

HEINZ 09





KEY LARGO MASTER CLASS









»THE EARLY BIRD CATCHES THE WORM« SUNRISE IN FRONT OF KEY LARGO – THE DIGITAL MASTER CLASS IS ALREADY ON THE PROWL FOR THE BEST SHOT.

KEY LARGO, AN ISLAND IN THE FLORIDA KEYS, BETWEEN MIAMI IN THE NORTH AND KEY WEST IN THE SOUTHWEST, HAS BECOME A DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY SCHOOL'S CLASSROOM. INEVITABLY. HOWEVER, FATE OFTEN PLAYS A ROLE.

Text & Photos: Stephen Frink

In the springtime of 1978, I travelled to Key Largo to visit an old friend of mine. He is as crazy about diving as I am and was working in Key Largo as a treasure diver – always in the hope of discovering artefacts from the Spanish silver fleet that sank during 1733. I enjoyed diving with him in the waters around Key Largo. It occurred to me that with a little luck, and with my experience as a photographer and in a photo lab, I might be able to make money working there. My ambition was to show the scuba dive tourists how

to take pictures underwater, hire out cameras and teach them how to develop their slide films. That was the plan! To get the ball rolling, I rented premises in a dive centre.

For a few years, business fared well. But, in the wake of digital photography, analogue photography, with its film cartridges, met its demise and part of my income went with it. I decided to look for an alternative source of business income. However, my interest in underwater photography remained; therefore, I focused my attention on photojourna-

lism. Since 1982, I have published in American diving magazines, as well as taking on photo assignments from the scuba diving industry and advertising agencies. And becoming a representative for SEACAM underwater housings also contributed to my further success.

The one thing in Key Largo that hasn't changed in all these years, is my underwater photography school. However, since I only teach the DIGITAL MASTER CLASS in Key Largo once a year, the course is a unique >









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KEY LARGO WITH ITS NUMEROUS CHANNELS AND JETTIES

experience and has become internationally renowned beyond Florida. For many photographers, the photography school is an exciting opportunity to update and expand their knowledge.

PENNEKAMP PARK

The coral reefs around Key Largo had the good fortune to be designated as one of America's first marine reserves. Especially at a time when fish were being harpooned indiscriminately and corals broken off as sou-

venirs. It is thanks to John Pennekamp, the editor of the Miami Herald and his years of commitment, that the first American underwater park opened in 1963.

In 1965, the symbol of the JOHN PENNEKAMP CORAL REEF STATE PARK, a statue of Christ of the Abyss, was sunk to stand on a concrete base at a depth of seven and a half meters. The statue, which was initially donated to the Underwater Society of America by the Italian Egidio Cressi, stands five miles off the coast at Dry Rocks Reef. The site is even ➤



A DETOUR TO THE STATUE OF CHRIST OF ABYSS IN DRY ROCKS REEF IS A MUST





© STEPHEN FRINK

ATLANTIC SPADEFISH (*Chaetodipterus faber*) ON MOLASSES REEF

more popular with snorkellers than divers.

PENNEKAMP PARK extends three miles from the coast into the Atlantic. In 1975, the U.S. government extended the region's protection and in 1990, it established the FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY.

The waters around Key Largo have been protected from spearfishing ever since, which has made the fish more approachable, something that we underwater photographers really appreciate.

MOLASSES REEF

One of my favourite places is Molasses Reef, which has a 13-metre-high, illuminated steel tower and over 30 anchor buoys. It is a very extensive reef, with an abundance of underwater landscapes and dive sites – but there are occasional strong currents. The sea life is dense and the currents also bring barracudas, mackerels, giant grouper and eagle rays to the reef. The south, is however a lot calmer. Individual sites, such as Aquarium, Spanish Anchor and the Winch Hole, are generally >







QUEEN ANGELFISH (*Holacanthus ciliaris*) IN FRONT OF A WALL OF RED ZOANTHIDS

effortless dives; nurse sharks, queen angelfish, trumpetfish and with luck, bottlenose dolphins, can be found. I try to visit the Molasses Reef with my DIGITAL MASTER CLASS students at least four times during the six day course.

AQUARIUS HABITAT

Occasionally, my photo students and I are invited to dive in the Aquarius Reef Habitat. This is a diving saturation chamber managed by the FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY and used by scientists and NASA as-

tronauts for their training. This artificial reef with its abundance of fish, is the only one of its kind in the world.

During my 40 years on Key Largo, I have been involved in two artificial reef projects. The first one was straightforward. Two US Coast Guard cutters were freed of dangerous contaminants, towed from Boston to Key Largo and scuttled there. Both ships were roughly 110 meters long. Because the »Duane« sits upright and is resting at a shallower depth, she is dived more often. There is a constant hust-



AQUARIUS HABITAT OF THE FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

le and bustle of fish; you can watch blue-striped grunts cavort in the wheelhouse, Atlantic spadefish lead a merry dance around the bow, barracudas endlessly circumnavigating the radar tower, as well as grey snapper amidships. The »Bibb«, in contrast, lies on her starboard side between 20 and 35 metres deep. It is a dive site for the more experienced divers.

