Destin & Florida's Northern Gulf Coast

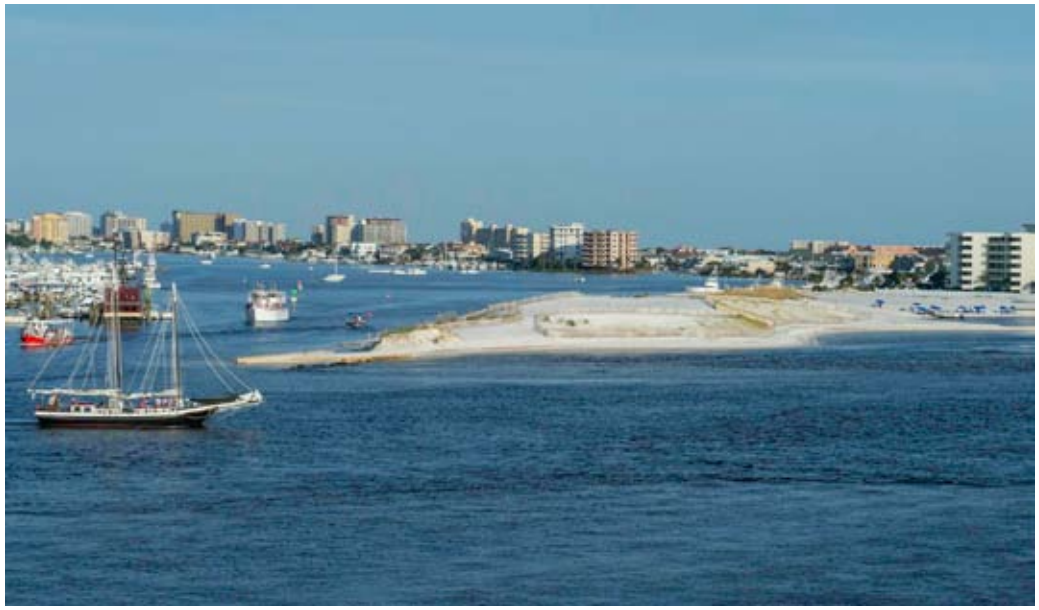
by Jim Garin

The northern Gulf Coast of Florida has been considered the ugly sibling to South Florida and the Keys in the world of diving. It is capable of having lovely, clear, blue-green water; just not as often as its southern counterpart. It can also have calm seas and minimal currents; just not all of the time. It is more affected by storms, heavy rains, and winds than in the South, making diving here far more variable. So why bother to dive the northern Gulf Coast? Because it has one thing that no other place in the world has: A unique and continuously changing variety of sea life.

The environment of the northern Gulf Coast is essentially a gradually sloping ledge of new limestone, until reaching a drop-off of over 2,000 Meters into the Desoto Canyon. Nowhere in the Gulf is the deep water closer, and nowhere is the bottom as smooth, allowing animal life to travel across it. Essentially, this is the ocean's equivalent to a desert dotted with oases consisting of ledges, wrecks and debris for life to cling to. And what life there is!

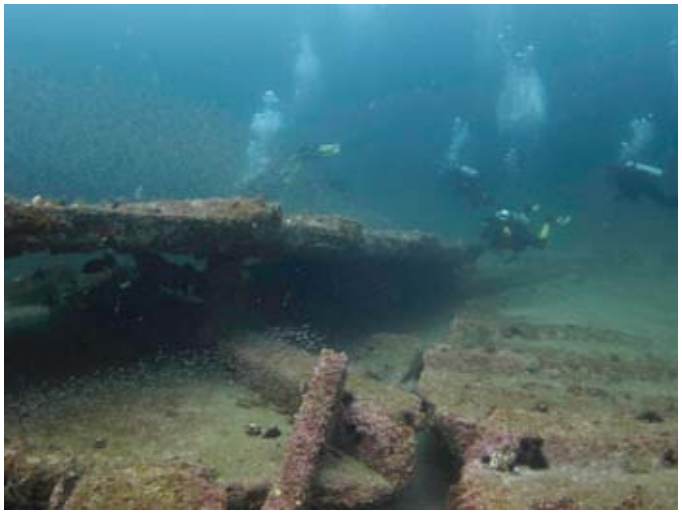
In addition to diving, this area is a very popular vacation spot in the summer, with tons of activities, restaurants and some of the loveliest white sand beaches in the world. Finding something to do on a down day is never a problem. Sadly, the majority of the people visiting here will never know of the riches that lay just a few miles off shore.

