

# Diving & Snorkeling



COURTESY OF VISIT FLORIDA

## hot spots

Florida boasts more than 8,000 miles of coastline and a plethora of sights under its water's edge. From the coral reefs found in Key West to the shells and sea life found along the Gulf Coast, to sunken ships with tales of buried treasures in the Atlantic, visitors who make their way underwater will explore a side of Florida few know exist.

### >> Pensacola

With an active scuba diving population since the 1960s, the area was the best-kept secret in the diving world until the sinking of the USS Oriskany - the world's largest artificial reef - in 2006. Other popular sites include USS Massachusetts, Antares and Pete II for underwater exploration, photography and even weddings. Water temperatures range from the mid 80s in summer to the mid 60s in winter, when visibility is generally at its best, allow for year-round diving.

The USS Oriskany has quickly become the scuba world's latest "must dive." The retired 911-foot aircraft carrier sits upright on a sandy bottom, 212 feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico, only 24 miles southeast of Pensacola Pass. Divers from as far as Australia, Japan, Sweden and Russia have returned from the depths singing the praises of the "Mighty O," and CNN dubbed the wreck "the great carrier reef." The USS Oriskany is accessible by divers at every skill level. Her "crown" or island can be approached at 67 feet in emerald-clear water where visibility averages 70 to 150-plus feet. From the island, divers can scan the flight deck sitting at 137 feet, a depth considered a technical dive. Couples wanting to make a big splash may have their wedding ceremony conducted on the navigation tower at 67 feet.

[www.visitpensacola.com](http://www.visitpensacola.com)

### >> Crystal River (Citrus County)

Armed with little more than a swim mask and a snorkel, you're ready to explore where the rivers of Citrus County flow into the Gulf of Mexico. It's a world of beautiful fish, interesting plant and animal life at the river's headwaters or along the sea floor, and the winter home of manatees who favor the comparatively warmer waters here. But you're not as well insulated as a manatee, and you may want to consider a wet suit.

Just about anyone can enjoy snorkeling, and for the more adventurous, scuba excursions probe deeper waters. Springs and sinkholes can challenge even the most expert scuba diver. It is vitally important to have the proper training and a knowledgeable guide when undertaking exploratory dives, and to follow some sensible safety procedures. Any of the local commercial establishments specializing in scuba gear can recommend training, locate a suitable guide and double-check your equipment.

[www.visitcitrus.com](http://www.visitcitrus.com)

### >> Key Largo

Keys conservation efforts actually got under way in 1960 when widespread public support laid the foundation for

John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park off Key Largo, named for a late Miami newspaper editor who championed local environmental preservation.

The undersea park adjacent waters, all incorporated in the marine sanctuary, feature the nine-foot-high "Christ of the Deep," a 4,000-pound bronze statue installed as an underwater shrine. Created by Italian sculptor Guido Galletti, the statue stands on a 20-ton concrete base in 25 feet of water. A duplicate of the "Christ of the Abyss" situated in 50 feet of water off the coast of Italy, the "Christ of the Deep" was a gift to the Underwater Society of America from industrialist and undersea sportsman Egidi Cressi. It has become one of the most photographed underwater sites in the world and is a popular spot for underwater weddings.

The 510-foot Spiegel Grove, a retired U.S. Navy Landing Ship Dock, is one of the largest ships ever intentionally sunk to create an artificial reef. An excellent multilevel dive, the huge ship attracts legions of fish and other marine life. The ship can be viewed by scuba divers, snorkelers and even glass-bottom boat patrons. The Spiegel Grove is positioned about six miles off Key Largo in 130 feet of water. Several mooring buoys provide convenient tie-off points for boaters.

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

>>**Big Pine Key & The Lower Keys**

In the ocean waters off Big Pine Key, in the chain of islands leading to Key West, divers and snorkelers explore the spectacular coral and marine life of the Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary.

