

# Heaven is a Place on Earth

Agnes Milowka

*I thought writing this article would be dead easy as I'd just re-use the emails I sent from abroad, stitch them together and voila – I'd have a ready-made article.*

*I arrived home and figured that perhaps this might not be the brightest of ideas. My emails sound like I'm on some serious drugs... or perhaps I should be on even stronger medication. So I'll make an attempt to restrain my enthusiasm just a tad here... but just quickly - the Florida caves are bloody awesome!!!*

Florida really is heaven on earth... or rather is about as close to heaven as a cave diver can get without abstaining from drinking and spending their entire life helping little old ladies across the road. It is home to some very pretty caves, with beautiful clear tunnels that allow for wonderfully long penetrations and very long dives. It seems that any old cave in Florida resembles a map of our very own Tank cave, with tunnels that just go and go forever... it is hard not to be impressed.

Summer is usually not the time to hit the caves in Florida as the sweltering heat equals much pain, sweat and suffering whilst gearing up. On the upside many of the caves are virtually deserted which means you can have a whole cave system to yourself. Mind you this type of peace and serenity does not apply to weekends. The hot weekends mean that every man and his dog along with a li-lo and perhaps a beer seem to seek out a watering hole. Thus popular caves become popular swimming holes which means divers have to dodge much traffic and many flinging legs to get to the cave

entrance...  
I'm  
think-  
ing  
here  
of

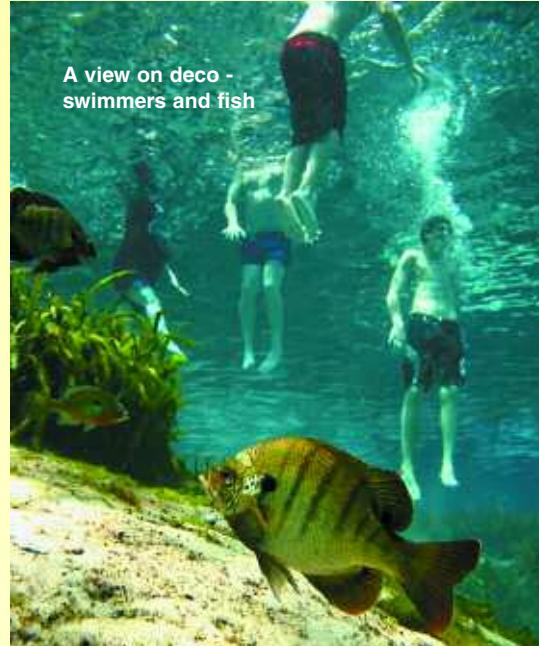
Ginnie  
in par-  
ticular.  
Having said

that, swimmers can be a source of much amusement on long deco hangs.

Still, you can't go to Florida and not visit the infamous Ginnie Springs. The place is definitely impressive, not just because of its infinite visibility but also because of the sheer size of the tunnels – you can



Flounder in Ginnie Springs



A view on deco - swimmers and fish

easily drive a bus through some of them! Further, Ginnie is famous for its flow... if you decide to do your deco in the Ear, be prepared to hang on to the log for dear life. To get into Ginnie without blowing all their gas divers tend to clamber Spiderman style along the ceiling and across the walls. Do as the locals do!

The gold line is great, but so is the flow, so it is not ideal to stay on the main line. Swimming against the current for over 2000 feet is, from personal experience, rather tiresome. The smart thing is to do a jump at the 'park-bench' (don't worry you can't miss it, this is about the time you feel like resting and catching your breath... and conveniently it looks just like its name sake) and head towards the Hiller Tunnel where you will be safely away from the roaring flow. On your way you will find the infamous bats which are very amusing, and also if you look really carefully a bunch of small fossils in the walls and on the

floor of the cave. Another nice place to visit is the white room – welcome to the disco! As long as your torch is pointing at the roof and illuminating the hundreds of air pockets you and your buddy can have a little dance.

Another cave with a great deal of flow is Little River and again most people jump off the main line and head through the Mud Tunnel in order to get into the guts of the cave. The recent droughts have reduced the flow, which made my dive here a pleasant dip as opposed to a marathon swim. While spectacular, the cave is a bit spooky with a lot of high vertical fissures and reminded me of a dungeon with so many tunnels all merging into one another. The low flow made the numerous finger marks on the walls seem very out of place and made it seem like something horrific had happened in the tunnels rather than divers simply using the walls to pull themselves against the flow.