Diving here is mostly done between Panama City and Pensacola, with the small town of Destin centered within. Pensacola has mostly wreck diving, with its major attraction being the Air Craft Carrier, the Oriskany. To the east, out of Panama City, smaller wrecks and numerous bridge spans are the major attractions. Destin, however, is unique. In addition to wrecks and debris from a former

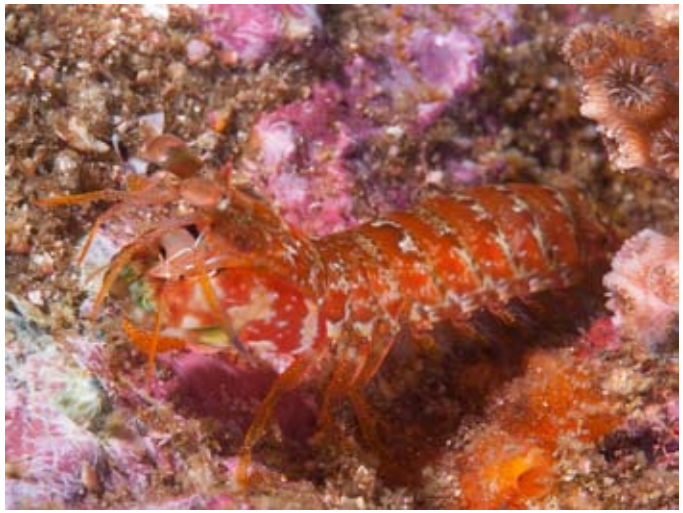


Destin Harbor. Panasonic GX1 w/14-140, 32mm, F9, 1/400, ISO 160

Uncommon visitor, humpback whale. Fuji F50, 24mm, F8, 1/250, ISO 100



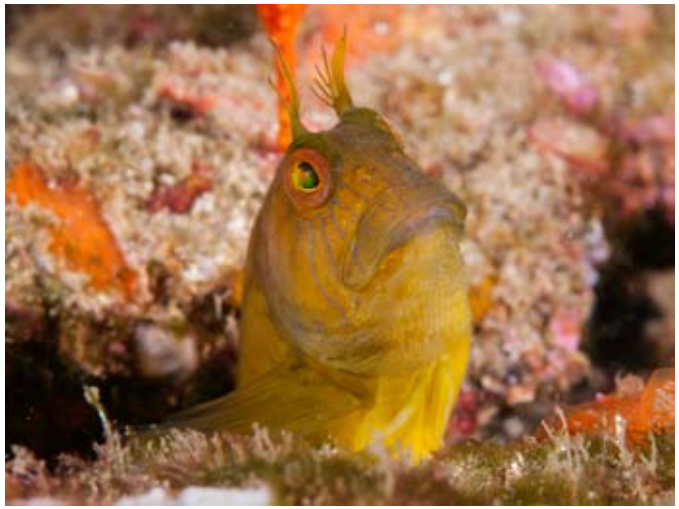
Bridge Rubble. Canon S90, with Ikelite wide angle, 7mm, F2.5, 1/20, ISO 80

