

Florida Springs Trip, December 1998

Overview

We took our open water certification course in July, 1998 through the outdoor recreation program at Clemson University. Premier Scuba Shop of Anderson taught the class, which met on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for three weeks. We performed our classroom and pool sessions at Fike Recreation Center on campus. Our instructor/divemaster was Reese Davis (bottom photo below.) We did our check-out dives during the first weekend in August. On Saturday, we completed the first part of the check-out at “The Cage” in Lake Keowee. Reese gave us vienna sausages to feed the fish. On Sunday, we finished the check-out in Lake Jocassee, where we saw a Chinese junk and a motorcycle that had been sunk. Reese presented us with our open water certificates underwater in Lake Jocassee.

The Open Water Certification led our first dive trip at the Florida Springs. We dove with the American Pro Dive Shop in Crystal River and stayed in a “cottage” at the shop’s “American’s River Rendezvous” mobile home park on the Homosassa River in Homosassa Springs. We arrived on Saturday, December 19th and returned to Macon on Wednesday, December 23rd. The weather was good for most of the trip — a little overcast on the 19th and 20th, but nice the remaining days, with land temperatures in the 70s and 80s.

Our dive package included day and evening drift dives down the Rainbow River, snorkeling encounters with manatees on the Homosassa River and Crystal River, and dives in Crystal River, Devil’s Den and Manatee Springs. We were also scheduled to dive Blue Grotto, but it was closed. One minor drawback to this trip was that we had to follow a dive shop vehicle in our car to all the sites (an hour-long drive in some cases), except the Homosassa River snorkel, for which we boarded the boat at the dock where we stayed.

Darren’s Favorites: Rainbow R. night dive, Crystal R., Manatee Springs

Kim’s Favorites: Rainbow R. night dive, Devil’s Den

Rainbow River

Afternoon Dive, 12/20/98

A completely spring-fed river — extremely clear. We snorkeled first, then proceeded with a rift dive down the river. It was a cloudy afternoon with no sun and a few sprinkles, and the water was very cold. Depth ranged from about 6 to 20 feet. David was our guide.

Animal Life: A number of turtles, limited fresh-water fish, including long-nose gar.

Plant Life: Lots of eelgrass.

Features: Several large craters where the springs emerge from underground; bubbling sands; “popcorn machines.”

Rainbow River

Night Dive, 12/20/98

A repeat of our afternoon drift dive. The river was very dark; no one else was out on the water and we were the only two people on the dive. Dave was our guide again. The water seemed warmer than in the afternoon.

Great experience floating through the water over the grasses and exploring the spring craters in complete darkness. Very easy to get turned around and disoriented underwater in the dark.

Homosassa River

Morning Snorkel, 12/21/98

We snorkeled with the manatees on the Homosassa River in a group of about 8 people. Our guide was Susan, co-owner of the dive shop. We saw 8 to 10 manatees and were able to pet and play with a number of them. They sleep on the bottom of the river (approximately 6 to 10 feet deep) and come up periodically for air, at which time they may play for a while. The water was very cold.

Manatee encounters are limited to snorkeling, with interaction permitted only on the surface. Manatees are an endangered species, and they come to inhabit the rivers of the Gulf Coast of Florida in the winter months in order to stay in water that is above 70°F.

Devil’s Den

Afternoon Dive, 12/21/98

An underground spring inside a cavern which houses a cone-shaped geological formation that caved in from the surface and goes approximately 50’ deep. From the water, you see a 15-20’ diameter opening in the top of the cone-shaped rock wall about 60’ above the surface, with thick vines hanging down to the water. Our guide was Richard, the shop owners’ son, and we were the only 3 people in the cavern during the dive.

Animal Life: A number of catfish and some other fresh-water species.

Plant Life: Very sparse.

Features: Lots of small, short swim-throughs

Crystal River

Morning Dive, 12/22/98

A partially spring-fed river where manatees come to spend the winter. Our group included about 11 people, with Dave as our guide. First, we snor-keled with the manatees and encountered about 6 of them. Then, we dove a 50' long cave that was approximately 50' deep. The cave was neat — we were the only two people left exploring it for the last 10-15 minutes.

Animal Life: Large schools of several species of fresh-water fish.

Plant Life: Very little plant life seen.

Features: Underwater statue with plaque regarding diving safety in a crater outside the cave.

Manatee Springs

Afternoon Dive, 12/22/98

Two connected springs. The deeper side (about 60') was more like a pond with no outlet and very little life. The second side was much shallower (20' maximum) but had a great blow hole where the spring water emerged from below. Lots of fun holding on to logs in front of the hole and then letting go and being carried away with the current. Dave was our guide, and we were the only three people in the water.

Animal Life: A few turtles and limited number of fresh-water fish.

Plant Life: Eelgrass on the shallow side.

Features: Blow hole.