

Going Down Under

Snorkeling the Dry Tortugas

by Chelle Koster Walton

The underwater sightseeing commences long before you get wet. The trip to the Dry Tortugas involves skimming through or above (depending upon your selected mode of transportation) the trademark windowpane-clear waters of the Florida Keys. Wildlife sightings are frequent, and while traveling by seaplane provides an awesome perspective, it could also result in a stiff neck from craning to look down from five hundred feet above the Gulf of Mexico.

In the flats that edge Key West, we saw stingrays and sharks in the shallow water (only three to five feet deep). My son, Aaron, spotted a sea turtle in the area dubbed The Quicksands, where water plunges to thirty-foot depths and sand undulates in dune formations.

In addition to the wildlife, several shipwrecks lie beneath the waters; here's where diver Mel Fisher harvested treasure from the *Atocha* and *Margarita*. His seventy-foot work ship, the *Arbutus*, deteriorated and eventually sank at the northern edge of the treasure sites. With

its mast poking out above water, it's easy to spot and fun to photograph. From there, the water shifts from emerald hues to shades of marine blue as depths reach seventy feet.

The Dry Tortugas National Park, seventy miles southwest of Key West, comprises 64,657 acres, of which only forty are dry. Very dry—a lack of freshwater earned the island group part of its name back in conquistadores days. The other part refers to the large number of sea turtles that still populates its waters. Diving and snorkeling this region rate high in the logbooks of bottom-timers from around the planet.

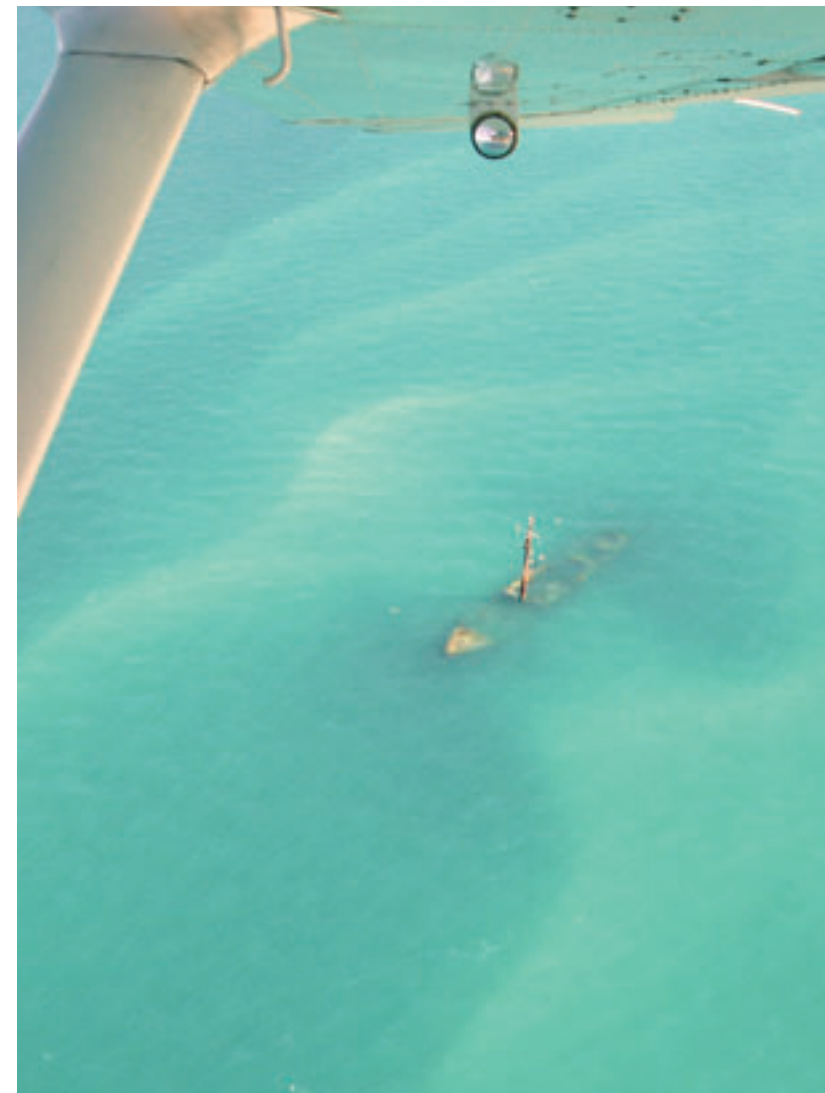
The typical day visitor, however, makes it no farther than the close-shore waters of Garden Key, one of the park's seven islands. Home to nineteenth-century Fort Jefferson, it's the destination for seaplane and fast ferry tours out of Key West. With several hours to spend on the island, visitors have time to tour the mammoth fort-turned-prison and then cool off with mask and snorkel along the fort's moat wall.

Birders in the know come during

spring to see some one hundred thousand sooty terns at their only U.S. nesting site, Bush Key, which is adjacent to Garden Key. During winter migrations, birds fill the air so thickly it appears as if they're falling from the sky, many birders say. More than three hundred species have been spotted at the park.

Again, we saw some of our best marine life for the day from above. As we followed the self-guided tour to the dizzying top of the fort—famous for its imprisonment of Dr. Samuel Mudd, who unwittingly set John Wilkes Booth's leg after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln—we were treated to dazzling views of water, a distant lighthouse, and sharks clustered at the North Beach. That gave us a clear picture of why we were directed to the opposite side of the fort for snorkeling.

The brick fort acts as a gigantic, almost sixteen-acre reef. Around its moat walls, coral grows and schools of snapper, grouper, and wrasses hang out. The reef formations blaze with the colors of brain coral, swaying sea fans, and flitting tropical fish. To reach the offshore



Traveling to Dry Tortugas National Park by seaplane provides aerial views of Fort Jefferson, the park's swimming beach, and diver/treasure hunter Mel Fisher's work ship.



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