

THE Florida Keys & Key West DIVING GUIDE

Sustainable Diving

Help preserve this treasure for generations to come.

NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

2,900 square nautical miles of magic.

DIVER SAFETY

Everything's better with a buddy.



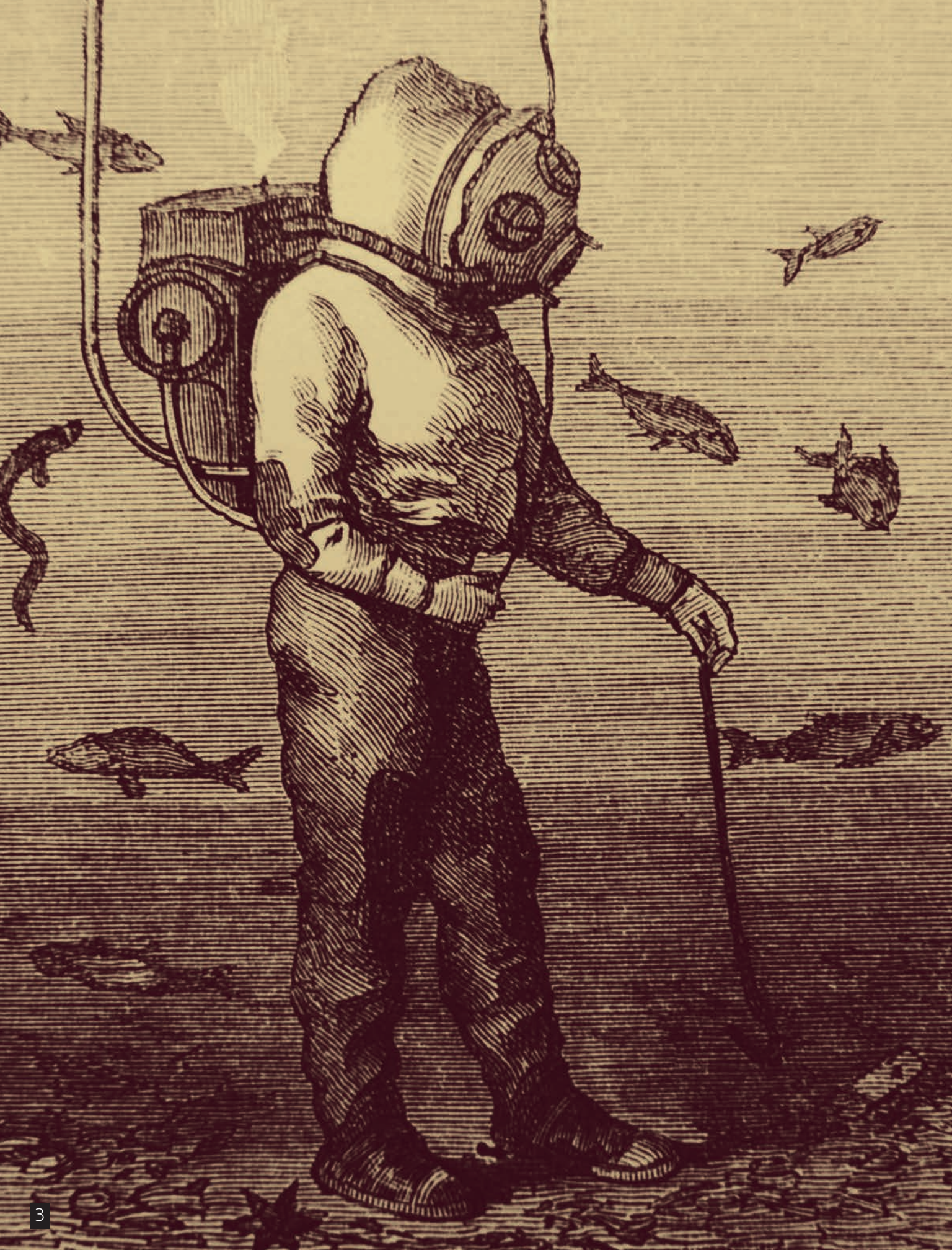
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Some Incredible Things Have Gone Down In The Florida Keys



History of Diving Museum, Islamorada



Man has always had an insatiable curiosity to explore. And with two-thirds of the world covered by water, it's only natural to want to see what's going on below the surface. Here in The Florida Keys, we're blessed with the only living coral barrier reef in the continental United States, spanning more than 125 miles end-to-end, just offshore. The reef provides an extraordinary home to more than 5,000 marine species under water, and protection from the fierce tropical storms that have shaped so much of our history, above.

As early as the 16th century, ships traveling the Gulf Stream from Europe to the Caribbean learned about our treacherous reefs the

hard way, spawning a lucrative wrecking and salvaging industry that made Key West the richest city in America. In the early 1800s, Keys natives discovered fertile sponge beds in the backcountry after thousands of sponges washed ashore during a storm. This literal windfall created another wave of wealth for The Keys that lasted 50 years.



As dive equipment evolved from 17th century lead dive bells to the modern-era Aqualung in 1943, the depths of the ocean were suddenly within reach of the masses. Today, snorkelers and divers come from around the world to explore the amazing assortment of reefs and wrecks that live just below the surface in the protected waters of The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

A National And Natural Treasure



Imagine being so beautiful and important to our planet, that you've been granted around-the-clock protection by the United States Government. Welcome to The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Within this vast, 2,900 square nautical mile protected marine habitat you will discover a dazzling array of marine life, including over 5,000 species of plants and animals. For divers of every skill level, the sanctuary offers unparalleled opportunities to explore vibrant coral reefs, historic wrecks and mangrove estuaries of The Keys, each teeming



with colorful fish, rays and even sharks. Iconic dive sites within the sanctuary include the Christ of the Abyss statue in John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, and the wreck of the General Hoyt S. Vandenberg – the second largest artificial reef in the world.

