dozens of dive operators, staffed with working professionals, actively teach and train each day, not just intermittently or seasonally. Classes also are offered at concessions in state parks and at community colleges.

**When** are classes offered? A primary advantage of the Florida Keys over any other U.S. destination is year-round tropical weather and clear, warm seas to practice skin diving and scuba skills virtually any day of the year. Training conditions are nice and easy, with light currents and great underwater visibility.

**Why** dive the Keys? Ocean depths from the shoreline to the reef rarely reach 20 feet. The reef lives in waters

as shallow as five feet and as deep as 50 feet, but most reef divers log a maximum depth of 20 to 30 feet. Keys shallow diving offers two immediate benefits: longer time safely spent on the bottom exploring, and brighter and more vibrant colors because more natural sunlight reaches shallow depths.

No matter your skill level in diving, abundant opportunities to enhance an interest and perfect abilities can be found throughout the Florida Keys.

## Keys Feature Blue Star Program for Operators

**U**sing a Blue Star-recognized charter ensures you are selecting an operator dedicated to coral reef education and conservation.

Blue Star is a voluntary recognition program established by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Dive operators who participate in the program have staff who have met certain training criteria and are committed to promoting responsible tourism and teaching divers and snorkelers in-water etiquette such as reef fish identification, practicing good buoyancy, taking care in placement of hands and fins as well as avoiding touching or standing on coral.

Operators are evaluated yearly. To identify a Blue Star-rated operator, look for a flag or decal with the Blue Star logo displayed on the charter vessel.



Visit [floridakeys.noaa.gov/onthewater](http://floridakeys.noaa.gov/onthewater)



A diver inspects a portion of the 510-foot-long Spiegel Grove off Key Largo.



## Become a Keys Wreck Trekker

Spotlighting the destination's string of shipwrecks, Florida Keys tourism officials and Keys dive operators have enhanced a "Wreck Trek Passport Program" rewarding certified divers who complete a series of wreck dives. "Wreck Trek 2.0" tasks divers (recommended to be advanced or wreck certified) to join more than 30 participating dive operators to complete up to nine dives listed in the Florida Keys Wreck Trek logbook.

Divers who complete five dives receive a personalized print of Florida Keys shipwrecks. Those who finish all nine dives are entered for a chance to win prizes including dive equipment, accessories and dive and lodging packages.

The "Wreck Trek 2.0" dive challenge is to continue through January 2014.

[fla-keys.com/diving/wrecktrek](http://fla-keys.com/diving/wrecktrek)

# Trek Florida Keys Shipwrecks

By Julie Botteri • Photograph by Stephen Frink

Scattered along the length of the Florida Keys island chain in ocean depths ranging from 20 to 130 feet are several notable shipwreck and artificial reef sites, some centuries old. Reaffirming an appreciation and understanding of the Keys' maritime heritage, these ships are considered some of the destination's most attractive underwater assets.

An officially named Shipwreck Trail established by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary distinguishes a number of historic wreck sites. Some vessels date back to early 1700s Spanish explorers, while others are modern cargo and U.S. military ships intentionally sunk to create artificial reefs, adding further dimension and diversity to the trail.

Bookend shipwrecks off Key Largo and Key West support this unique collection.

Most notable is the Spiegel Grove, a 510-foot Navy landing ship dock and the third-largest ship ever intentionally sunk to create an artificial reef. It has rested in 130 feet of water about six miles off Key Largo since its sinking in May 2002.

In shallow waters off Key Largo lies the City of Washington, a two-masted sailing vessel used for passenger transport and cargo trade between New York, Cuba and Mexico.

It sank July 10, 1892, in waters 25 feet deep. Also off Key Largo, in 25 to 45 feet of water, is the Benwood. The merchant marine freighter sank in 1942 after a collision with another vessel during World War II blackout conditions.

Twin "Treasury Class" 327-foot U.S. Coast Guard cutters, dubbed the Duane and Bibb, rest in nearly 130 feet of water one mile south of Molasses Reef, off Key Largo. Advanced divers have enjoyed the twin sites for 25 years.

