

Spiegel Grove wreck site

The Deepest Blue

Some of Florida's most astounding wonders
lie far below the surface

By Artis Henderson

A squall sits along the horizon, dark gray clouds over steely water, as our boat bounces through the choppy surf. Waves break across the bow. But my dive instructor, Lila, isn't worried. "We'll be a hundred feet deep when it hits," she says.

We're off the coast of Key Largo, and the small dive boat is pointed east, away from shore, toward the wreck of the *USS Spiegel Grove*. The former Navy ship was built in the mid-1950s and spent 30 years running amphibious exercises along the eastern seaboard of the United States. In 2002, after being decommissioned, the *Spiegel Grove* was sunk to create an artificial reef inside the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Six miles off shore, we reach the buoys that mark the wreck. The water is dark blue, and it's impossible to see beneath the surface.

Sixty feet below, the ship's top level waits. There are just four of us on the boat: the captain, my partner, Lila and me. The captain ties the boat to one of the buoys while the three divers step into our wetsuits. This dive is part of my PADI Advanced Open Water certification, and I worry about what's ahead as I go through my pre-dive ritual, checking my tanks, stepping into my fins, strapping on my buoyancy control device (BCD) and spitting in my mask. "You'll do fine," my partner tells me. He squeezes my knee reassuringly. "It's all the same below 40 feet."

The storm clouds have reached us, and they loosen their first drops as I stick my regulator in my mouth. The captain helps me shuffle to the stern of the boat. "Say hello to a hundred feet for me,"



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he says. I nod uncertainly and take a giant stride off the edge. The water hits me, cool even through my wetsuit, and I flinch at the shock of it. My partner follows close behind. Lila is already in the water, waiting at the surface. “Ready?” she asks. “Ready,” I say, though I’m more afraid than I want to admit.

People had been telling me for years that I should get dive certified, but I’d resisted the idea. Life is dangerous enough on the surface, I said. Why would I volunteer to spend time underwater? Sure, they extolled the beauty of diving, the peaceful feeling that comes with being at-depth, the adrenaline of a challenging dive. But my fears kept me on dry land. What finally convinced me to get certified was sheer obsession: I’m passionate about this state and its natural places. And there’s no getting around the fact that Florida is a peninsula, surrounded on three sides by water. If I was ever going to know the wild heart of this place—truly know it—then I’d have to get wet. So, I took SCUBA lessons, I went on two dozen shallow dives around Florida and the Caribbean and, to my surprise, I loved it. Like a lot of new divers, I got the itch to do more. And more in diving usually means going deeper.

A buoy bobs off the port side of the dive boat. It has a line that

leads down into the blue water. We empty our BCDs of air, sink below the surface and follow the line downward, hand over hand. I’m thankful for the gloves that keep my skin from slicing open on the mollusks that cling to the rope. I can only see three feet below us as we descend. On either side, there are barracudas suspended in the water column, their tails barely moving, their eyes swiveling to follow us. I breathe slow breaths in and out, and the entire world is reduced to the sound of my breathing and the limitless blue around me. I glance at the depth gauge tucked into the belt of my BCD as we descend from 30 feet to 40 feet to 50 feet. It’s here that my heart beats faster. Until now, 50 feet was my maximum depth. The water feels different as we move deeper. It’s darker, more still. The surface is farther away, its light pale and distant. I remind myself to keep breathing, to keep following the line downward. We descend another 15 feet.

Out of the darkening blue, the Spiegel Grove appears, all at once, like a mirage. Just over 500 feet long from bow to stern, she looks like a ghost ship in the watery depths, perfectly upright, as though at any moment her engines might come to life and propel the ship upward. The main deck sits 89 feet below the surface, and we continue to descend toward it. At 70 feet we release the line and swim

out over the deck, moving through the water like astronauts through space. At shallower depths, small motions translate to big movement in the water. Even a deep breath can make you rise a few feet. But here everything is compressed. I have to make strong scissoring kicks with my fins to move forward.

The ship is flanked by tropical fish — parrotfish, hogfish, triggerfish, angelfish. Their bright colors appear as shades of blue at this depth. There are more barracudas but no sharks. Secretly, I’m relieved. I know sharks generally aren’t dangerous, and they make a cool addition to every dive story, but that’s one stress I’m glad not to have on this trip. We swim along the deck then beside the upper levels. While my partner explores near us, Lila and I stop beside an open doorway that leads into the ship’s interior. She shines a flashlight into the dark rectangle so that I can see the metalwork covered in sea life. We don’t venture inside.

As we continue along the hull, I check my dive computer regularly. I watch my air consumption and dive time with a careful eye. I also monitor my depth. We’re swimming at a steady 85 feet when Lila stops and turns to me. She makes the “OK?” sign and I return it with my answer, “OK.” She carries a whiteboard and a wax pencil that

work underwater. She writes on the board, “Ready for 100 ft?” I check in with myself. Am I ready? The sea surrounding us glows a dark blue, like the inside of a sapphire. A school of amberjacks passes overhead, pale silver in the light that filters down from the surface. The *Spiegel Grove* sits beside us, enormous and magnificent. This watery world is a marvel, I decide. I give Lila the OK sign. She takes my arm at the elbow, and we let the air out of our BCDs and hold onto each other as we sink. I watch my depth gauge. Ninety feet, 94, and then, quickly, we’re at 100 feet. Lila kicks to keep us from falling farther, and I do the same. She gives a little cheer, muffled through her mouthpiece, and I swell with pride.

I look up toward the surface, where by now it’s probably raining. I imagine the waves churning in a choppy foam. Here at 100 feet the world is still and blue and astonishing.

For information about the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, see <https://floridakeys.noaa.gov/>; for more on the USS Spiegel Grove site, <https://fla-keys.com/diving/spiegel-grove/>. Read more of Artis Henderson’s work at artishenderson.com.