From fishing and diving to boating, The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary seeks to strike a balance between the enjoyment of recreational activities and the preservation of our delicate marine environment. Only then can we ensure the preservation of these vital ecosystems for future generations to enjoy.



Banana Patch Reef, Key Largo



There's An Underwater Experience Everyone Can Get Down With



The Webb telescope can show us galaxies 13 billion light-years away. The internet made it possible to travel the world without leaving home. But nothing will ever take the place of getting out there and seeing things for yourself. That may be the most beautiful part of an underwater expedition in The Florida Keys. You don't have to be Jacques Cousteau to have the experience of a lifetime.

SNORKELING

The water in The Keys is warm all year-round, and with shallow reefs and abundant marine life, all you need is a mask, fins and snorkel and you won't miss a thing. Whether you take a guided tour, rent your own boat, or simply step off the shore, there's no shortage of sites to see in the waters surrounding The Florida Keys.



SNUBA

One part snorkeling. One part SCUBA. A SNUBA tour allows you to go down deeper and stay down longer without the need for complicated dive gear and certification. Your oxygen supply is fed from the surface, so you can glide effortlessly through the water without the weight of the world on your shoulders. And your SNUBA guide will hook you up with all the best dive spots at depths of up to 20 feet.

DIVE SCOOTER

Unleash your inner Aquaman and take your SCUBA and snorkeling journey to another level with a dive scooter. This exhilarating jet-powered device allows you to rocket across the surface and quickly submerge for some incredible underwater sightseeing. Become one with the machine, and the ocean, as you cruise alongside marine life and explore underwater terrain.

Florida Keys Photo Safaris



Answer, is that you? Didn't recognize you behind the mask. Whether you're an experienced photographer seeking to refine your underwater photography skills or a novice shutterbug eager to get your feet (and camera housing) wet, a photo safari in The Florida Keys might just be what the dive doctor ordered.

With its crystal-clear waters, vibrant marine life and stunning coral reefs, every dive in The Keys is like a photographer's Poseidon adventure. Guided by seasoned professionals, these undersea photo excursions provide a once-in-a-lifetime

opportunity to capture the beauty of this underwater realm under the watchful eye of world-class instructors. From colorful tropical fish to curious sea turtles, every trip below the surface presents new and fascinating subjects to capture, share and maybe even frame.



Whether you prefer to explore shallow reefs or venture a little deeper, there's something for every visual storyteller within the diverse underwater ecosystems of The Florida Keys. So grab (or rent) your camera, don your mask, and come experience a magical photographic journey beneath the waves.



More Unusual Creatures Than A Science Fiction Film

There are more than 5,000 unique species in the waters of The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. But there's always room for one more. Whether you're a diver or a snorkeler, a journey below the surface in The Keys is an eye-opening experience.



Moon Jellyfish



Loggerhead Turtle



Black Grouper



Mangrove Snapper



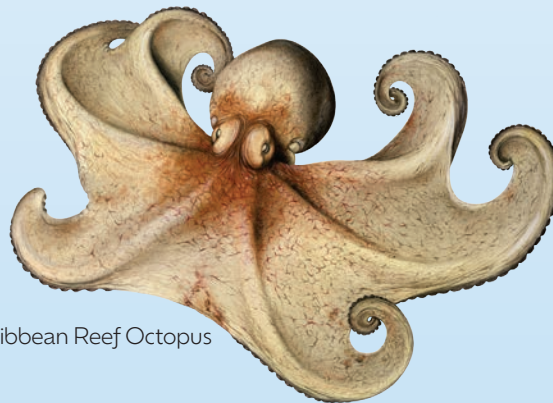
French Angelfish



Southern Stingray



Jack Cravalle



Caribbean Reef Octopus



Barracuda



Caribbean Spiny Lobster



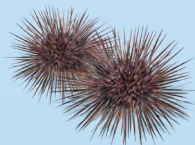
Conch



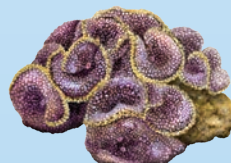
Common Sea Star



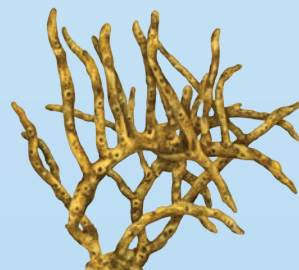
False Sea Fan



Purple Urchin



Coral Anemone



Rope Sponge

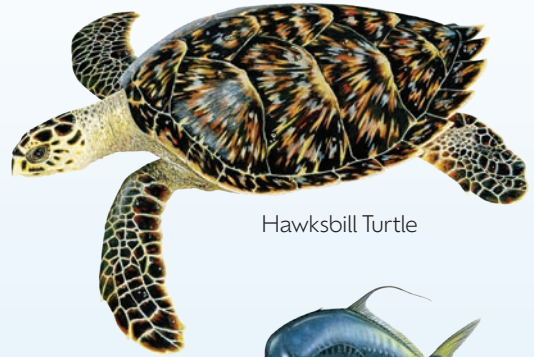


Barrel Sponge

Animals are not to scale.