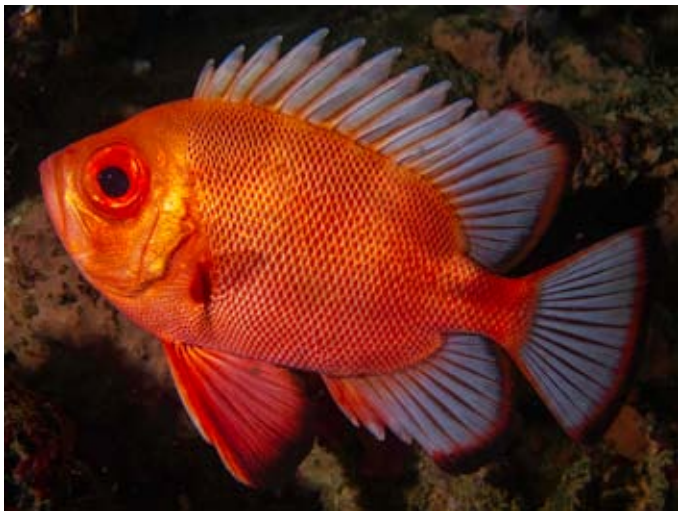


(Above) Unknown species of Mantis shrimp. Panasonic GH1, F11, 1/250, ISO 100

(Top left)Yellow form of Seaweed Blenny. Panasonic GH1 w/45mm macro, F11, 1/160, ISO 100

(Right) Short Bigeye, a deep water fish you can see here at 85 ft. Canon S90, 13mm, F3.5, 1/500, ISO 80





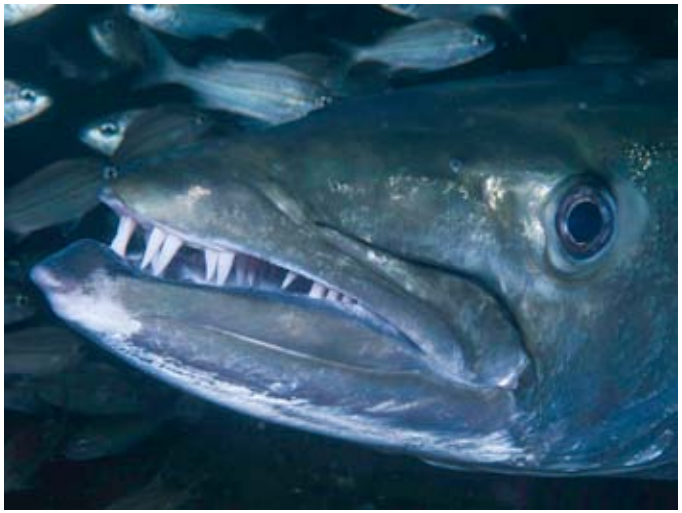
bridge, the major attractions are its ledges and natural reefs. These ledges can provide an endless variety of creatures for any photographer willing to take the time to learn the skills to spot them.

There are numerous dive operators across the region, however Destin has only two: Emerald Coast and Scubatech. Both are knowledgeable, both are well run, and both know all of the major dive sites. A typical trip is a 2 tank, half day, with one dive on a reef and the second dive on bridge rubble or a shallower wreck. Normally, the first dive is around 80-85 ft. In the summer, the shops run both morning and afternoon trips.

For the most part, it is common to have some surface current, with very little on the bottom, but this varies a lot. One can have everything from no current, to current that is difficult to swim against. Mid-water currents are also fairly common. Getting lost is typically not a problem, as most dive sites are single ledges where you simply follow it in one direction and then return the way you came. Thermoclines and bands of varying visibility are common, which tend to make for very low light levels on the bottom.

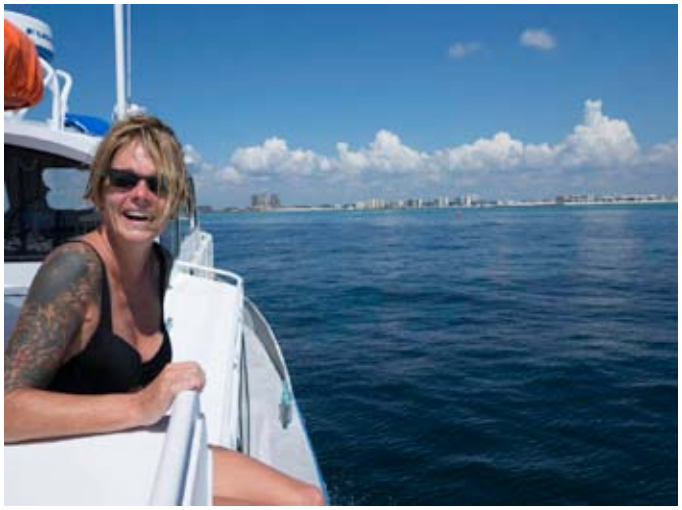
It is important to note, that for experienced divers, this is unguided diving. While newer divers can have a dive master, for the most part dives are done here without any interference. That obviously means you have to manage both your air and navigation. Given the depths involved, Nitro is available and highly recommended. For a photographer, being able to spend your time when and where you want to is a wonderful breath of fresh air.

