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# Out Of This World Diving in Jupiter (Florida!)

FLORIDA DIVER – JULY 24, 2020

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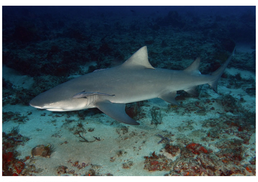
The handsome lighthouse standing guard at the entrance of the Jupiter Inlet in Florida marked the start of our journey to the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf Stream and some of the most unexpectedly exciting diving we had experienced in quite some time. With a freshening breeze from the east, the ocean was kicking up some moderate waves but the sturdy dive vessel Republic VII, operated by the Jupiter Dive Center, punched through the chop with barely a shrug and before long we were positioned over the dive site.

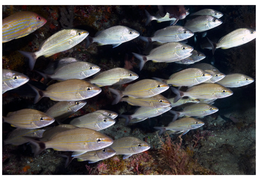
*The Jupiter Dive Center dive boats*

Donning our kit within sight of the condos and high-rise hotels of eastern Florida, our expectations were low. How good could this diving be if we could see the hotels from the boat? Well, it wouldn't be long before we would learn how mistaken we were!
In this part of the world, the Gulf Stream, a powerful ocean current running up the coast of North America, veers close to the coast and washes over an ocean bed of ledges, cracks, boulders and reef contours creating exciting and unpredictable dive opportunities. This is live boat, drift diving and SMB country! Divers must be prepared for swift currents and be proficient in drift diving and live boat techniques, along with the proper use of SMBs.
Our first dive was to a site known as Area 29, and after the divers quickly stepped off the stern in rapid succession, we descended to 90 feet and began our flight over the low-lying reef. It was January, and this was Lemon Shark season here in Jupiter. Each year during the early winter months Lemon Sharks aggregate here and can be seen reliably on several of the dive sites. Within minutes, several bulky sharks swam by in the ocean current and, thinking of the condos and hotels above, we smiled in astonishment.



*A Lemon Shark with remoras in tow*

As much as we were enjoying our encounters with 6 and 8-foot Lemon Sharks, it was another set of visitors that quickly diverted our attention. Emerging from the edge of visibility were several very large Goliath Groupers. As their name implies, these fish are enormous; some were thesize of smart cars. Swimming languidly in the ferocious current, these fish seemed perfectly at ease in the fast-moving water. Some carried their own retinue of remoras clinging to their sides in hopes of catching the remains of a meal.
We travelled quite a distance on this dive and before long we were on the surface amid a garden of red SMBs from the group of divers we were with and happy to see the dive boat bouncing through the waves and headed our way. As we waited, we all couldn't contain our excitement over the encounters of the dive.

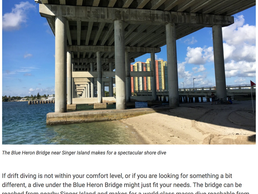


*A school of Tomtate Grunts shelter find shelter in the reef*

Next up was a dive at Juno Ledge, a pretty dive site that is comprised of an undulating ledge that runs south to north and amounts to a small mini-wall ofabout 8 feet. As we cruised over the ledge in the Gulf Stream current, we were able to spot Green Moray Eels poking their fearsome looking faces out of crevices in the reef. We also swam by large schools of grunt, snapper and Porkfish taking refuge under the protective cover of rock ledges and overhangs. For underwater photographers, the reef itself is not as photogenic as in other parts of the world, but the diversity and amount of life is astounding. Squirrelfish, Spadefish, Spiny Lobster, Bream, Angelfish and many other species keep the cameras humming and the memory cards filled. It was a great day of diving off Jupiter.
Our second day of diving in Jupiter continued our drift diving adventures. Scarface was our first dive site, named after a particularly gnarly looking Moray Eel that used to live here. Unfortunately, Scarface has since passed on but there are multitudes of other photographic opportunities here. The current was fierce again this day, and it was all we could do to position ourselves to create images of the Hawksbill Turtles that were cruising along the ledge seemingly unaffected by the movement of the water! Scarface is a great dive site even in the swiftest of currents because it has numerous "cul-de-sacs" and areas to get out of the current to observe marine life, create images or just take a breather from the drift.

*Divers often encounter Hawksbill Turtles on these dives*

***Words & Photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver***
Schools of Spadefish greeted us at the next site appropriately named Spadefish Point. Here we saw robust French Angelfish, Grey Angelfish and even a Queen Angelfish poking along the reef. Under a ledge, a collection of Soldierfish attempted to hide despite their brilliant red coloration. We surfaced with smiles on our faces.
There are numerous other dive sites in Jupiter, each with their own merits. But, the next day we decided to drive down the coast about 20 minutes to check out the diving off West Palm Beach with Deep Obsession dive charters. Here, we found similar reef conditions but were able to get a dash of variety by diving on the Anna Cecelia wreck, a small fishing smack sitting in about 75 feet of water. Despite the current, which had actually gotten stronger overnight, we were able to use the wreck as a blocker as we photographed Sergeant Major fish guarding their egg masses. It was here, though, where we realized the importance of paying attention to the currents. While we lingered on the wreck with a dive guide, other divers drifted off along the reef in the swift current.
We surfaced to a bright sunny day, but with a strong breeze the ocean waves had kicked up to 6 feet or more. More distressing, the dive vessel Deep Obsession was just a tiny speck on the horizon! Worse, it seemed to be moving in the opposite direction! With SMBs deployed, we could do nothing but wait.
And wait we did. We ended up drifting for about an hour in the Gulf Stream until a passing boat stopped to lend assistance. They were able to radio over to our boat and within moments, the dive boat was pounding through the waves to pick us up. We were relieved as the boat drew near, even as we contemplated how to safely get ourselves and our cameras onto the boat in the pitching seas. Once on board, we learned the reason for the situation: other divers in our group became separated from us and drifted a great distance before surfacing. Once the boat retrieved them, they were so far from us that we were no longer visible. It was a long drift, and a long day. But everyone was safe, we captured some good images and we had some good dives.



*The Blue Heron Bridge near Singer Island makes for a spectacular shore dive*

If drift diving is not within your comfort level, or if you are looking for something a bit different, a dive under the Blue Heron Bridge might just fit your needs. The bridge can be reached from nearby Singer Island and makes for a world-class macro dive reachable from the shore. Under the pilings of the bridge, divers can find multitudes of marine life in a very healthy ecosystem and the site is often ranked among the top 5 shore dive destinations in the United States.
With Lemon Sharks, Goliath Grouper, Turtles, and myriad species of fish, along with world class shore dives, exhilarating drift dives and interesting shipwrecks, the diving off Jupiter, Florida is well worth the effort. In fact, you might just say it is "out of this world".
**Getting There**
Visitors should plan to arrive into Palm Beach International (PBI) airport, about a 30-minute drive from Jupiter, Florida.Diving and AccommodationThere are numerous lodging options in Jupiter. Divers can also find hotels in West Palm Beach, Singer Island and other nearby beach destinations. Divers will want to rent a car to get from the airport to the hotel and to the dive boats.
Mike and Chris recommend Jupiter Dive Center for their comfortable boats, experienced dive leaders and very capable boat captains.
**When to go**
Year round. Lemon Sharks are present in January and February. Hurricane season is July through November so divers should keep an eye on the weather in those months. Summer months bring calmer water; winter months are subject to stronger winds and the occasional cold front bringing cooler temperatures.
**Currency**
US Dollars and major credit cards are accepted in Florida.
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***Words & Photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver***

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