

ostcards *from paradise*

A week of diving fun in
Florida's
drive-though wonderland
for under a grand.

by Rob Carroll

I'm sitting in front of my computer in my air-conditioned office prison cell. In my mind's eye, I see the Florida sun bathing palm trees on a beach of white sand. It doesn't take me long to rationalize why I should be "down there" diving instead of "in here" sitting: Round trip airfares from just about anywhere in the U.S. can be purchased for under \$300. Hotels and meals-on-the-road in Florida are very affordable. God put Florida's reefs and springs within driving distance.

Suppose I grab a buddy and we fly to Florida, toss our scuba gear in the trunk of a rental car, and drive and dive our way north from the Florida Keys to the Florida Springs over a week's time. I'll put together a quick budget for a week of Florida diving and fun in the sun. Hmm, let's see: \$275 for the round-trip flight to Florida, flying into Fort Lauderdale, flying out of Orlando. Hotel: as low as \$25 per person

per night, times seven nights—\$200. Moderate meals, not eating high on the hog, mind you: \$20 a day for seven days, that's \$140. Rental car with unlimited mileage and gas for a week, that's \$175 split two ways, or \$88 per person. Diving will average \$40 a day for six days—\$240. Trusty calculator, what's the total? Holy Sunshine State! That's \$943—under a grand!



photo by Stephen Frink

Days 2 and 3—Dive the Keys

The entire Keys are ours to dive—from Key Largo south to Key West.

So where to first? Around Key Largo and Islamorada for reefs and wrecks in John Pennekamp State Park and the Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary? Do we head south to dive in Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary? Or do we head further south to dive (and carouse) Key West?

This is what our guide book says: “In these Florida waters lie the most extensive coral systems in the United States. The vibrant reefs that run from Key Largo south to Key West are close to shore, yet the Gulf Stream nourishes them with nutrients, fish and benthic life. From one end of the island chain to the other, scores of dive centers run charter trips to the reefs morning, noon and night, each day of the calendar. The blue waters are warm, clear and inviting year ‘round.”

It says here that the Keys are “rich with opportunities for wreck diving.” In Key Largo it’s the two Coast Guard cutters, *Bibb* and *Duane*. Off Islamorada, there’s the 287-foot freighter *Eagle*. You can dive the *Thunderbolt* off Marathon. And Key West wrecks include the *Cayman Salvager* and the *Tug*.

The book goes on: “In the Keys, divers share the water with fish that would be the envy of aquarium buffs.” (On the list are angelfish, silver and black spadefish, rainbow parrotfish, yellow-tail snapper, barracuda and more.)

“Travelers making the journey down U.S. Highway 1 first reach Key Largo, where the local waters and reefs have been protected for decades by John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park and Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary. Molasses Reef—just six miles offshore—is the world’s most popular dive site for its consistently clear water, amazing hordes of tropical fish and easy access. Depths range from ten feet atop the coral embankments to 30 feet in the channels.”

“From Key Largo, head south to Islamorada for immense schools of grunts and snapper on Davis Ledge and Alligator Reef. Divers can cruise the dramatic coral canyons of Marathon’s Sombrero Reef. Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary is a shallow wonderland for divers and snorkelers that covers five square miles of ocean. At the southernmost end of the Keys, divers can wind their way through spur and groove coral formations of the Sambo Reefs, off Key West.”

End of Day 3 — the Keys to Fort Lauderdale

We catch an impressive sunset. A huge orange fireball sinks into Florida Bay as we drive to Fort Lauderdale.

Days 4 and 5—Dive Fort Lauderdale

The guidebook says this area actually has three reefs in varying depths of water. The first reef is close enough to shore for practical beach diving. The second reef starts about a half-mile from shore. Depth ranges from 30 to 50 feet. The third reef line lies about a mile offshore; depths run from 60 to 100 feet.

According to the book, the second and third reefs teem with tropical fish large and small. These reefs are decorated with a painter’s palette of colorful hard and soft corals, sea whips and purple fans. Structures run the gamut from flats, holes, and undercuts to short and tall ledges and mini-walls. The Gulf Stream brings large marine life to the second and third reefs. Expect encounters with sea turtles, nurse sharks, stingrays, barracudas, huge angelfish and giant green morays.

Lauderdale also boasts one of the best collections of diveable shipwrecks in the world: tugboats, huge freighters, sailboats, old Coast Guard cutters. Or maybe we’ll just jump in and let the currents have their way with us while drift diving. Better yet, it’s lobster season. Why don’t we try our hand at bagging some?

At the end of day 5, it’s time to head north—it’s just a five-hour drive to Ginnie Springs.

Days 6 and 7— Diving the Florida Springs

This is heaven, a freshwater diver’s dream come true. The Florida springs are what they call “The Fresh Alternative.” But all by itself, Ginnie Springs is worth the trip: an aquatic playland of crystal-clear waters that are 76 degrees year-round. We’ve got sinks, rock-lined streams and caverns that we can explore safely, even if we’re not cavern-certified.

And Crystal River—winter home of the manatees—is easy striking distance from Ginnie Springs. So are several dozen other springs and caverns popular with divers who’ve got fresh water running through their veins. We could even come back some day for cavern and cave



photo by Stephen Frink

diving training. But right now I want to drift through gin-clear waters swarming with turtles and fish. I want to slither over smooth rocks like an otter as the rush of currents whooshes us down a half-mile long snorkeling run. But enough talk—let’s dive!

End of Day 7—Fly Home

We’ve got two, maybe three hours to catch our plane in Orlando. Then it’s home—back to the nine-to-five grind. But hey, mission accomplished: we managed to wring every nickel out of our budget. And we got more than our money’s worth in diving and fun.