Because the water here, even when very clear, tends to be blue-green in color, very little red light makes it to the bottom and therefore lights tend to frighten many animals. This can make photography a bit harder, and make identifying things even more difficult as red is the most common color for life here. Seeing a transparent red shrimp, without any



Barricuda. Panasonic GH1, F16, 1/125, ISO 100

Trigger fish on natural reef. Panasonic LX5, with wide angle, 11mm, F5, 1/400, ISO 400



Rebecca Hewett returning to Destin on Scubatech's dive boat. Panasonic GX1 w/7-14, 14mm, F9, 1/500, ISO 160

red light can be very challenging.

Before discussing the macro life here, it should be noted that this area has Goliath grouper, sharks (lots of species), eagle rays, manta rays, turtles, barracuda and infrequently everything from Mola Mola's to whales. The problem is, these tend to be fleeting encounters and, depending on the visibility, one has to have the right setup and some luck in order to capture good images of these creatures.

Visibility varies from near zero (infrequently) to well over 100 ft (also infrequently). Typical is 20 to 60 ft, which works very well for macro images. However, it is not visibility that is the major concern. The biggest issue is the presence of large particles in the water, looking rather like snow. It is this condition that presents the biggest challenge to the photographer, and while not always present, learning how to deal with it and buoyancy control are the two biggest skills one needs to get good images here.

So what can you expect to see? Well, for starters, there is a very healthy population of frog fish. They are masters of color change and can be any color from white to rainbow. Green, orange, brown and purple are all possible colors. There are at least 6 species of scorpionfish, and even the common spotted scorpionfish has colors seen nowhere else. Blennies are perhaps the most plentiful fish, but there are also several species of gobies. Lots of tropicals, along with toadfish and soapfish, are also present. Shrimp species are fairly common but very difficult to see. Eels, like the fish, are a mix of shallow water species with several deep water species appearing from time to time. I have images of 4 species of mantis shrimp, but I would expect the actual number may be more than twice that. Bat fish are common, and Flying Granards can be seen occasionally. And while the area doesnít have Flamingo Tongue, there are two much prettier relatives (the Spotted Cyphoma and the West Indian Simia). In addition, if you like octopus, there are at least 3 different species living here.

To the person with a good eye and careful demeanor, it is possible to find unexpected, extremely rare, or even unknown creatures. For example, odd as it may seem, there are two species of sea horse here, pipe fish and several species of jaw fish. Lots of species of rays (including one species of electric skate) can be seen on almost every dive. There are also several species of nudibranch including the extremely rare Dendrodoris Warta. Of the two species of peppermint shrimp that live in this area, one has only been seen alive in this area.

Equipment requirements are any camera that can do macro, and one or two strobes. Due to the darkness of the environment and the complete lack of red light, ambient light photography does not generally produce good results. If one does decide to shoot ambient photographs, using a manual white

Ocellated Frog fish. Canon S90, F3.2, 1/500, ISO 80

balance can help, but even that will not be enough to recover all of the lost red. Higher end point and shoot camera's are particularly nice, as they can cover a very wide range of subject sizes. As you can tell from the trigger fish image, the bottom does not lend itself to attractive wide angle images (with some exceptions). Here, finding your subject and having good lighting skills is far more important than the equipment.

As there are lots of slow moving crabs, shrimp and other animals, I suggest that someone not used to this environment start by photographing fairly stationary animals such as frog fish, scorpion fish and the numerous crustaceans, and when comfortable, move up to faster moving creatures.

Once having mastered the environment, the next step is to attempt to get good images of butterfly fish, adult bucktooth parrot fish, or juvenile angel fish, as these represent the more difficult to

Lion's Paw scallop. Panasonic GH1, 45mm macro, F14, 1/125, ISO 100

photograph animals of the area. And if that is too easy, one can try to find one of the very common reef mantis shrimp, as these guys are almost impossible to spot and even harder to capture images of.