Bonefish



Hawksbill Turtle



French Grunt



Black Margate



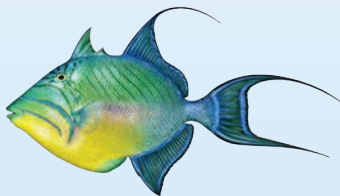
Sargeant Major



Bar Jack



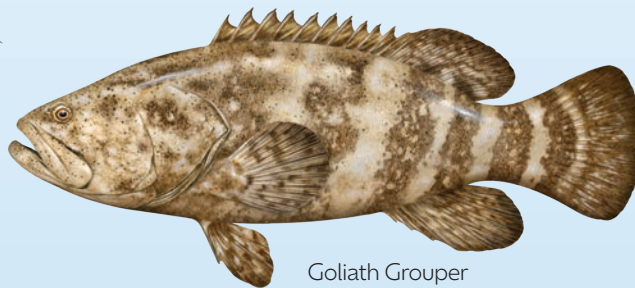
Lookdown



Queen Triggerfish



Queen Parrotfish



Goliath Grouper



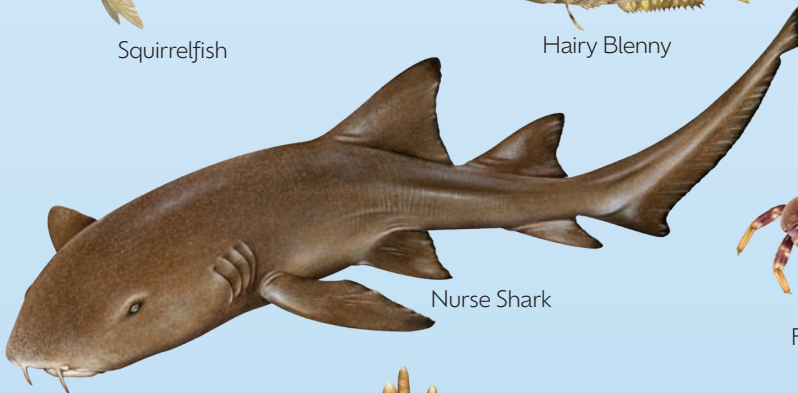
Squirrelfish



Hairy Blenny



Yellowtail Snapper



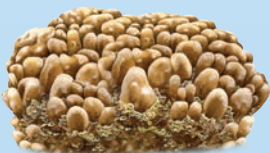
Nurse Shark



Florida Stone Crab



Green Moray Eel



Lobed Star Coral



Pillar Coral



Calico Scallops



Purple Sea Fan



Chimney Sponge

Animals are not to scale.



Banana Patch Reef, Key Largo

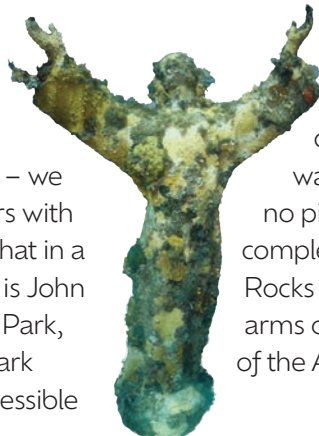


The Reefs Of Key Largo



As the first Key you come to along the famed Overseas Highway, Key Largo is the proverbial gateway to The Florida Keys. Key Largo also holds the honor of being the first opportunity for divers to explore the extraordinary 120-mile-long Florida Keys reef tract. That's not a privilege we take lightly – we welcome divers and snorkelers with open arms (but more about that in a minute). At the center of it all is John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the country's first undersea park and one of the few shore-accessible

snorkeling sites in The Keys. Molasses Reef, the most visited reef in The Florida Keys, is revered for its consistently clear water, massive brain coral, hordes of tropical fish and easy access. Pickles and Horseshoe Reefs also deserve plenty of attention, with the latter considered one of the best shallow water sites in The Keys. Of course, no pilgrimage to The Keys would be complete without being welcomed at Dry Rocks Reef by the eternally outstretched arms of the submerged Statue of Christ of the Abyss – a Key Largo icon.