One of the Keys' oldest wrecks is located off Islamorada's Indian Key in 18 feet of water. The San Pedro was a 1733 Spanish treasure galleon.

The Eagle, a cargo transporter sunk as an artificial reef in 1985, also lies off Islamorada, but much deeper in 110 feet of water.

The three-masted bark Adelaide Baker lies south of Duck Key in 20 feet of water. The ship also is called the Conrad.

A wreck believed to be the North America lies in 14 feet of water on Delta Shoals east of Sombrero Light. The ship was lost Nov. 25, 1842, while carrying dry goods and furniture.

The easily navigable 188-foot Thunderbolt, donated by Florida Power and Light Co. to the Florida Keys Artificial Reef Association, was originally named Randolph. The cable layer was used in researching electrical energy and lightning strikes, and hence renamed. Considered the queen of the Marathon wreck fleet, "T-bolt" was intentionally sunk March 6, 1986, and lies in 120 feet of water four miles south of Marathon.

To the west of Looe Key in the Lower Keys lies the 210-foot freighter Adolphus Busch Senior. Since Dec. 5, 1998, divers have been exploring this artificial reef five miles southwest of Big Pine Key.

The Amesbury, a former destroyer escort that is better known as Alexander's Wreck, is broken into two sections 200 yards apart and is five miles west of Key West in 25 feet of water.

The most recent addition is the 524-foot Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, a decommissioned Air Force ship that once tracked space launches off Florida. The second-largest ship in the world ever scuttled to become an artificial reef also starred as a Russian science ship in the 1999 movie "Virus." On May 27, 2009, it took less than two minutes for Vandenberg to sink in about 140 feet of water seven miles off Key West.

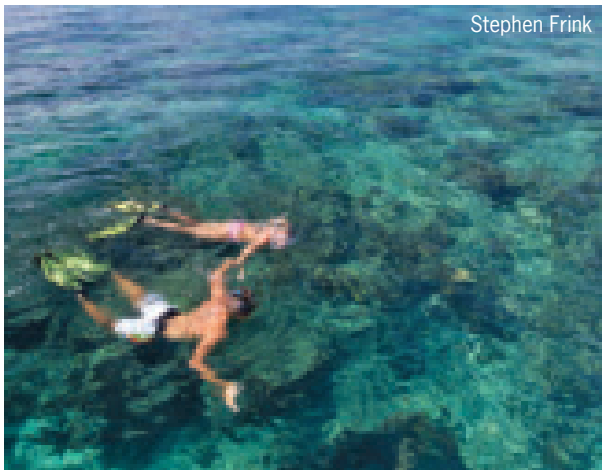
# Snorkeling: Easy to Explore Subsea World

Featuring vivid coral reefs teeming with exotic sea creatures, the Florida Keys offer a ready-made vacation paradise that attracts almost 800,000 snorkel and scuba aficionados each year who can't wait to get into the water and explore — even as first-timers.

Snorkeling primarily requires a mask, snorkel, fins for propulsion and inflatable snorkeling vest to enjoy a day of underwater sightseeing. Professional snorkel charters provide (and rent) equipment and simple instruction. Add a T-shirt with sun block to protect exposed backs, waists and legs, and you're ready to go.

Spectacular coral reefs are a short boat ride from the islands, located in shallow water that's often just 10 to 15 feet deep.

Some favorite undersea sites include



Stephen Frink

Snorkelers explore coral formations in the shallow and clear waters off the Florida Keys.

the nation's first undersea park, Key Largo's John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, and nearby, the 9-foot-tall 4,000-pound bronze statue known as "Christ of the Deep." The underwater shrine stands on a concrete base in approximately 25 feet of water and is one of the most photographed underwater sites in the world.

French Reef and Davis Reef, also in the Key Largo area, are easily navigable among the top of the reef and sandy ledges. Large groupers and moray eels cruise among the cliffs and canyons, gullies and archways in depths from 15 to 40 feet.

