

Virgin Territory: Devil's Eye Cave System Beyond The Restriction

I love Devil's Eye. Yet after diving it virtually every weekday for months on end and inspecting what seems like every inch of its gorgeous self, one day it struck me - this must be what being married is like. It's still good every time you do it... but you always know what you are going to get.

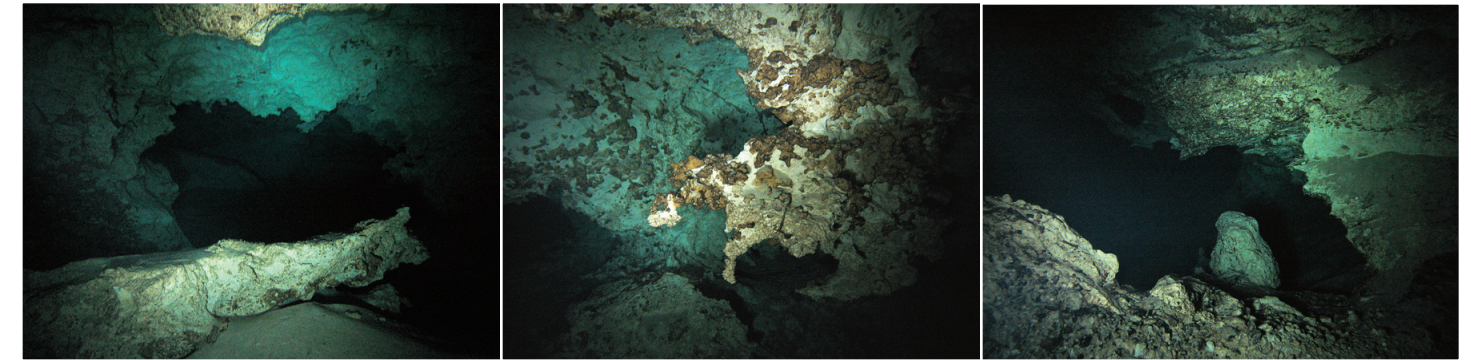
Then the floods came and I was in for a wild ride; the marriage equivalent of coming home and finding your partner in a kinky outfit and ready to go, I suppose. The floods quickly turned the vis to crap and hardly anyone was diving. While most saw doom and gloom, I saw an opportunity. I could turn my attention to the one tunnel I hadn't seen yet, the tunnel that led to the new section.

For my very first dive I traveled to 3000 feet, swam up to the end of the gold line, and made my way into the mysterious tunnel. The flow was virtually nonexistent because of the floods, which made diving in this area incredibly pleasant, kind of like diving Peacock. I got to the restriction and thought "really?" "This is the infamous restriction" I unclipped one of my tanks and gingerly popped through to the other side. To my great surprise it was not at all hazardous, or particularly tight for that matter. The remainder of the passage was a most reasonable size and even had some decent sized dome rooms. I was super excited as one gorgeous dome room after another appeared in front of me. I spent ages stopping, staring, looking, absorbing... admiring cave that less than a handful of people have ever laid eyes on. Unspoiled, untouched and beautiful cave revealed itself in front of me. I hit thirds around the 4400 ft mark and headed back with a

renewed passion for all things Ginnie. It was like falling in love all over again.

I spent a few weeks diving there regularly, looking around, enjoying the cave and doing progressively longer dives... meanwhile the vis and the flow began to slowly return back to normal. One day as I was completing one of my regular ventures there, I couldn't help but notice a conga line of tanks leading all the way through to the new passage... and finally to a new cookie. I wondered who else was going back there... and what they were up to? Luckily I didn't have to chew on this for too long, as Andrew Ainslie gave himself away on the boards the very next day. We got in touch and figured out who the mysterious "Saber" who laid line all over the place back there was (James Toland). Thus began a flow of communication that solved many of the questions I had in regards to who did what and when. Andrew added more line, surveyed, and to his great surprise, found himself at 150 ft depth. 150 ft in Devil's Eye - it seemed surreal.