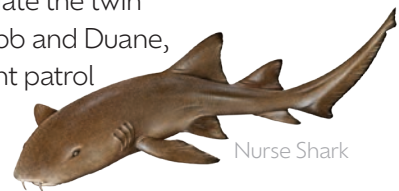
The Spiegel Grove wreck, Key Largo

The Wrecks Of Key Largo

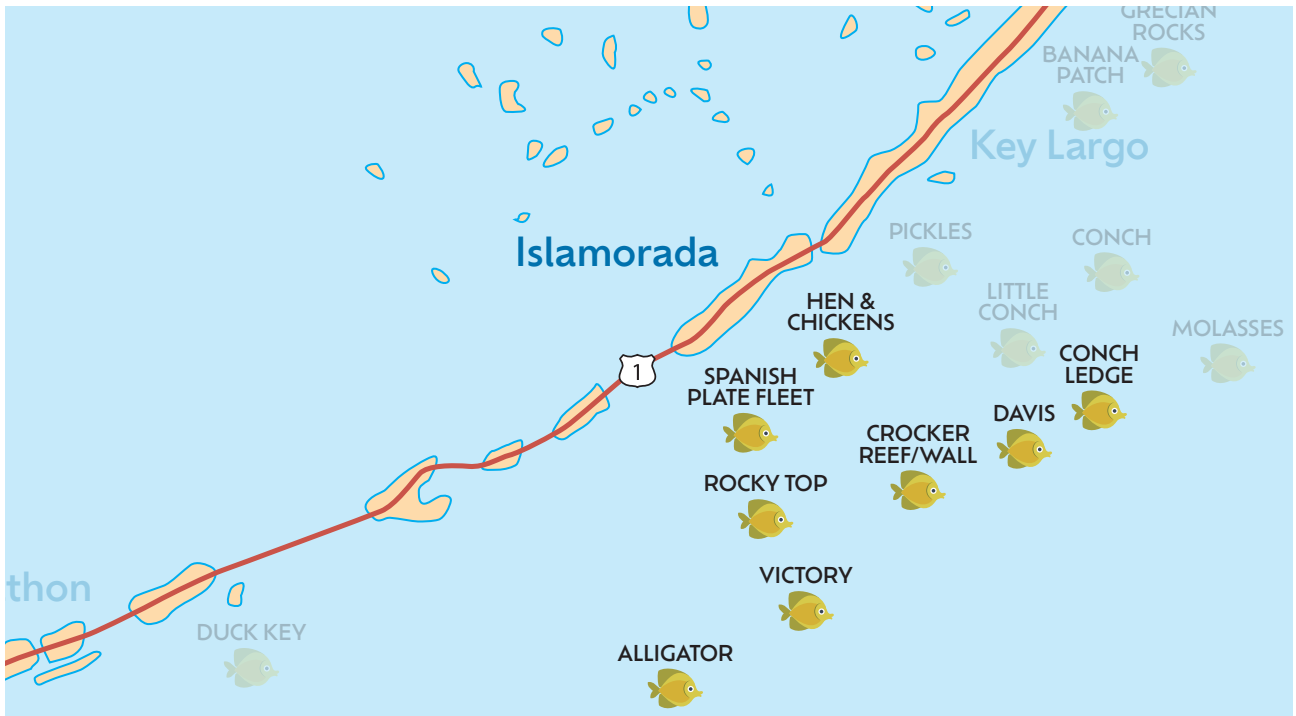


The azure waters around Key Largo contain some of the most extraordinary collections of coral formations in The Keys. That's a fact that would have come in handy for 18th century seafarers making way from Europe. It explains why these waters claimed countless ships in the years before they were charted. Others were intentionally sunk as artificial reefs – benefitting entire marine ecosystems. Among the most popular wrecks in Key Largo is the Benwood, a 360' merchant marine freighter that went down in depths ranging from 25 to 45 feet after a nighttime

collision with the freighter Robert C. Tuttle in 1942. A perennial favorite open water dive site, The Benwood is home to large schools of grunt, snapper and goatfish. Advanced divers will appreciate the twin 327' Coast Guard Cutters Bibb and Duane, which are now on permanent patrol 120 feet below the surface. But the undisputed star of the underwater show is the 510' Spiegel Grove...a retired Navy Landing Ship Dock that now serves as the backbone of The Florida Keys artificial reef system and home to a biodiverse community of algae, sponges and more than 130 species of fish.



The Reefs Of Islamorada



Islamorada has long been recognized as the sportfishing capital of the world. So you'd naturally assume that being a world-class dive destination would go with the territory. As a matter of fact, it does. Islamorada's underwater

ecosystem includes an array of extraordinary reefs, each one home to different corals and myriad sea creatures. With its broad coral ledge running north to south, Davis reef is celebrated for its abundance of fish and inquisitive



Queen Parrotfish

moray eels that glide effortlessly along the cliffs. On the south end of Crocker Reef is Crocker Wall, a 450-foot sea slope dive boasting rare black coral, spur-and-groove formations, small canyons and mounding coral heads. Hen & Chickens Reef, named for its resemblance to a hen and her chicks when viewed from above, offers a wealth of sea life plus easy access for divers and snorkelers of every level. Islamorada also boasts several unnamed patch reefs, which are home to colorful parrotfish, angelfish, sea turtles and nurse sharks.





The Eagle wreck, Islamorada

The Wrecks Of Islamorada



The waters surrounding Islamorada are hallowed grounds for big game anglers, but there's a whole other angle lurking below the surface. Because these waters hold a treasure trove of historic shipwrecks enjoying their second act attracting snorkelers and divers from around the world. The most notable wreck in Islamorada, and the oldest ship on The Florida Keys Shipwreck Trail, is the 287-ton Spanish galleon San Pedro, part of a 22-ship fleet that met their fate in 1733 after getting caught in a hurricane in the Straits of Florida. The

ravages of time have reclaimed most of the fleet, but remnants of the San Pedro were declared a State of Florida Underwater Archaeological Preserve in 1989, easily accessible in just 18 feet of water in Hawk Channel. She was joined two and a half centuries later by another notable wreck, the 287' freighter Eagle, which was intentionally sacrificed to the sea 5 miles off Islamorada in 1985, and now carries a cargo of goliath grouper, bull sharks, tarpon and rays, 110' below the surface.



Goliath Grouper

The Reefs Of Marathon



Situated halfway between Key Largo and Key West, Marathon is located smack dab in the middle of The Florida Keys coral reef system. But there's no middle-child-syndrome here. Marathon gets plenty of love and attention from divers, and it's richly deserved. Just offshore are untold treasures – a marine sanctuary

