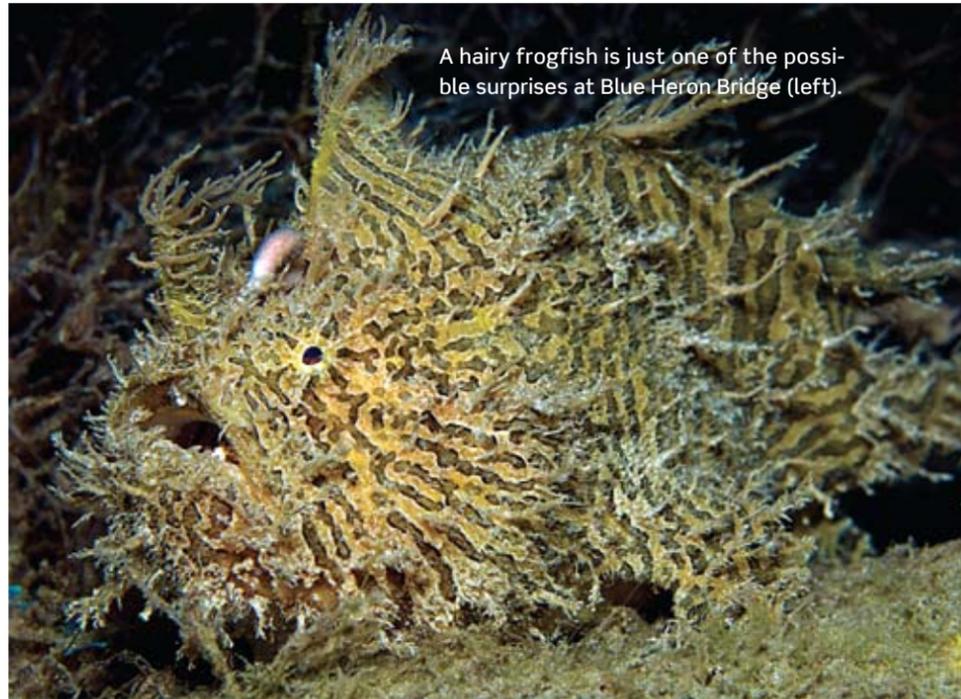


State of Diving



A hairy frogfish is just one of the possible surprises at Blue Heron Bridge (left).

All in the Timing

FLORIDA'S WEST PALM BEACH BY TERRY WARD

THERE'S A TWO-HOUR WINDOW for the bridge," says dive guide Mike Walker of Walker's Dive Charter, prepping me for West Palm Beach's Blue Heron Bridge. The hours before and after high tide make for a manageable current and — like the wave of a magic wand — turn the Intracoastal Waterway between Palm Beach and Singer Island crystal clear for a precious window of bottom time.

But there's no need to kill time waiting for the tide with 100 dive sites in the area. We're speeding aboard *The Wetter the Better*, following the curve of Palm Beach's privileged coast. Walker points out Rush Limbaugh's house and the old Kennedy estate, and the Breakers resort passes in a blur. But for all the riches nearby, the real treasure is underwater.

Less than a mile offshore, at the Breakers Reef, we drift for nearly an hour over fingers of coral blanketed with gorgonians, whips and swaying soft corals. In the course of waiting to dive the bridge, we're treated to some of diving's greatest hits — a large nurse shark, a giant green eel unspooling streamerlike through the corals, schooling spadefish and a loggerhead with just three fins that lets us swim next to him for a full five minutes.

We surface, wolf down fresh pineapple and within minutes are back at the bridge, where it's prime time to get back in the water. Eager to bid adieu to the rushing cars, skyscraper condos and looming power plant of the built-up top-side, I slide off the back of the boat.

The small wreck of a dinghy emerges



from the sandy bottom, a scorpionfish lurking on its overturned bow. But Walker is fixing his macro lens on something rarer — a bumblebee shrimp, tiny and striped, picking its way across a large starfish. Next we spot a long-arm octopus near a pile of shell carcasses, and I tickle the sand nearby, coaxing a sticky

ALEXANDER MUSTARD (2)

arm to grab hold of my finger. "When we did a cleanup dive here a few weeks back, lots of people brought up bottles," Walker told me earlier. "But they were full of octopuses, so we had to throw them back."

We're down for almost an hour, hardly passing the 12-foot mark, except for a gander around the wooden fenders on the eastern side of the bridge, at a whopping 16 feet. The fenders are carpeted with orange soft corals and purple barrel sponges, the colors rainbow-bright in the shallow water. Schooling Bermuda chubs paint quicksilver highlights in the blue, and a stoplight parrotfish follows a hogfish through the columns. A seaweed blenny peeks from a barrel sponge, and a tiny rough-head blenny the color of a lemon Starburst pokes its head from a tube — critters absolutely everywhere. A bristle worm inches across the gravelly bottom; nearby, a red-lipped batfish pouts for Walker's paparazzi routine. A large ball I mistake for plastic trash turns out to be a lump of eggs bookended with clusters of apple murex shells. Walker told me that the Little Blue Heron bridge (the eastern stretch of the bridge), under construction through 2011, is a hot spot for frogfish and seahorses.

