

Jan 20, 2022, 01:10pm EST | 614 views

The Inside Scoop On Scuba Diving In Florida



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Travel

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A diver exploring the Blue Heron Bridge in Singer Island, Florida. JILLIAN BLAKKAN-STRAUSS

Florida is no stranger to great diving, but many travelers are unaware that The Palm Beaches are home to hundreds of spectacular dives for every skill level. In fact, people come from all over the world to dive at Blue Heron

Bridge at Phil Foster Park on Singer Island. It's known as one of the best shore-dive sites in the world. The water here is full of amazing and colorful sea life.

Getting Certified



The Palm Beaches in Florida boast world-class diving spots. LAWRENCE WATKINS

I've been thinking about getting my diving certification for years. I've traveled all over the world, to many fabulous dive sites—Maldives, Fiji, Seychelles, Hawaii, the Caribbean, Tahiti, Palau—and always remained on top of the water as a snorkeler. While I loved seeing all the colorful fish and coral from the surface, I really wanted to go below to have a deeper understanding on what that world was like under the sea.

If covid taught one thing, it's that I shouldn't put anything off. I was determined to get certified. And since international travel rules kept changing, I decided to make it easy on myself by picking someplace in the U. S. Enter [Pura Vida Divers](#) in the Palm Beach area of Florida.

Finding a Reputable Diving Company





A diver admiring a starfish at the Blue Heron Bridge. ANDREA WHITAKER

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Owners Dean Shuler and Shana Phelan have extensive experience in the diving industry. Shuler started Pura Vida Adventures back in 2002, to offer the Palm Beaches a unique dive operation that focused on customer service, safety, community and conservation. Shana came on board in 2005, after pursuing her passion for conservation earning a master's degree in Environmental Management at Duke University. Together, the couple has worked hard over the last 20 years to build lasting relationships throughout the community and they have grown from a tiny retail space with a small

passenger boat to becoming a leader in the Palm Beaches' diving community.

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Why Florida?



This area in Florida has amazing sea life, including the chance to see an octopus. ZACHARY NOLAN



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Pura Vida Divers is located on Singer Island, nestled just between the world-famous Blue Heron Bridge and Florida's stunning offshore reef tract. This means that different types of world-class diving can be found right here in the United States.

The [Blue Heron Bridge](#) (BHB) is an international destination for scuba divers in the know. Photographers in particular love to explore BHB, where macro wildlife from nudibranchs to seahorses and octopus abound. The sandy-bottomed "muck diving" site is home to a myriad of larger creatures as well. Divers and snorkelers will find spotted eagle rays dancing through the water, colorful angelfish fluttering over corals, and schools of silvery baitfish flashing past. Curious divers can spot batfish and elusive frogfish camouflaged in seagrasses. You may even see the whiskered snout of a manatee gliding past you in the shallow water.

The BHB is also uniquely positioned to offer a fantastic introductory experience to SCUBA diving. New divers can move at their own pace at this inshore site, literally walking from the beach into the water during their first open water dives. The site's snorkel trail functions as an artificial reef, entertaining snorkelers on the surface as divers swim below.

Getting The Right Instructor



While the goal of diving is to see amazing fish—like this grey angelfish—picking the right dive ... [+]

ZACHARY NOLAN

I was a bit nervous getting certified, but instructor David Wilemon at Pura Vida Divers immediately put me at ease. His focus on safety was evident from the start and clearly started with his distinguished career in the U.S. Marine Corps. As a diver, he had seen it all—from the seascapes of Okinawa, Japan to the kelp forests of California, from diving with manta rays in Hawaii, to hunting for fossilized Megalodon teeth off the rugged coast of North Carolina—David knew his stuff.

What was so nice about getting certified with Pura Vida Divers is that I was able to do all the coursework and tests online from my home in New York. Then, I took a quick flight to West Palm Beach where I was certified in open water diving in just a few days. What's nice is that travelers can combine a certification course with their vacation so they are able to do a variety of activities and interests in a short amount of time.

David is a thorough instructor and during our coursework both in the pool and in the open water, he always made sure I understood what we were

going to be doing and made sure I understood each new skill before moving on. I never felt rushed and I always felt completely safe.

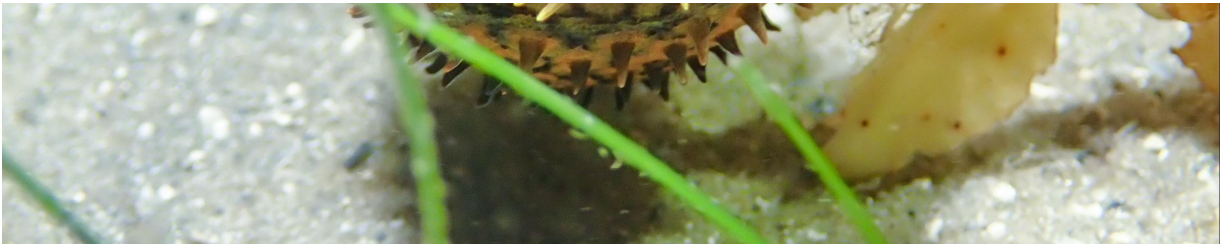
The first day I met David at the Pura Vida office where we did gear fitting and paperwork before we headed to a nearby pool for a full day of learning skills and getting comfortable with the various equipment. After a full day of instruction, David made me feel confident in my skills and I was excited to experience the open water.

The next two days were open water dives (four in total). David was with me during the entire time and we went through the skills and training needed for certification. David was patient when I didn't understand something and we went over a few things that didn't come as easily to me, until I got it right. At the end of the second full day of open water dives, I was excited to finally get my certification.

As someone who came to scuba diving later in life, and also someone who was on the fence about getting certified, I highly recommend making sure you have an instructor who not only is very qualified, but who takes safety seriously and is patient and knowledgeable in their training. David really made sure I had a thorough understanding of what is involved in scuba diving and how to make the most of it.

More Diving





Diving is addictive, the more you see (like this pufferfish) the more you want to do it again. ANDREA WHITAKER

Now that I'm certified in open water diving, I'm anxious to return to the Palm Beaches for even more diving.

One of Pura Vida's [favorite sites](#) includes Flower Garden—where thousands of fish can be seen in the aptly named "Fish Bowl" while divers hover over the sand watching. Sea turtles flock to the Palm Beaches every summer as divers fill their log books with sightings of these endangered species. [Goliath Grouper](#) aggregate offshore every fall, circling the wrecks with their giant, hulking bodies. Schools of sharks meander south to birth their pups in Florida's warm waters every winter.

The proximity to the Gulf Stream lends a natural current to the reef tracts here, making this the perfect location for "lazy diving." Divers go with the flow as they drift along the reef. Without the need to navigate back to a starting point, the time underwater is maximized. Then when divers surface, the boat idles right over to pick them up.

Now that I'm a certified open water diver, I'm excited to revisit the Palm Beaches each season and fill my log book with all my sightings.

Check out my [website](#).



Judy Koutsky

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