Armed with this knowledge planning my next dive was that much easier, so I mixed it up and continued my own little exploration. Along the way I had the pleasure of seeing what is, without being too melodramatic, some of the prettiest cave I have ever seen. Then suddenly and unexpectedly I found myself at the end of the line... with a bunch of gas... and thought, now what do I do? The 125-foot spool was the longest bit of line I had. Yet, there I was and the Pits of Mordor were beckoning. The Pit to the right was the obvious



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way forward. I peeked in and it definitely went. I decided not to tease myself, with no line to actually go exploring, so I dropped into the other Pit. The Pit dropped to 165 ft, the flow disappeared, and the whole thing was low, flat and filled with silt up to the ears. I have affectionately dubbed it the "Mud Bath." While I won't bet my life that it doesn't go, I don't reckon it does. Although to find out for sure, I would need a much longer leash. At the end of my splash, I took out the spool; no point leaving scraps of line around and headed for home.

Finally while relaxing on deco I had an after-thought - I just got to see my first virgin cave ever! I'd be lying if I said I didn't get a kick out of this, not to mention the warm fluffy after-glow that goes along with the deflowering of virgins. Yet the after-glow was typically fleeting, and the cave had only revealed as much as a typical two dollar peep show. I am under no illusions; in the scheme of things my little sojourn 100 feet into new passage means absolutely nothing. It is not a cure for cancer. It's not even a footnote to the exploration that has been done and is being done around cave country FL, not to mention the world.

Yet the exploration of this cave does matter and it does mean something in the larger scheme of things. Cave exploration is not just about divers seeing pretty new cave or spooling out line into uncharted territory. At the very heart of exploration is the thirst for knowledge, knowledge that in the hands of the right people can be ammunition in the battle for environmental conservation. There are so many examples in Florida alone of physical connections made between springs by divers, which lead to conservation efforts and real changes in peoples and organizations attitudes to and actions towards the aquifer. Clearly the Devil's Eye Cave System does not stop at the end of the gold line. Tracing the source of the water could have a significant impact on how the land in this area is treated by everybody. Exploration should not be a dirty word; it should be applauded, facilitated and recognized appropriately. Clearly the mysteries of this cave are yet to be fully revealed.

Going past the restriction is not a dive for everyone, the same way a 10,000 foot push into Manatee or hitting the

end of the gold line in Jackson Blue is not for everyone. But the cave is there, it has been pushed and it has been lined, and where's there's cave there will be eager and curious divers.

So if you are one of the curious divers and can't sleep knowing that beautiful, unspoiled cave is just a hop, skip and a jump away from the beaten path, do us all a favor and take it easy in there. Keep your own limitations in mind and don't over reach. Don't plan a quadruple stage dive in there to begin with; enjoy what this new section has to offer. In the first 400 ft alone there are three gorgeous dome rooms that will leave you breathless. Make sure your sidemounting is squared away, you are comfortable negotiating restrictions, dealing with potentially bad vis, tons of deco and that you plan your gas accordingly. If you are going back there, remember, it is largely pristine and unspoiled cave, so keep your wits about ya.

While my pics are from the white section past Narnia's Gate, I don't mean to be biased towards it, as the black section is equally incredible and mind blowing. My little camera and 24W light however, are no match for the black veneer walls of Devil's. One of my favorite memories is being sucked down the siphon tunnel into black nothingness. Imagine being in this huge black tunnel, I mean jet black, and being slowly sucked into what feels like a black void - it was the most surreal and memorable experience. I'd hate for others to miss out on this in the future, so stay off the perfectly black walls, pretty please with a cherry on top. Otherwise - have fun and enjoy!

Editor's Note: From the earliest days as a chartered organization, the NSS-CDS has held exploration, conservation and safety as primary objectives. The second article in our constitution reads:

ARTICLE II: The purpose of the organization shall be the same as that of the National Speleological Society (hereafter referred to as NSS), with the additional purpose of organizing NSS members who are interested in cave diving so that they may better promote the objectives of the NSS. These objectives include 1) promotion of the conservation, exploration, and study of underwater caves; and 2) education for increased awareness, safety, and skill in cave diving.

We would be remiss and failing in our charge if we did not provide a platform for news of the intriguing ongoing discoveries in the Devil's Eye Cave System. The CDS does not support exploration that disregards the importance of landowner relations and safety, and encourages all individuals and teams engaging in exploration to respect the wishes of the landowner, undertake every effort to conduct safe exploration within current training guidelines, and make every effort to protect the fragile cave environment.