Now Peacock is their so called 'training site' but don't be discouraged by this, as it is a very, very distant cousin of Gouldens. Those two are about as related as a centipede is to a unicorn. The Grand Traverse is particularly fun, you descend into Orange Grove and follow a crystal clear tunnel for over 4600 feet before finally exiting in Peacock I. Along the way are various small sinks or 'emergency exits,' which allow you to recalculate your thirds as you go... or if you're like me and have a small bladder, let you jump out for a quick toilet stop. Now, if you left your car at Orange Grove and did the grand tour, guess what, it's a long walk back. Unless of



Diver descending into Jackson Blue.

**Diver on scooter in Jackson Blue.**



course you can hitch a ride with a bunch of friendly Floridians on the back of a tray – many thanks to the boys!

The grand tour allows you to see some of the best parts of the Peacock system but don't ignore Peacock III. This cave is a bit tighter and a lot more silty than its counterparts, with that thick dark mud that you'd see in Stinging Nettle or Fossils back home, but it's definitely worth a look.

Further up the road is Madison Blue and it is an amazing cave that goes through more 'costume' changes than Whoopi Goldberg hosting the Oscars. Every bit of this cave is different and around each corner is a little surprise; really the place just gets more and more stunning. The biggest surprise for me was that the gold line does not in fact lead all the way through to the famous Rocky Horror and big drop off and instead I found myself jumping off to the Roto-rooter



tunnel. This mind you was not the end of the world as taking this jump and following even this small tunnel was still rather extraordinary. But the moral of that story is, if you don't care much where you want to go then it doesn't really matter, but if you're keen to head somewhere in particular... invest in a half decent map!

Cow is a truly wonderful cave and is my personal favourite, if for no other reason that it reminded me of home... you could actually get to the end of the line in this one! Actually cow is my favourite for a number of reasons, its smaller tunnels and various restrictions are challenging but most importantly it is incredibly beautiful. Some parts of it reminded me of Iddlebidy back home, as it has some beautiful multi-coloured stratified clay banks. To top it off a turtle was visiting the cavern, which made for a perfect distraction during the long deco hang.

At the back of Cow I had my not so smart moment. At the end of the line is a plastic moo cow and for a few seconds I thought to myself, what the hell is a cow doing all the way back here? Then it hit me, like a freight train... duh!

So far I talked about the caves in the Suwanee River Basin, where I was staying at a house in Ft White ([www.fladivehouse.com](http://www.fladivehouse.com)) and which I would highly recommend as base camp, especially if you're diving with a large group. A bit of a drive from these caves and part of the Woodville Karst Plain are Jackson Blue and Hole in the Wall. WKP might sound familiar as it's the home of the famous Walkulla Springs. While Walkulla is



**Cow Springs**

off limits to divers, Hole in the Wall is not a bad consolation prize. It is a great dive and offers the added attraction of a boat ride through the rather stunning Merriits Mill Pond area. The best part, you get to drive the boat yourself! Jackson Blue is also a beautiful, big and extensive cave and it is certainly worth the drive to this part of the State to dive these two caves.

Apart from the great diving one of my favourite things about the Floridian cave diving scene are the fill

stations. Not only do they stock 32% as a standard gas of choice, not only do they charge by the litre rather than by the tank, but you can drive your car up to the filling station, chuck a whip on your tanks and get a fill without dragging the damn gear out or stripping it all off. To top it all off, the gas goes on the tab if you're a regular! Like I said, heaven... One thing's for sure, Mud Hole is definitely off my list of favourite cave sites and the crystal clear, beautiful and seemingly endless tunnels of Florida are definitely on!

I'd like to extend a huge thank you to Lamar Hires and the wonderful bunch at Dive Rite who were all incredibly generous, helpful and truly wonderful. A big thank you also to Scott and Kathleen Byars who took me under their wings and made sure I got wet and to Lamar English who kindly let me use some of his dive gear. It was these guys who made much of my trip possible and I am most grateful.

And of course, hats off to my fabulous dive buddies who led the way, or led me astray as the case may be - Scott, Kathleen, Kevin, Lee-Ann, Lamar and Mike!



**Diver on deco in Madison Blue.**