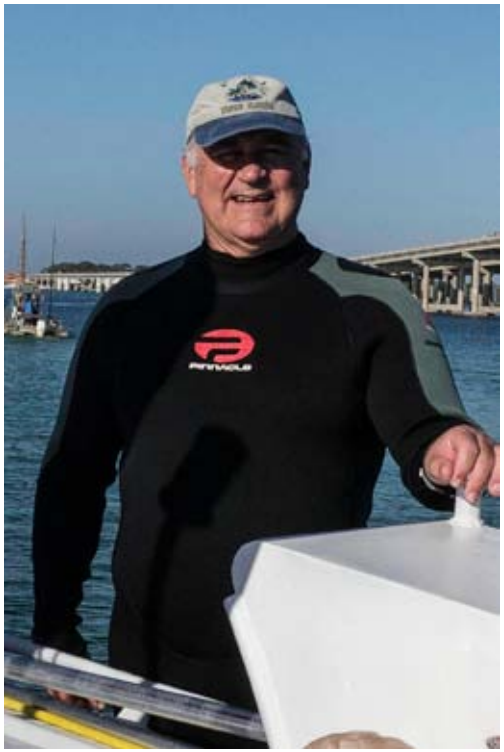
When diving in this area, finding the really interesting animals requires one to be close to the reef (so good buoyancy control skills are needed) and one also needs to be able to see animals that are genetically engineered not to be seen. Many animals I have images of only because I knew to look for them after Iíd discovered them in the backgrounds of photos Iíd taken of other creatures. This is adventure photography at its finest, where the better your discovery skills are, the better your photography results will be.

As the water gets colder in winter, life in this area for the most part migrates to deeper, warmer water. In the spring the life returns, and frequently brings with it animals native to deeper water. It is this constant cycle of changing life that makes every dive the chance to see something new and surprising.

While I am fortunate to be able to dive all over the world, every year I am amazed at the new species and unknown animals that can still be discovered in this unique area, and I still get a sense of excitement every time I dive here.

No short article could cover all of the animals one can see here, but hopefully, the images here will provide a sampling.

Jim Garin



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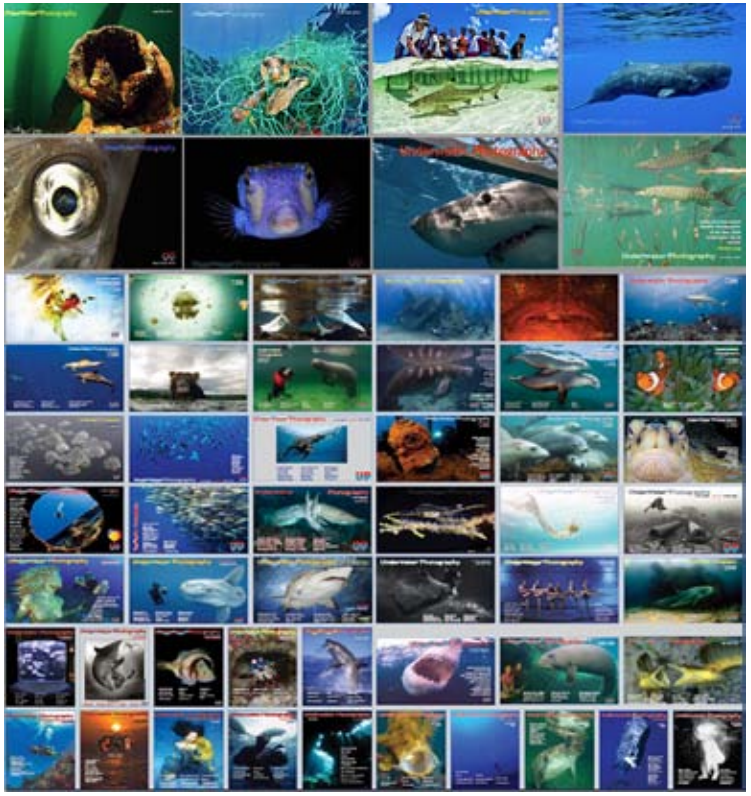

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