

# Boot Camp for Divers

## *Learning Cavern Diving in Florida*

If the cenotés of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula are the big leagues of cave and cavern diving, then northern Florida is triple-A ball, the place to learn the unique skills demanded by overhead environments. Without a certification from either the National Speleological Society's Cave Diving Section or the National Association of Cave Divers, however, one's access is limited to either a few select caverns or guided explorations, which is why I decided I'd become a cavern-certified diver.

I arrived at Ginnie Springs, a privately-owned resort northwest of Gainesville that borders the Santa Fe River, on a 37° February morning. (Fortunately, I'd booked a motel in nearby High Springs rather than a campsite on the resort's forested 200 acres.) After checking in at the dive center, I met my instructor, Tyler Moon, who's in charge of the cavern/cave program.

The NSS-CDS cavern class runs two jam-packed days and includes lectures, equipment modification, land drills, and at least three dives in two different caverns. I opted to add two extra days for the Intro to Cave certification, as did the other three students. Tyler had us sign a sheaf of waivers, releases, and disclaimers, then, with boyish enthusiasm, he summarized cave geology and moved quickly to a lengthy discussion of everything that can (and has) gone wrong, the upshot of which was that nearly every fatality had been caused by someone's failure to follow one of the basic rules we were to learn.

He drilled us in the limits imposed on cavern divers: the rule of thirds (reserving at least two-thirds of one's starting air supply for exit); running a guideline from open water to the farthest point of the dive; penetrations no greater than 130 linear feet from the surface, always in view of sunlight; maximum depth of 70 feet; minimum 40-foot starting visibility; no decompression diving; and staying out of restrictions too tight for two divers to pass through together.

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Initially I resisted these warnings, recalling the endless times I had followed dive guides single-file through constricted reef passageways. My response was typical of many of the students who were experienced divers, but, like a stand-up comedian skilled at handling hecklers, Tyler had heard all the challenges and provided well-rehearsed comebacks to every objection. We were on his turf, all of us rookies despite our experience. After lunch, he inspected everyone's equipment and dictated modifications. Since we were all going on to the intro cave course, we were set up with dual-valve tanks and redundant regulators (one with a

seven-foot hose for air-sharing), and extra lights and reels. Tyler lightened our ballast and helped us rig drop weights that we would use to descend and ascend, but which would be tied off to our guidelines when we reached sufficient depth to achieve neutral buoyancy. We were to fine-tune our buoyancy by inhaling or exhaling.

Much time was spent replacing bulky items with more compact versions. Each modification triggered a trip into the dive shop and a new purchase or rental. The cave diver's most critical piece of equipment, it seems, is an American Express Gold Card. At least the prices seemed competitive, which was a break considering that we were a captive market. (Don't buy any specialized equipment ahead of time; they're downright finicky about what brands, features, and sizes are acceptable.)

Nothing that I'd done in open water prepared me for the exotic speleological realm, and being forced to unlearn some of my cherished techniques and attitudes proved more difficult than negotiating the subterranean labyrinths. The classes were spread over four 10-hour days. Though they were more grueling mentally than physically, they still resembled boot camp. I did learn new techniques in buoyancy control, trim, gear streamlining, fin propulsion, and emergency procedures, but it wasn't fun — at least not this specific course. I'd recommend it only for experienced, comfortable — and very determined — divers.

On Day 2, during three different dives, we performed basic safety drills (air sharing and equipment check), buoyancy control and trim, guideline and reel use, modified flutter kicks and other propulsion techniques,

## *Really Diving Into Florida*

No one wants to be in school all the time, so I also visited six North Florida caverns as part of my trip. All are known for their super visibility (up to 200 feet) and constant 72° water temperature regardless of depth. Each was open to sport divers, and only one required cavern certification to take lights down. Two that didn't require lights and stood out from all the rest were:

**Paradise Springs.** I figured I was going to like this place when I read the directions in a guidebook: "Fifty feet before SR 441 splits, look for a black mailbox with a diver's flag and take the dirt road to the right 2 mi." Sandwiched between picturesque cattle and horse pastures, the dive center is part of the Chapelka family's house, and the operation is run by Curt and his 70-year-old diver dad, "Fudd," who's as cordial and homespun as they come.