The second artificial reef project was much more difficult. The 155-metre-long »Spiegel Grove«, was a logistical nightmare right from the start. She was scuttled on May 17, 2002 but

sank completely upside down. Marine salvagers eventually managed to position her on the bottom, where she rested on her starboard side for the next three years. Thanks to the storm surge from Hurricane Dennis, she was moved perfectly upright on July 9, 2005. One and a half million dollars in project costs were ultimately well invested. A gift for divers and underwater photographers.

CITY OF WASHINGTON & BENWOOD

There are two more historical shipwrecks, > 169



170 PHOTOGENIC CRUSTED ANEMONES SETTLING ON THE MASTS AND ROPES OF THE »DUANE«



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PORKFISH (*Anisotremus virginicus*) ON THE WRECK OF THE »BENWOOD«



© STEPHEN FRINK

BLUESTRIPE GRUNT (*Haemulon sciurus*) INSIDE THE WRECK OF THE DUANE





GRUNTS AND PARROTFISH ON THE WRECK OF THE »BENWOOD«



174 CARIBBEAN SPINY LOBSTER (*Panulirus argus*) INSIDE THE WRECK OF THE »WASHINGTON«



LARGE GROUPER (*Epinephelus itajara*) IN THE AQUARIUS HABITAT 175



CORAL REEFS AND DIVESITES OFF KEY LARGO

which are suitable for standard dives. The «City of Washington» and the «Benwood».

The «Washington» is a 100-metre-long island freighter which ran aground in 1917, near the Elbow Tower to the north of Key Largo. Like most ships that lie stuck in the shallow water, she was blown apart so that she would not endanger other vessels. Nevertheless, there are enough superstructures left to be recognised as wreckage and she provides refuge for green moray eels, lobster, fat grouper and lots of schooling fish.

The «Benwood» was a victim of the Second World War, when German submarines patrolled off Florida in 1942. In order not to attract fire, the freighters were darkened at night, which led to collisions – as with the «Benwood». She managed to drag herself into shallower waters, where she sank and now rests at a depth of seven to twelve metres. She was also blown up, as she had become a potential hazard for other ships. Nevertheless, enough remains of her superstructures for the destroyed bow, ribs and planking to be seen. It has become a ma-

gnat for schools of mullets and lobsters and vast clouds of glassfish.

We rarely dive on the big, deeper wrecks during the DIGITAL MASTER CLASS. The remaining bottom time is just too short to get a good selection of pictures for discussion in our class. Nevertheless, the wrecks are among the most popular Key Largo motifs.

ELBOW REEF & SNAPPER LEDGE

Two other sites that I like to visit with my photography students, are the Elbow Reef, as

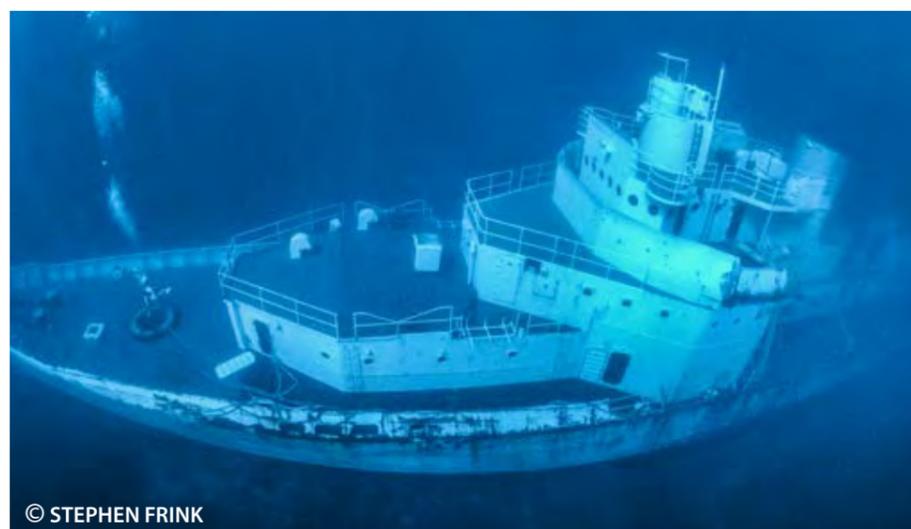
it also rises into the clear waters of the Gulf Stream and Snapper Ledge, south of Molasses Reef, with its large, photogenic schools of sweet lips. As I have now been teaching in Key Largo for almost 40 years, I know where the best wide-angle areas are or where the most beautiful macro-motifs are hiding. However, to avoid rough seas, lessons only make sense in summer. During the other months, wind and waves create unpleasant surf, and the underwater visibility becomes too poor for demanding underwater photography. ➤







THE WRECK OF THE »DUANE« RESTS VERTICALLY ON THE BOTTOM. ↗ THE »BIBB« LIES ON THE STARBOARD SIDE



THE WRECK OF
THE »DUANE«
SHORTLY AFTER
ITS SCUTTLING
IN 1987

DIGITAL MASTER CLASS

The DIGITAL MASTER CLASS program includes two boat dives every morning. Equally important are the afternoon hours during which we discuss the morning's photo results, as this allows us to respond immediately to errors or problems. Working with computer programs, such as Lightroom and Photoshop, is also part of the lesson. ■

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THE AUTHOR

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the world. He is a CANON EXPLORER OF LIGHT, editor of the magazine ALERT DIVER, author of the illustrated book WONDERS OF THE REEF and teaches digital underwater photography.