But that will have to wait till my next visit. Before we surface, we get one last treat: Finning back to the boat, we spot a hovering razorfish. It watches us for a brief moment before it spooks, dropping straight into the brown sand like a sugar cube plunked into so much café au lait. ▀

Live It: West Palm Beach

WHERE About 70 miles north of Miami on Florida's East Coast; served by Palm Beach International Airport (PBI)

NEARBY Whitehall Relive the Gilded Age at the Flagler Museum, winter home of oil tycoon Henry Flagler; flaglermuseum.us

STAY The Breakers It's the poshest digs in town, and another legacy of Henry Flagler; thebreakers.com

EAT Café Boulud This multiple award-winner with a gorgeous setting is worth the astronomical prices; cafeboulud.com

CONTINENTAL AIRLINES VACATIONS®



DISCOVER SPECTACULAR DIVING ADVENTURES

COZUMEL
Fiesta Americana
Cozumel Dive Resort
Dive House
8 DAYS/
7 NIGHTS FROM
\$1,001
PP DBL OCC.
Includes 7 nights accommodations, 5 days of 2-tank boat dives, and shore diving on boat diving days. Valid through Dec 23, 2010. Add \$30 more per person for travel from Jul 2-Aug 14, 2010. Must book by Aug 14, 2010.

Scuba Club Cozumel
8 DAYS/
7 NIGHTS FROM
\$1,138
PP DBL OCC.
Includes special second diver sleeps, eats and dives half-off promotion, 7 nights accommodations, 3 meals daily, 5 days of 2-tank boat dives, and unlimited shore diving. Tips and beverages are not included. Valid Sep 1-Oct 31, 2010.

CAYMAN ISLANDS
Cobalt Coast Dive
Resort / Divetech
8 DAYS/
7 NIGHTS FROM
\$1,458
PP DBL OCC.
Includes 7 nights accommodations, breakfast daily, six days of 2-tank boat dives, unlimited shore diving, and complimentary use of dive computer. Valid Oct 2-Nov 5, 2010 and Nov 28-Dec 18, 2010.

Compass Point Dive
Resort/ Ocean Frontiers
8 DAYS/
7 NIGHTS FROM
\$1,338
PP QUAD OCC.
Includes 7 nights in two-bedroom accommodations, 7 day car rental, 6 days of 2-tank boat dives, and Wednesday night All-U-Can-Eat-BBQ. Valid through Aug 15, 2010 and Oct 2-Dec 11, 2010.

BONAIRE
Divi Flamingo Beach
Resort / Divi Dive Bonaire
8 DAYS/
7 NIGHTS FROM
\$1,520
PP DBL OCC.
Includes 7 nights accommodations, daily breakfast, 6 days of 2-tank boat dives, and unlimited shore diving. Valid through Dec 15, 2010.

FIJI
Paradise Taveuni
8 DAYS/
7 NIGHTS FROM
\$2,570
PP DBL OCC.
Includes 1 night in Nadi, and in Taveuni, 6 nights in a Tropical Bure, 10 boat dives, 1 night dive, unlimited shore diving, and all meals. Valid through Mar 31, 2011. Book by July 31, 2010.

PALAU
Ocean Hunter III
8 DAYS/
7 NIGHTS FROM
\$4,204
PP DBL OCC.
Includes 15% off any 7 night charter in double stateroom, up to 5 dives per day, full technical diving and photo support and gourmet meals. Valid for charters through Aug 27, 2010.

YAP
Manta Ray Bay Resort
8 DAYS/
7 NIGHTS FROM
\$2,933
PP DBL OCC.
Includes 7 nights accommodations, 10 Nitrox boat dives, final night late checkout (midnight), and breakfast daily. Valid through Dec 31, 2010.

Continental Airlines Vacations packages include air transportation, hotel accommodations, hotel taxes, and more. For information, go to covacations.com, call us at 1-888-970-4114, or contact your travel professional.



Photos by: Amando Alentado, Tim Rock

Restrictions: Prices are in USD based on double occupancy unless noted and are subject to change. Prices are based on travel from select departure cities and may require travel on certain days and additional nights per air schedule availability. All packages, unless otherwise noted, originate from Newark International Airport. Cozumel packages originate from George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston. Cayman Summer Splash Program—some restrictions apply. *Fiji, Palau and Yap packages originate from Los Angeles International Airport. Travel to Taveuni Fiji includes air on Continental Airlines onto Nadi and flights to Taveuni on a local regional carrier. Prices may include published airfare available at the time of publication and may require purchase by date or instant purchase and be subject to currency fluctuation. Prices include airline fuel surcharges but do not include U.S. arrival and departure taxes, international airport departure tax, immigration fees, customs user fees, federal inspection fees and/or APHS fees from \$51.20 to \$149.39. Additional checked baggage fee(s) and overweight baggage fee(s) may apply. Individual country departure tax may require direct payment by passenger. Package is subject to availability and standard terms and conditions. Blackout dates, holiday surcharges and other restrictions may apply. (CSOT # 2063948-40 & FLSOT #ST36173)