The spring itself is just a few feet from the house and accessible from a sandy grass yard studded with picnic tables, a gazebo, and an outdoor rinse shower. Other amenities include a bathhouse and air station. My buddy and I suited up on the lawn and walked down a flight of stairs into a leafy grotto with a crystalline pool about 30' in diameter that was set amid native trees and ferns. The stairs continued underwater to a platform where we finished donning and adjusting our gear, then swam down a buoy line to a marker and veered off around a cone of debris from previous cave-ins to a straight tunnel that slopes gently down to 100 feet. A stationary line guided the way, and the limit for open water divers was clearly marked. Cave divers can take a tunnel down another 40 feet, but we enjoyed turning around at this point for a spectacular view of the dark chasm leading back up to the sunlit surface of the pool.

On the return leg we took Fudd's advice, poking our heads into a couple of small side rooms and circling the debris cone to search for sand dollar and sea biscuit fossils. Resident catfish often accompanied us in the shallower waters. Although we couldn't find it, there's a fossilized 5-foot rib bone from some as-yet-undetermined prehistoric creature imbedded in the limestone wall. It was high season, but we still had the cavern to ourselves for most of our Tuesday afternoon dive. When another dive team entered the water, we just stayed on the far side of the debris cone, watching the eerie play of their lights as they descended into the tunnel.

**Devil's Den.** Affable Manager Ginnie McNight greeted us at the dive center and suggested we hang out for a few minutes since a pair of divers were reportedly kicking up silt in the spring. While we filled out paperwork and rented tanks, she explained that Devil's Den is Florida's only underground spring cavern dive. The landscaped grounds were dotted with covered picnic tables and barbecue grills. Devil's Den also features volleyball, horseback riding, a swimming pool, hot showers, and a fountain set amid a one-acre clearwater pond up to 20 feet in depth that's used for open-water training classes. If you're looking for a place to stay, there's camping, rental cabins, RV hookups, a bunkhouse, and a few snacks and soft drinks. But the most impressive feature by far is the underground spring itself. A narrow rock tunnel with wooden steps leads down to a grotto 60' below ground. Vines hang down from a 40' circular opening in the earth, and sunlight streams into the grotto and filters through gnarly mossback oaks.

At the bottom of the stairs is a large bowl nearly 100' across that's stocked with catfish, brim, and koi. Since there's no natural vegetation in the spring, the fish are all hand-fed by divers, so they're incredibly tame. Dipping below the surface, we encountered a debris cone so massive it looked more like a rock slide. Catfish tailed us, looking like small nurse sharks. We descended to the maximum depth of 55 feet, eyeing a series of lower and narrower caves that are off-limits to divers. They had the spooky aspect of funhouse dioramas; I kept expecting ghouls to leap out, rattling chains.

On our way up we made four progressively shallower circumnavigations of the debris cone. The different nooks and crannies looked different from various perspectives, and the walls dotted with small holes and interconnected tubes, some with small stalagmite and stalactite-like formations, made me feel like a mouse in a Swiss cheese fantasy. There was more variety here than anyplace else I saw in Florida. I logged a little over an hour on this fascinating dive and still finished with over 1,000 lbs. in my 80 c.f. tank.

— D. L.

plus various emergency procedures, some of which we attempted while juggling lights or in zero visibility. I found it a struggle to remember the skills and still follow the dive plan, and the stress caused me to consume air much faster than usual. When I blew the zero-vis guideline drill,

I felt like a dunce. Unlike most diving courses, this was one where failure was a real possibility.

Finally, however, Tyler let us all know we were ready to go to the Intro Cave level course with a new instructor, Rod Metcalfe. A grizzled veteran, Rod's style was

more folksy than Tyler's, but just as demanding. Taking in the paraphernalia hanging off or tucked into my BC, he scoffed, "you look like a garage sale" and rearranged the merchandise. He was amiable but, like a drill instructor, seemed intent on breaking down any ego-resistance

we might have to unlearning old behaviors.