Off Islamorada, Alligator Reef boasts huge populations of yellowtail snapper, grunts, goatfish and damselfish and a mini-wall where lobsters hide in crevices.

Among Marathon's notable patch reefs and spur and groove formations is Sombrero Reef, marked by a large lighted tower. You might see a pair of spotfin butterflyfish circle in their courting dance, French angelfish nip and peck at reef plants, a huge school of grunts slide back and forth in a gentle tidal surge or a stingray scour the sandy bottom for a snack.

The Lower Keys' Looe Key Reef is one of the most spectacular shallow-water undersea environs. Its reef fish annually play host to a



Bob Care

It only takes about 15 minutes to learn how to snorkel and enjoy the underwater environment off the Keys.

well-attended, albeit unusual, event for snorkelers and divers: the Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival.

Key West offers snorkelers nearby offshore wreck and artificial reef sites including the unique Stargazer project, created by Keys metal sculptor Ann Labriola. In 22 feet of water, the 200-foot-long creation is composed of 10 individual steel cutouts of star constellations, each weighing between 2,000 and 8,000 pounds. Each pattern is home to abundant marine life.

Snorkeling is the perfect family activity for visitors to the Keys for close, calm observation of the inhabitants of one of the world's most diverse, complex and beautiful ecosystems.

## Museum Showcases Man's Quest to Dive

Dedicated to collecting, preserving and displaying artifacts, antiques, and photographs related to diving and its heritage, the Florida Keys History of Diving Museum is filled with unique exhibits. In addition, free monthly "Immerse Yourself" lectures and a new research library are valuable educational resources.

Open since 2005, the History of Diving Museum boasts 3,000 square feet of interactive exhibits that feature the world's most comprehensive collection of diving artifacts, representing more than 30 countries.



Dr. Sally Bauer, who co-founded the museum with late husband Joe Bauer, is a Women's Diving Hall of Fame inductee.

Museum visitors can come within inches of the earliest diving machines, including a full-scale replica of an all-wood diving bell, and view the Parade of Nations, an unparalleled collection of historic hard-hat dive helmets from around the world. Helmets from 25 nations are presented side by side for close inspection.

Open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., the museum is located at mile marker 83 bayside in Islamorada.

# Conserving the Keys: Dive 'Voluntourism'

Divers assist staff members with cultivation of young corals at the Coral Restoration Foundation's coral nursery off the Upper Keys.

**D**ivers can help keep Florida Keys reefs healthy through "voluntourism" vacations, doing things to protect the reef while volunteering for the greater good, up close and purposefully.

Recreational sport divers can join ongoing coral restoration and propagation efforts with marine scientists from Key Largo's Coral Restoration Foundation. They learn about environmental impacts on Florida's reefs through education and participate in hands-on dives to restore endangered staghorn and elkhorn corals. The two are among the reef-building species with the best chance to propagate and create new habitats.

Volunteers go on working dives to coral nurseries to clean and prepare corals for planting. An orientation dive at a restoration site shows firsthand the evolution of corals over time.

"This is something the average person can get their hands on and do," said

foundation director Ken Nedimyer.

"Volunteers can take the experience back to their home communities — it

is a grass-roots way of giving people ownership."

**Capturing lionfish helps** prevent the invasive Indo-Pacific species from voraciously preying on invertebrates and juvenile fish such as grunts and hamlets, and stealing resources from domestic species like grouper and snapper. The popular aquarium fish, probably introduced to Florida waters in the 1980s, has no natural reef predators except humans.

The Keys' Reef Environmental Education Foundation, whose mission is to conserve marine ecosystems, partnered with the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and the dive community to educate divers on how to capture and remove lionfish from Keys waters.

Mature lionfish need to be removed regularly in order to fish down the species and reduce its Atlantic population to zero.

Recreational lionfish roundups provide divers the chance to earn prizes, sample the edible, tasty fish and help preserve reef ecosystems.

**REEF also enlists** divers for volunteer reef survey and annual fish count projects to help collect and report

data on marine fish populations.