Since 1988, divers have been exploring a new artificial reef approximately five miles southwest of Big Pine Key - the intentionally scuttled 210-foot former island freighter the Adolphus Busch Sr. [www.fla-keys.com](http://www.fla-keys.com)

>>**Key West**

Key West, replete with luxurious resorts, fine dining and renowned shopping, also offers snorkelers nearby offshore reefs and dozens of dive and snorkel excursions every day. Several wrecks are frequented by area dive-charter operators.

They include the 65-foot-long Joe's Tug, which rests upright on the bottom in 65 feet of water surrounded by coral formations; Alexander's Wreck, a former destroyer escort broken into two sections that sit 200 yards apart in 28 feet of water; and the Cayman Salvage Master, an old 185-foot Coast Guard buoy tender providing diving opportunities at 70 to 90 feet.

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For divers with an interest in art, Keys metal sculptor Ann Labriola's Stargazer project rests about five miles southwest of Key West in 22 feet of water. Now home to marine life, the 200-foot-long creation is composed of 10 individual steel structures weighing between 2,000 and 8,000 pounds each, with holes cut out in patterns of star constellations.

For scuba enthusiasts seeking advanced education in the sport, many dive operators in the Florida Keys offer sophisticated programs such as underwater photography and videography as well as deep-water technical diving.

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

### Scuba News!

In April 2009 the 522-foot Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg departed Virginia for the long tow to her new home in Key West. A team of reef experts will sink the ship about five miles off Key West, creating a new habitat for marine life, an underwater classroom and a fishing, diving and snorkeling site.

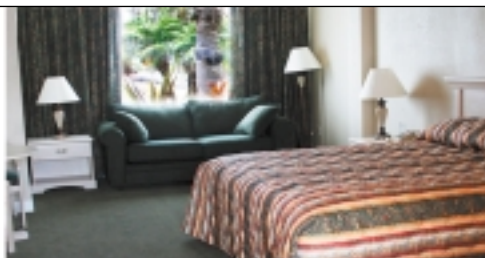
**Key West Express** is one of the efficient ways to arrive in South Florida! Sailing from both Fort Myers and Marco Island, visitors can board one of the comfortable vessels for a relaxing journey to Key West in less than four short hours! Enjoy the air-conditioned cabin or meet new friends at the galley lounge and bar. The vessel makes scheduled runs daily with round-trip and one-way tickets available. Call for reservations or current schedule.

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Visitors wanting information or are simply unsure of where (or how) to find that ideal dive or snorkel hot spot can utilize the services of charter boats and scheduled reef trips.

If you're planning a dive or snorkel vacation, take advantage of the accommodations and/or services offered here!

- >>**Dove Creek Lodge** [Key Largo]  
305-852-6200 | [www.dovecreeklodge.com](http://www.dovecreeklodge.com)
- >>**Horizon Divers** [Key Largo]  
305-453-3535 | [www.horizondivers.com](http://www.horizondivers.com)
- >>**Keys Diver Snorkel Tours** [Key Largo]  
305-451-1177 | [www.keysdiver.com](http://www.keysdiver.com)
- >>**Key Lime Sailing Club** [Key Largo]  
305-451-3438 | [www.keylimesailingclub.com](http://www.keylimesailingclub.com)
- >>**Popp's Motel** [Key Largo]  
305-852-5201 | [www.popps.com](http://www.popps.com)
- >>**Hampton Inn & Suites** [Islamorada]  
305-664-0073 | [www.keys-resort.com](http://www.keys-resort.com)
- >>**History of Diving Museum**  
305-664-9737 | [www.divingmuseum.com](http://www.divingmuseum.com)
- >>**Marathon Aqua Ranch** [Marathon]  
305-743-6135 | [www.marathonaquaranch.com](http://www.marathonaquaranch.com)
- >>**Conch Republic Divers** [Tavernier]  
305-852-1655 | [www.conchrepublicdivers.com](http://www.conchrepublicdivers.com)
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