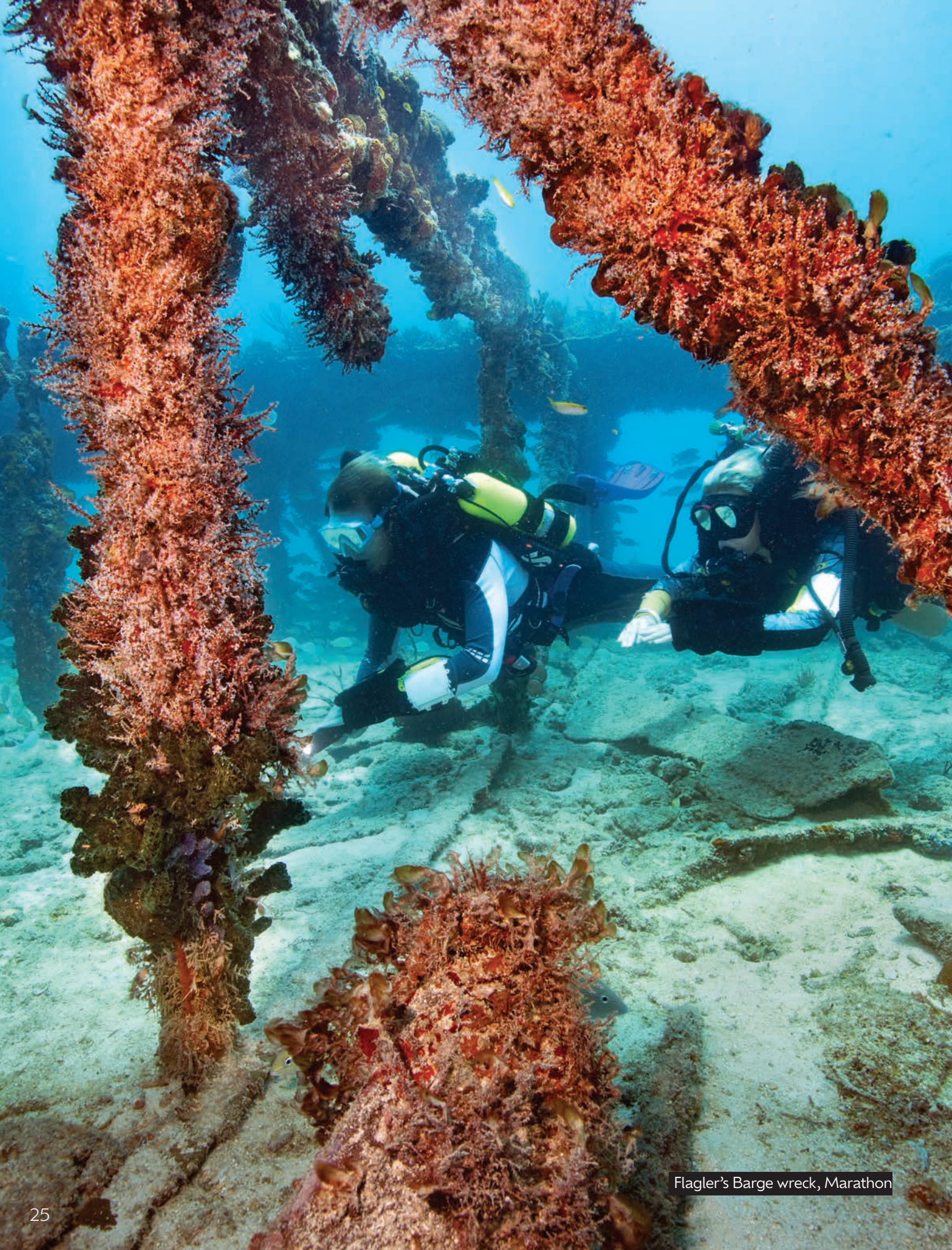


Southern Stingray

comprised of crystalline waters, an extensive spur-and-groove coral complex and countless patch reefs to

explore. In fact, with waters ranging from 15- to 60-feet deep, Sombrero Reef is one of the most magnificent dives in the Middle Keys. Descend into this watery wilderness and you'll be greeted by brain coral, gorgonians, swaying sea fans and dramatic canyons and archways that provide refuge for large schools of fish. Coffins Patch, a conglomerate of six distinct patch reefs, is better suited to snorkeling and novice diving. Bottom line? There's plenty to love about diving, here in the heart of The Keys.





Flagler's Barge wreck, Marathon

The Wrecks Of Marathon



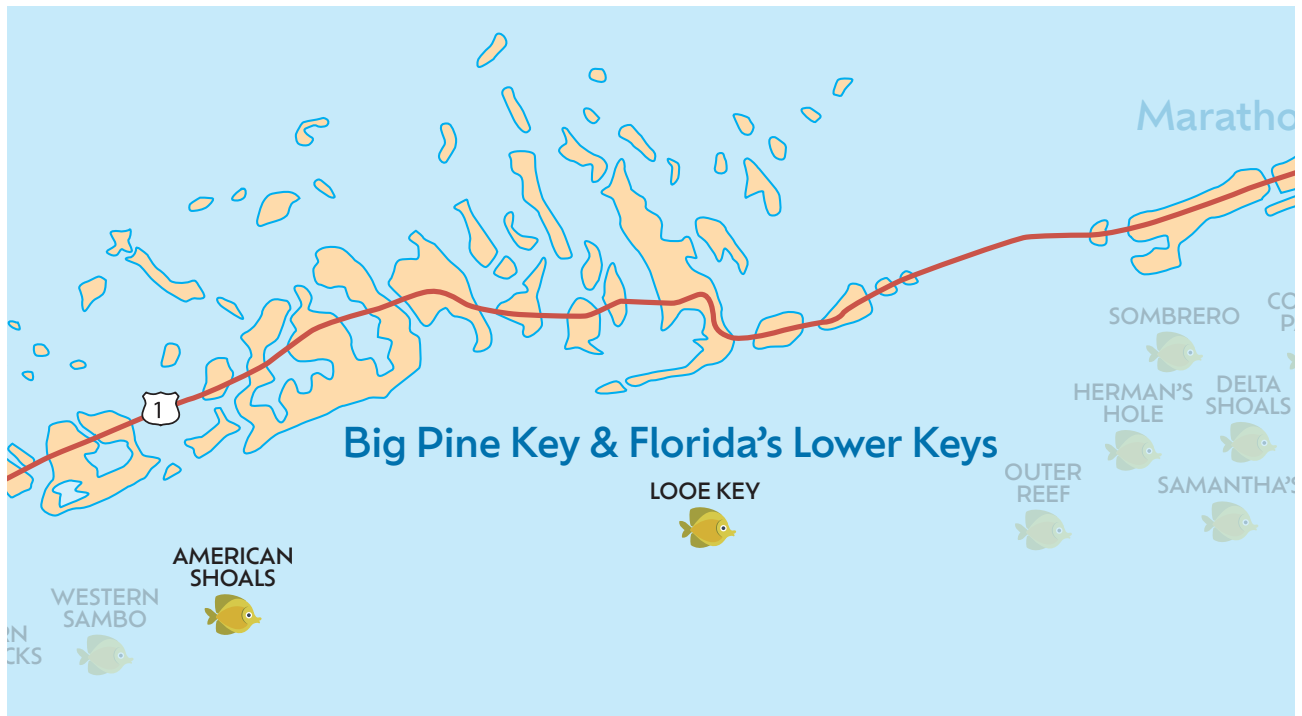
One part history lesson. One part marine biology. An underwater excursion in the Atlantic waters surrounding Marathon is an eye opening experience for snorkelers and divers of every level. As home to the Seven Mile Bridge, Marathon has been a vital connection between The Keys and the rest of the world for generations. But over the centuries, the treacherous reefs surrounding Marathon have claimed more than their share of ships navigated by captains unfamiliar with the perils beneath them. Time and nature have reclaimed many wrecks, but there's still

plenty to see below the surface. Among the most notable wrecks in Marathon's waters is the Adelaide Baker, a 153' three-masted barque that went down after ramming the reefs in 1889, and now rests in two clusters in shallow water accessible to most snorkelers and divers. Another must-see is the Thunderbolt, a 188' retired minelayer and research vessel that came to rest, bolt upright, 114' below the surface. Both ships are part of the legendary Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Shipwreck Trail.



