

Why Ginnie and I are like peas and carrots

by Agnes Milowka

Ginnie (Devils Cave System) was low on my list of favorite Floridian caves when I arrived back in the US from Australia. Sure, the size of the tunnels was impressive as was the visibility but somehow it failed to really capture my heart. The flow was a nuisance and it all seemed a bit too much like hard work for relatively little reward... although admittedly spending my dives fighting flow up the gold line probably didn't help in this regard.

So no one was more surprised than I when I started to spend considerable chunks of my time diving Ginnie. Admittedly at first I had little choice given so many of the other caves where flooded. (I almost got back on the plane after being greeted at the airport with 'welcome to cave country - all the caves are flooded!') The fact that Ginnie is conveniently placed on my way home from work (well, almost) is also a big factor in my frequent visits. But what started out as a forced relationship of convenience has now blossomed into a rowdy love affair and Ginnie and I are like peas and carrots.

Ginnie is probably the most popular and frequently visited cave in Florida, with weekends making the place look more like a circus than a serious dive site. Still with over 25 000 ft of mapped cave passage it's nothing to sneeze at as there is plenty to see. There is something for everyone, from huge rooms where even the most powerful lights struggle to make headway and actually light up the room, like the Bone Room or the Bear Room for example... to tight silty passages that bring joy to every sidemounters heart, like

Harry's Crack or the Worm Hole. There are so many beautiful and awe inspiring features in Ginnie... huge



Insulation Room in Ginnie Springs



Baby turtle in the run of Ginnie Springs

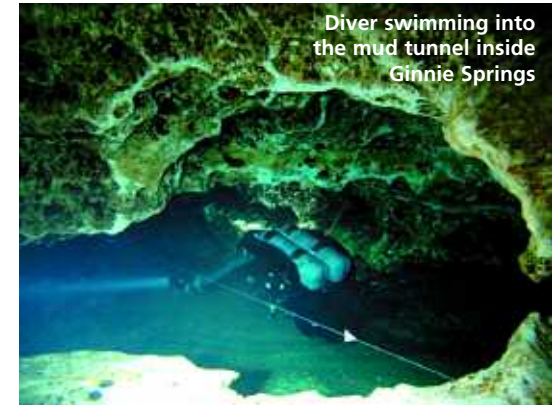
sand dunes reminiscent of the drifting dunes of the Sahara desert, floors that look like the scorched earth in Death Valley, cathedral like domes of all shapes and sizes, stunning narrow fissures and wild rock formations... the list is endless. Then there are a few special places, as fragile as dust, some tucked away in the back of the cave, others off the line and off the beaten path entirely. The Insulation Rooms is a great example of one such magnificent place, where a blanket of orange bacteria covers the floor and is so fragile and soft that as much as a glance in their direction sends them swirling. A careless fin kick is like an atomic bomb sending a mushroom cloud of orange puff up through the water column.

There has been a lot of talk about cave preservation lately (isn't there always) and I'll join this chorus because trashed doesn't quite cover the extent of the damage in the front part of the cave. I think it is difficult for new cave divers to fully comprehend and appreciate what the cave use to look like. Until the black walls of Ginnie have swallowed your light, until you see cave passage reminiscent of its origi-

nal self, the idea that Ginnie used to be a black cave will probably remain difficult to grasp. The hard years of use

and abuse have taken their toll on the first part of the cave, but it is the small and insidious damage on the back end that is the most startling. This is where the scars are the most evident, with every chip and speck of white wall glaring back at you viciously. These scars will never heal. Yes it is Ginnie - the easily accessible tourist cave and all that - but that doesn't make it any less spectacular and it is an appalling reason not to take care. Ginnie is a fragile lass and she needs all the TLC she can get, especially in the back end where it is still reminiscent of its former glory.

Then there is Ginnie topside, if you spend enough time diving it people start learning your name and in no time it starts feeling like a local watering hole... without the beer. Then again it is not entirely unusual to see beer at Ginnie, whether this be in the hands of the tubers or divers quenching a



Diver swimming into the mud tunnel inside Ginnie Springs

post dive thirst... so perhaps it is not entirely that far removed. Add a host of fascinating characters who

form a part of the regular crowd and keep things interesting and it is not difficult to understand why Ginnie and I are like peas and carrots.

I have many favorite areas in Ginnie, sometimes they are as small as a clay bank or pretty rock feature like say the cracked floor in the Hill 400 line, other times it's a whole tunnel that captures my imagination. The Sweet Surprise tunnel is top of my list, as indeed there are surprises as sweet as honey around every corner, but there is still a couple of thousand feet of passage I haven't seen so this might change. Yet, when I have finally seen the whole cave, I won't stop heading to Ginnie. I want to see it all again, multiple times... cause like any girl will tell you, once is never enough. - Ag



Insulation Room in Ginnie Springs (Devil's Cave System), Florida