**Divers also can** contribute through everyday conservation actions to leave an area cleaner than they found it.

Cutting and removing monofilament fishing line eliminates a potential entanglement for other divers. Picking up other lost fishing tackle, such as hooks and sinkers, as well as removing cans, bottles, plastic and refuse makes a huge difference over time.

[coralrestoration.org](http://coralrestoration.org)  
[reef.org](http://reef.org)  
[fla-keys.com/volunteer](http://fla-keys.com/volunteer)



David Gross

**Diver Patti Gross shows her success in capturing several invasive lionfish off the Keys.**



# No Compass Needed

## Navigating the Keys' Quirky Underwater Fun

The Florida Keys are widely acclaimed for offbeat celebrations, and divers can find quirky, uniquely marine activities along the island chain. Famous for being an underwater nuptial niche, the continental United States' only living coral barrier reef offers wedding parties and guests the opportunity to don boutonnieres and bathing suits to tie the knot with exotic sea creatures in attendance.

One of the most photographed underwater sites in the world is the 9-foot-high "Christ of the Abyss," a 4,000-pound bronze statue in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary adjacent to Key Largo's John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. Its welcoming arms make a perfect place to exchange "I Do's."

Annual challenges beneath the sea include Key Largo's Underwater Pumpkin Carving Contest every October, "egg-sploring" for hidden eggs during the Underwater Easter Egg Hunt and racing along the 524-foot-long Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg with diver propulsion vehicles during the Vandenberg Underwater Grand Prix each May.

Costumed mermaids, "The Snorkeling Elvises," an offbeat "Alice in Waterland" tea party and an underwater band complete with tuba all have been spotted over the years at the Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival.

The submerged songfest is held each July at Looe Key Reef, an area of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary six miles south of Big Pine Key.



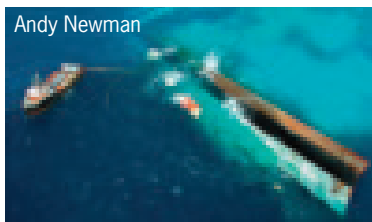
Offbeat though these activities may be, many carry a serious message of reef preservation and diver awareness, emphasizing ways to enjoy the reef while minimizing impacts on the underwater environment.

## A Famed Naval Wreck Turns 10

It was a story that could have been scripted for a major motion picture, but no writer could have conceived the plot of the Spiegel Grove.

In June 2001, after more than a decade tethered in the U.S. Navy's "Mothball Fleet" in Virginia's James River, Spiegel Grove was towed to undergo an elaborate cleaning process and 11 months later was moved to Key Largo.

Six hours before its intended scuttling on May 17, 2002, the former 510-foot landing ship dock prematurely sank and unexpectedly rolled over, leaving



**The Spiegel Grove begins to sink fully in June 2002.**

its upside-down bow protruding above the surface of the water.

Three weeks later, on June 10, a salvage team sunk the vessel fully on its starboard side. July 9, 2005, brought what many call Hurricane Dennis' gift to divers, even though the storm skirted the Keys. When Dennis was east of Cuba it generated powerful



currents that migrated up the Florida Straits and turned the Grove upright.



Bob Care

**Divers "perform" with artistic interpretations of musical instruments at the Underwater Music Festival.**

## SNUBA Merges Scuba With Snorkeling

Outdoor adventurers who want to blend the simplicity of snorkeling and the excitement and freedom of scuba diving in a safe, comfortable and easy way can try SNUBA, a method that enables ocean lovers to breathe easily underwater without wearing dive gear or earning a certification.

"Divers" breathe by means of a 20-foot air line attached to an air supply that sits on a pontoon raft at the water's surface. No prior diving or snorkeling experience is required.

After a 15- to 20-minute briefing, usually during the trip to the coral reef, a professionally trained diving guide takes passengers on an underwater tour.

The sport is particularly suited to family adventurers – children 8 years and older, as well as couples and seniors.



**Upright on the bottom, the ship is a thriving ecosystem.**

Tim Grollmund