Yellowtail Snapper

The Reefs Of Big Pine Key & Florida's Lower Keys



Logic would dictate that a place that's wild and natural on dry land would also hold riches in the oceans that surround it. We're pleased to report that the supposition holds true. Because when you don a mask, fins and snorkel in Big Pine Key & Florida's Lower Keys, you'll discover an undersea realm as extraordinary as the world above. Located five nautical miles offshore sits famed Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary, home to more varieties of tropical marine species



French Angelfish

than perhaps anywhere else in the hemisphere. Long recognized as one of the premiere dive sites of The Florida Keys reef tract, Looe Key Reef is home to over 150 species of fish in waters sloping from 20 to 35 feet deep. Divers can expect to see yellowtail snapper, angelfish, parrotfish, sergeant majors, barracuda, moray eels and even sharks and rays. More than 50 species of coral are present here, including staghorn, elkhorn, star, brain and fire corals. A little further out is American Shoals, favored for its lighthouse structure, beautiful coral and abundant marine life.



Looe Key Reef, Big Pine Key & Florida's Lower Keys



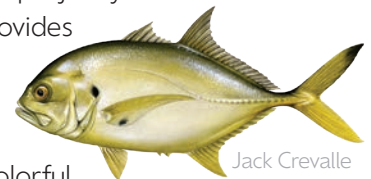
The Adolphus Busch wreck, Big Pine Key & Florida's Lower Keys

The Wrecks Of Big Pine Key & Florida's Lower Keys



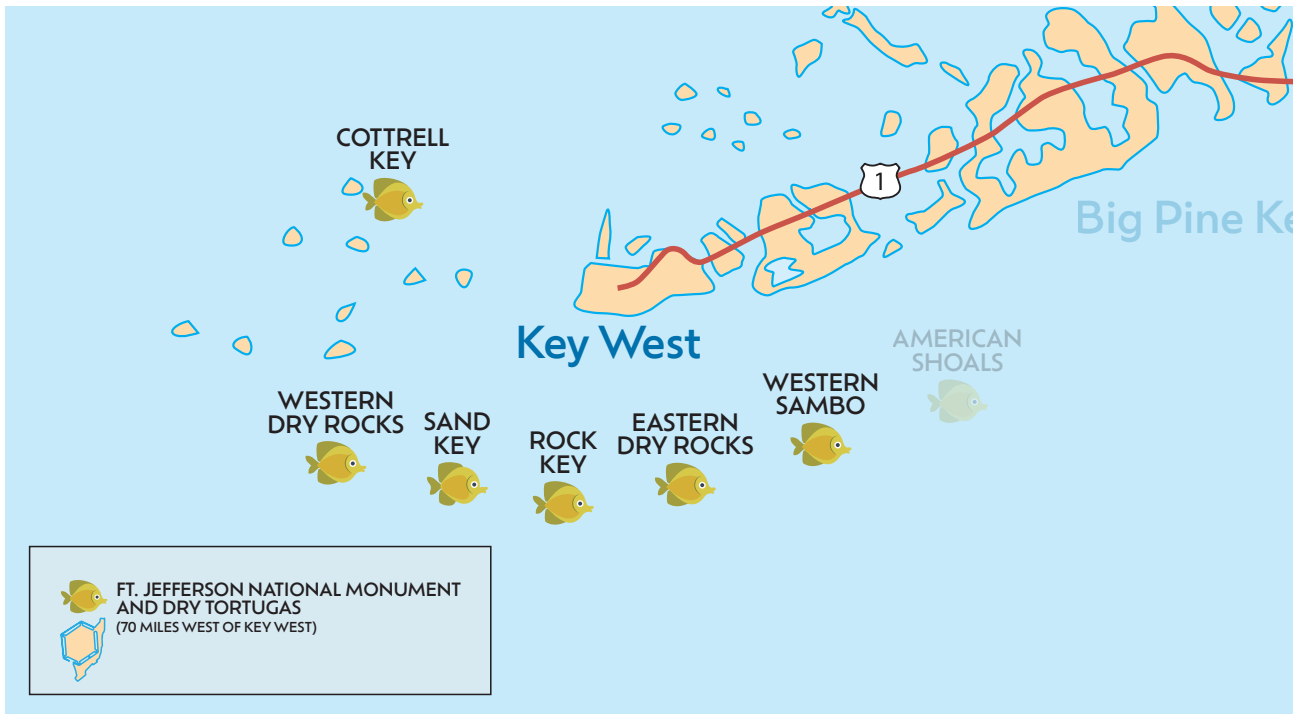
Big Pine Key and Florida's Lower Keys are best known to those who love the great outdoors and the pristine, unspoiled wilderness of The Keys in its purest form. But there's a much deeper side to the story in the waters just offshore. Because this is where you'll find what many consider to be the best wreck dive in the entire Florida Keys archipelago – the towering, 210' Adolphus Busch Sr. After serving a long, hard life as a short haul freighter, she was sold off to the Looe Key Artificial

Reef Association in 1998, and scuttled in 115' of water between American Shoal and Looe Key Reef. She came to rest in the sandy seabed fully intact and perfectly upright, and today provides an extraordinary experience for divers of all skill levels. Her hull is adorned with colorful corals, and her abundant cargo holds are now home to a dazzling array of aquatic life, including schools of grouper, snapper, permit and jacks of all kinds.



