



DRIVE AND DIVE FLORIDA

RAINBOW RIVER

FLORIDA'S
SPRING-FED
FRESHWATER
JEWEL OFFERS
SUBTLE DE-
LIGHTS FOR
DIVERS



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KATY DANCA GALLI

Turn. Around.” Something speaks to me as I’m immersed in long swaths of sea grass, attempting to photograph them in their best light. I look around and in front of me is an anhinga, a species of water bird known for the lack of water-proofing on their wings, an animal I have always wanted to photograph underwater. Seeing this bird dart from one bank to the other makes me feel like a giant, uncoordinated blob in the water; their agility and effortlessness is a spectacle, and I feel so lucky to be alive at this moment. This is Rainbow River, in Dunnellon, Florida, a town you’ve probably never heard of unless you’re fortunate enough to have dived this glorious place. Having grown up in Florida, diving both salt and freshwater, I can honestly say this dive takes the cake.

About 100 miles north of Tampa Bay, this 5.7-mile river is a genuine jewel, and lives up to its name. When sunlight hits the crystalline turquoise water, a veritable light show ensues. Glints of multicolored spectrums set the sandy bottom ablaze, mingling with the patterns of ripples reflected all around, while long, healthy, kelly-green strands of sea grass — also called mermaid hair — play in motion with the water. Four hundred to 600 million gallons of water are discharged into the spring-fed river every day, making for an abundantly healthy, fast-moving river — 1.5 knots, on average — with depths of 25 feet at the deepest point and visibility of up to 200 feet on a good day.

In one day, I was witness to multi-

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NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO Year-round, but try to stick with the winter months if you can. The water is clearer, and you won’t need to dodge the tubers and kayakers along the way.

DIVE CONDITIONS The river is around 72 degrees F year-round, with max depth around 25 feet; you will be in the water for around an hour. A 5 to 7mm suit is preferred, so you can maximize your time. (If you don’t own a 5mm or higher, you can rent a 3mm from the shop a size larger than your normal wetsuit size and layer them.) The current is swift but not unmanageable, and you’ll have no problem turning and facing the current to get a closer look at a turtle or anhinga.

OPERATORS Some websites recommend going on your own, but without a local guide you may float directly down the center of the river and miss the highlights. Instead meet your guide from Bird’s Underwater (birdsunderwater.com) at their shop in nearby Crystal River; you’ll then travel about 20 miles north to K.P. Hole Park, a county park with restrooms and showers. At the dock, a Bird’s boat will meet you and take you upriver for your dive. (You’ll only be in the boat for a short trip, so don’t bring any water or food with you).

PRICE TAG \$65 per person, which includes your tank, guide and boat fee. Bring an extra \$5 to park at KP Hole park.

TRAVEL TIP The earlier you can get there, the better: You’ll have a better chance of seeing wildlife that way. Also, if you can, take a few moments halfway through the dive and surface to gaze along the





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tudes of turtles, large and small — yellow belly sliders, soft shells, snapping turtles and red belly cooters to name a few. Ultra-curious bluegill love the look of themselves in a dome port, and will especially stick around if one stirs up a bit of bottom with the stroke of a hand. Alligator gar — sometimes described as a living fossil as they have survived millions of years essentially unchanged — hover near the banks, so many I struggled to count them all. You won't find a better taste of old Florida underwater; I imagine the Timucua Indians who lived here centuries ago must have thought this place was paradise — it still is. Lining the banks are a mix of cypress and oak, but the multitude of aquatic plants will

command your attention; I would suggest any horticulturalist get dive-certified for this river specifically.

Most peculiar are the spring boils that bubble up from the sandy bottom, pushing fresh water up from the aquifer; this along with the many vents, cracks and little caves help create the massive discharge of water that keeps this river so clean and vibrant. The very best part about Rainbow River is, you will never be bored. Even without including the underwater plants and the spectacular array of wildlife, where you start this dive will be nothing like where you end — I liken it to visiting an art museum with multiple rooms and a multitude of different mediums. First,

you'll encounter a boat dock or two, underneath which there's a spray of silver bodied baitfish, twinkling in the sun, adding to the discotheque-lightshow effect. Like floating on air, you'll drift over a bright sandy bottom and pockets of rich, velvety portions of tape grass, home to great lots of baby turtles. Next, below you are wide pieces of rock, in angular shapes and forms; this is where you'll find cracks and fissures in their surface, along with little bluegill, inspecting them for any food they can find. From here lies the graveyard of fallen trees, where old giants rest peacefully, stretching their limbs to greet anyone floating by. Farther still, you'll encounter a conservatory of grasses and flowers — yes, underwater flowers! — like a garden of Eden. Lastly, the grand finale, where you will be greeted with a plush, never-ending field of mermaid hair in every direction. Take it all in, and watch the way it ebbs and flows with the current,

NEED CREDITS



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RAINBOW RIVER



DAY ONE

Plan to camp at [Withlacoochee State Forest](#) at the Holder Mine Campground (freshfromflorida.com) — clean, quiet and shaded by giant oak trees, it costs only \$25 per night. If camping isn't your thing, the [Olive Grove](#) (airbnb.com) is a 70s-style A-frame on four acres of olive groves in Brooksville, Florida, about an hour south. For \$65, you can savor endless stars, fresh-pressed olive oil and clean country air.



DAY TWO

Post-dive, check out the [Blue Gator Tiki Bar & Restaurant](#), which in cooler months has fabulous oysters. The fried-shrimp-and-hush-puppy combo combined with a Bloody Mary or a Blue Moon is perfection, complemented by views of the Withlachoochee. Rainbow Springs State Park has a beautiful trail lined with azaleas, oak and magnolias; zen-out next to its three waterfalls along the trail (watch for swallow-tail kites, especially in spring). Don't leave Withlacoochee State Forest without checking out its caves, a great way to [experience Florida caverns](#) without getting wet.



DRIVE AND DIVE

FROM HERE LIES THE GRAVEYARD OF FALLEN TREES, WHERE OLD GIANTS REST PEACEFULLY, **STRETCHING THEIR LIMBS TO GREET ANYONE FLOATING BY.**