That afternoon Rod took us to a cave system inside Ginnie Springs, where we penetrated two interconnected tunnels, doing even more demanding versions of the skills we had learned in the cavern course. At Devil's Eye we dropped 20 feet down a limestone shaft, bucking a 4-5 knot outflow, the strongest current I'd ever swam against. Leveling out, I pulled myself along with my left hand, the primary reel and a light in my right hand, trying to keep the line taut and away from other divers while also keeping track of my air consumption and buoyancy.

I rode the current back from a depth of 66 feet, fighting to slow myself while reeling in the line. Though I wasn't a pretty picture, I had things under control until I tried to undo the line we'd tied off at our starting point. It got hopelessly snarled, and Rod had to finish the job for me. That dunce cap was growing taller and taller. I spent the evening finishing take-home exams for both the classes.

The next morning, as we drove an hour to Peacock Springs State Recreation Area, my stomach was roiling. Was it nerves or the after-effect of my grits-and-grease breakfast at a High Springs café, where the motto seemed to be "nothing healthy"?

Peacock Springs is located in a remote area off the Suwannee River and is a more primitive day-use park than Ginnie Springs. We made two dives there, performing a lost buddy drill and then a lights-out air-sharing exercise from 300 feet back in Peanut Tunnel. After pointed critiques by Rod (whose D.I. approach didn't include positive reinforcement as a teaching tool), we headed back

to Ginnie Springs to return our gear by 7:00 p.m. and then await our final personal evaluations. We were not a cocky bunch (Intro Cave failure rates at Ginnie Springs can run as high as 25%-40%, depending on the instructor). We were tired, hungry, and brain-fried, and most of us agreed that we wouldn't be surprised if we failed.

Being the last one called for review increased my anxiety level. Rod recapped his earlier criticism, then said he was going to pass me by what sounded like the slimmest of margins. I walked out of the classroom feeling more drained than any time since college finals.

Armed with my new skills, I'm looking forward to exploring those legendary Yucatan cenotés. Still, even if I never enter another cavern, I'll carry away some important pluses from this training, including the humility of knowing that, despite my decades of underwater experience, I've always got more to learn. I'm not in the big leagues yet.

## If You Go

The Cavern and Intro Cave classes are \$199 each, including air, manual, admission to the resort, and NSS certification card. Gear modification or rental is not included. (Four more days of training are required for full cave certification; they discourage taking all eight days at once, so you'll need to schedule a repeat visit.) ...Other activities include swimming, snorkeling, tubing, canoeing, nature hikes, volleyball, and camping. For info call (904) 454-2202, [www.ginnesprings.com](http://www.ginnesprings.com) Day rate for divers is \$24; tanks are \$8/day, weight belts \$3. For other certification sites, contact either the NSS/CDS (850-536-0351, [www.caves.org](http://www.caves.org)) or the National Association of Cave Divers (352-495-NACD or [www.afn.org/~nacd](http://www.afn.org/~nacd))....Double hotel rooms run \$45-65/night (Days Inn, Holiday Inn Express). Expect a lot of fried foods, some great barbecue. Tampa is just a couple of hours away.

— D. L.

## Who's Who at What URL

Web browsing seems like one of those things that should be logical. So where would you expect URLs like [www.skindivermagazine.com](http://www.skindivermagazine.com) and [www.skindiver.net](http://www.skindiver.net) to take you? Odds are your first guess will be wrong: *Rodale's Scuba Diving* magazine has registered these URLs, and they'll take you directly to Rodale's site at <http://www.scubadiving.com>. In the web game it's not uncommon to purchase additional URLs that will take readers to your site, but buying and using URLs that people would expect to take them to the competition is another story.

The owner of <http://www.skindiver.com> isn't *Skin Diver Magazine* but Great Destinations, a dive travel agent. If you're looking for *Skin Diver's* site, the address is <http://www.skin-diver.com>. *Skin Diver* is a late comer to the online world, and part of the price for coming late is finding that some of the best diving URLs have already been snapped up.

Not that there aren't still opportunities out there. It looks like the addresses <http://www.scubadivingmagazine.com> and [.net](http://www.skindiver.net) are still available. Anyone want to grab those?

— W. D.