Jack Crevalle

The Reefs Of Key West



It's no coincidence that much of the inspiration for Key West's art community and cultural scene comes from the sea. After all, just minutes from Key West's historic seaport you will discover crystalline waters filled with a fascinating, multi-hued world of brilliantly colored sea life and living coral.

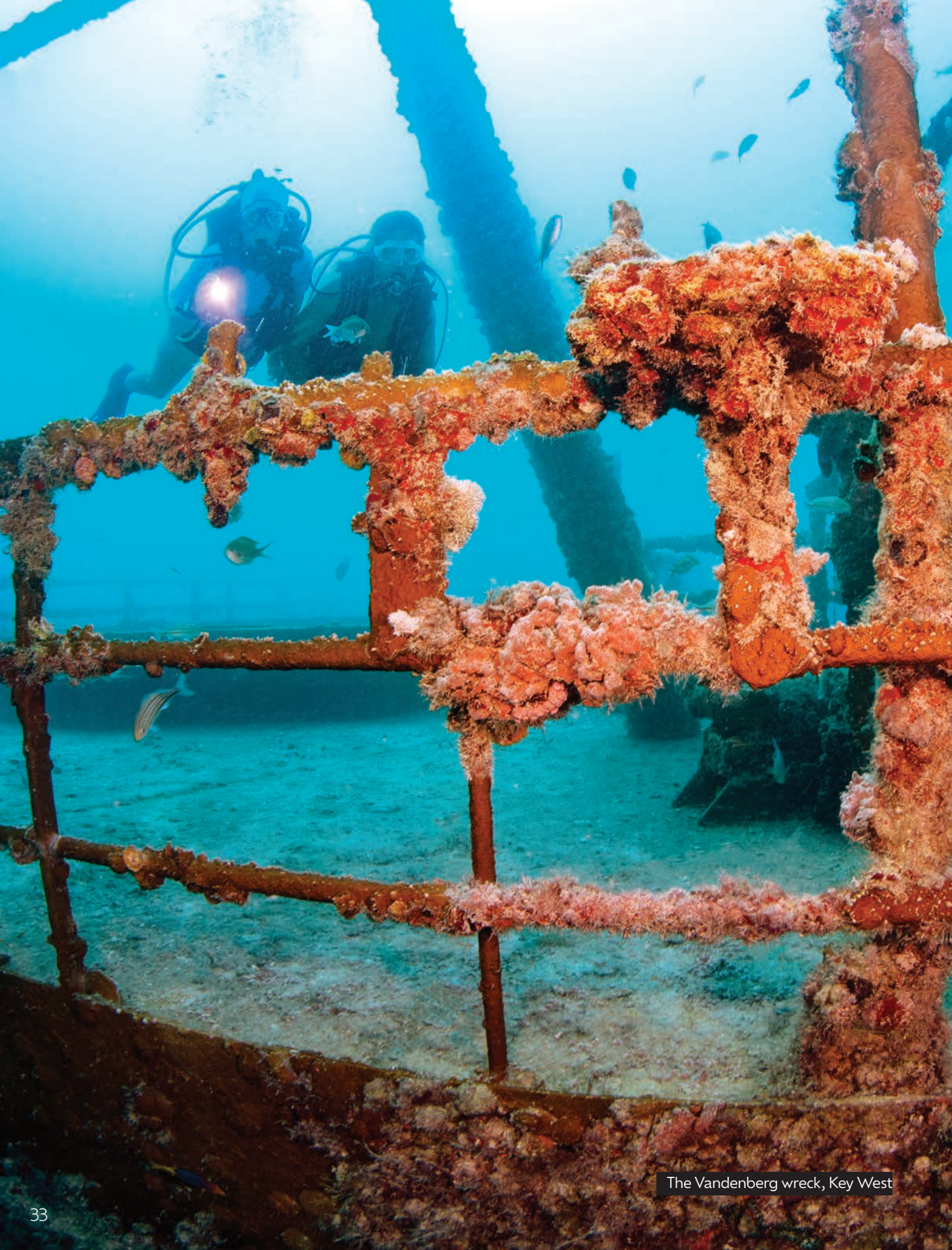


French Grunt

Western Sambo, Key West's largest protected coral reef, holds one of the last remaining stands of living elkhorn coral in The Lower Keys.

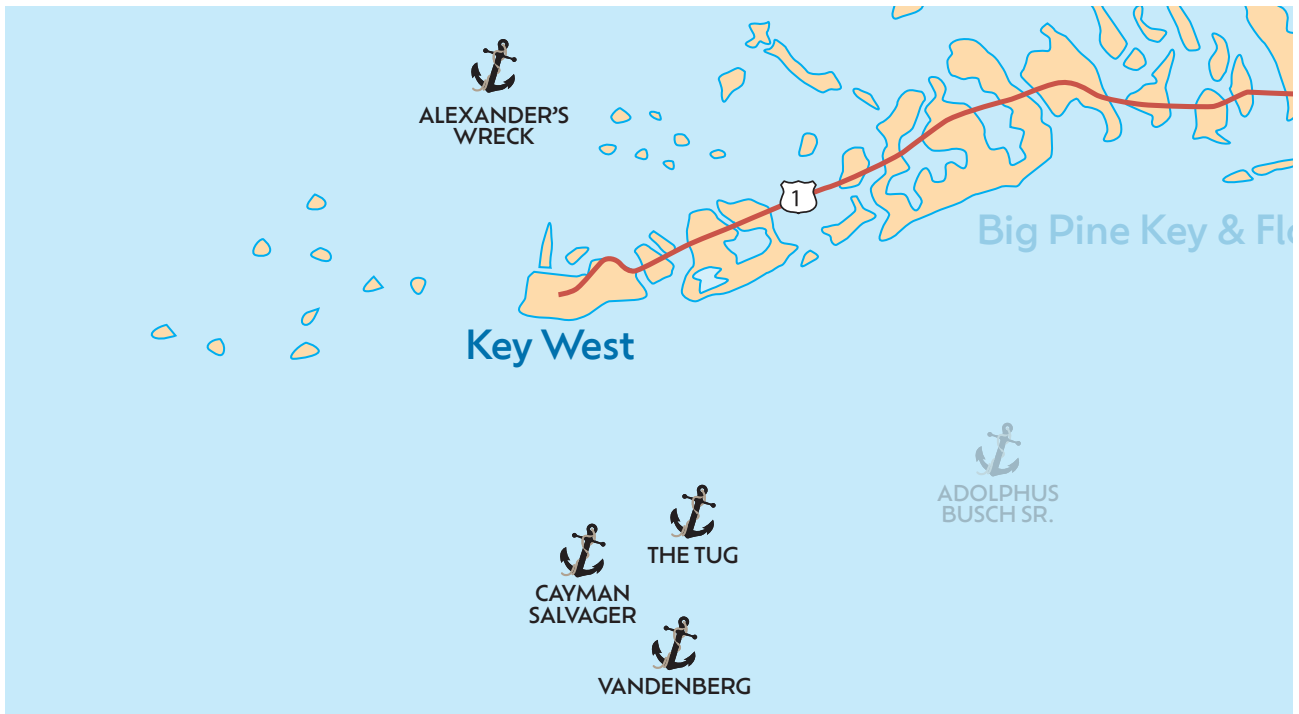
This popular snorkeling site is part of the Western Sambo Ecological Reserve, created in 1997. Here, anemones, starfish, sea cucumbers, crabs, sand dollars and sea urchins hold tight to the spur-and-groove coral formations, while surgeonfish, neon gobies, grunts, damselfish, huge gray angelfish and hogfish meander the shallows. Several other extensive shallow reefs include Eastern Dry Rocks, favored for its abundance of corals, gorgonians and tropical fish in depths ranging from 5 to 45 feet.





The Vandenberg wreck, Key West

The Wrecks Of Key West



As an island city surrounded by coral reefs, Key West's history was largely defined by the shipwrecks that occurred on a regular basis just offshore. So it only made sense that the largest vessel in The Florida Keys shipwreck trail would choose these waters as her final resting place. In 2009, the 522' missile tracker General Hoyt S. Vandenberg left port on a 145' mission to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to become the second largest artificial reef in the world. Once a heroic troop transporter, The Vandenberg is now known to carry schools of barracuda,

goliath grouper and the occasional sailfish. She joined another underwater legend, the 187' steel-hulled Cayman Salvager, which refused to go down without a fight. In 1985, Cayman Salvager was slated to become a deep reef in 300' of water, but the ship had other plans. She broke free from her tow cable and settled in, slightly askew, at 92'. A strong surge from Hurricane Kate in 2005 straightened her up and she's been a reliable home to moray eels ever since.



Green Moray Eel





Diver Safety



The City of Washington wreck, Key Largo



Don't dive alone. Never hold your breath. Plan your dive and dive your plan. Diver safety is no accident. So before embarking on any dive in The Florida Keys, it's essential to undergo proper training from a reputable dive shop or organization. Once certified, familiarize yourself with specific dive sites and their unique characteristics, such as currents, depth, visibility and marine life. Always perform pre-dive safety checks on your equipment and the equipment of others. Utilize a dive buddy system



and establish hand signals for essential communication underwater. Respect local regulations and guidelines for protected marine areas and wildlife habitats, to minimize disturbances to delicate ecosystems. Practice responsible diving behaviors, such as avoiding touching or harassing marine life. And finally, check the weather and trust your instincts – if a dive doesn't feel right for any reason, skip it. By putting diver safety first, you can fully enjoy the unparalleled beauty of The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.



The Benwood wreck, Key Largo



Sustainable Diving



Sombbrero Reef Lighthouse, Marathon

Whether you're a certified diver or a casual snorkeler, The Florida Keys offer the opportunity to explore a whole other world, right here on Earth. As part of a National Marine Sanctuary, our underwater ecosystem is a living, breathing museum, and we ask that you treat it that way. By following a few simple rules, you can help ensure that this treasure is here for generations to come.

Look but don't touch.

There's a beautiful order to the chaos in our undersea society. Every pebble and shell plays a part in our delicate ecosystem, and one simple change can upset the balance. So just live and let live, and enjoy the view.

Stay two feet away.

Until you master your finning technique, be mindful of where your feet and fins are at all times, so you can keep a safe distance from the fragile corals that surround you.



Use Reef Safe sunscreens.

Help prevent coral bleaching by seeking out SPFs with physical UVA and UVB filters. Look for sunscreens that use zinc oxide and titanium dioxide to create a physical block from harmful rays.

Use a mooring buoy.

There are nearly 500 mooring buoys in The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, all free and conveniently located near some of the best dive sites in The Keys. Tie up instead of dropping anchor into delicate coral or our precious seagrass bed.

Dive with a Blue Star operator.

The Blue Star program was established to promote responsible diving, snorkeling and fishing practices in The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. These tour operators take the extra step to educate you to be better stewards of the environment and natural resources in The Keys.

Plan Your Trip



Now that you know the history of diving in The Florida Keys, the species you'll encounter, notable reefs and wrecks and the importance of diver safety and sustainability, there's only one thing left to do: pack your bags! But before you do, there are several things to consider. First, plan your trip during seasons with calmer seas and optimal underwater visibility. Research reputable dive operators in the area and select one that meets your certification level and desired dive sites. Contact them to schedule dives and inquire



about rental equipment if needed. Arrange accommodations in advance, considering proximity to dive sites and amenities such as dive shops and restaurants. If traveling by air, book flights to nearby airports such as Key West International, Miami International or Ft. Lauderdale. Pack essentials such as reef-safe sunscreen and appropriate dive gear – in good condition and serviced before departure. And, finally, water your plants and hit the road. With a little planning and preparation, you can have a safe and memorable diving adventure in The Florida Keys & Key West.





The Florida Keys
& Key West
come as you are®



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