



A school of Atlantic spadefish swim over The Duane's main deck (above); writer Lance Bark's dive buddy TJ floats by a propeller from The Bibb, a surgeonfish, a view from inside The Bibb (next page).

KEY LARGO'S TWIN SISTERS THE BIBB & THE DUANE

Story and photos by Lance Bark

IT'S A HOLIDAY WEEKEND and I'm with an entourage of divers looking for three days of adventure on the high seas. Our trucks are packed with tons of dive gear, food, drinks and Jimmy Buffet tunes to stir up that longing for the warm waters of Mother Ocean. Key Largo is just 1.5 hours south of my Fort Lauderdale home but it will seem like a Caribbean out island.

We finally arrive at our three bayside bungalows, which will serve as diving headquarters, and after unpacking we toast the upcoming dive adventure while taking in a stunning Keys sunset. We also discuss tomorrow's double wreck dive of The Bibb and The Duane.

Both US Coast Guard cutters are 327 feet long and started their careers

in the 1930s. Each has a colorful history full of wartime action that includes fending off German U-boats and Japanese kamikazes during World War II and serving in Vietnam, plus they have a long history of rescuing sailors and civilians. A record that few vessels could match in the annals of maritime history. I highly recommend the book *Histories and Mysteries: The Shipwrecks of Key Largo* by Capt. Thomas A. Scott for in-depth accounts of these fascinating vessels.

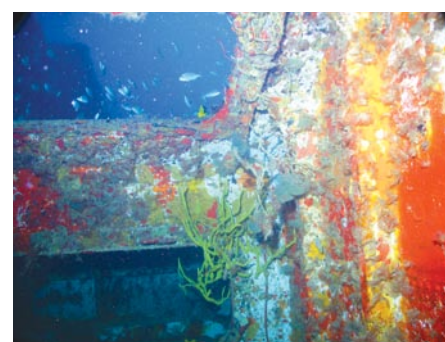
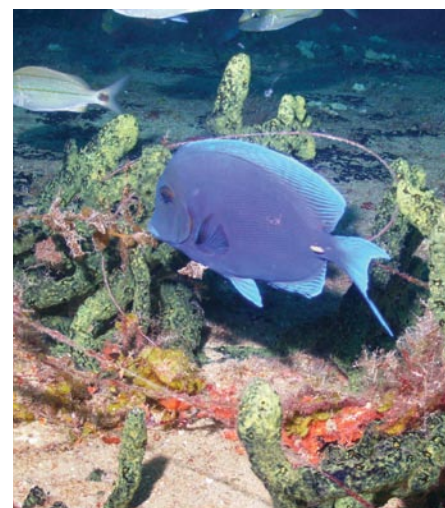
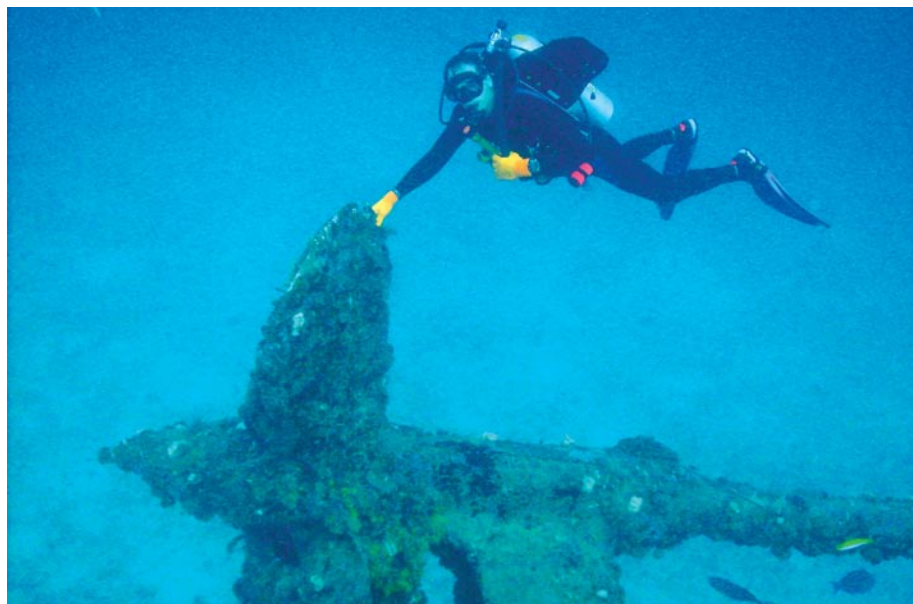
Quite some time after The Bibb and The Duane were decommissioned, the Key Largo diving community banded together to raise \$160,000 to purchase, clean and sink the cutters outside the southern boundaries of John

Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. They were sunk within a day of each other in November 1987.

Now resting peacefully on the bottom between 110 feet and 135 feet, far from the chaos of war, The Bibb lies on her starboard side while her sister, about a half mile away, sits perfectly upright, maintaining a graceful vigil watching over the reefs of the northern Keys.

Full of gusto and anticipation, we arrive at the marina the following morning. Our gear is loaded onto the dive boat and we pull out, greeted by a slight warm breeze and a sunny, clear-blue sky.

As we assemble gear, we chat about dive plans and who is going to pair



up with whom. Actually, it's a forgone conclusion that my buddy TJ and I will be a team because we are exploring and taking pictures while the rest of the divers will be spearfishing.

By the time everyone has assembled and double-checked tanks, spearguns, and cameras, we arrive at the buoys marking The Bibb. Strong currents are the norm on these wrecks because they are so close to the Gulfstream but today we are lucky in that the current is mild.

Over the side we plunge and right away I feel that oh-so-familiar caress of the warm southern waters.

The visibility is great and after only a few fin strokes I can see a dark shape appearing before us. I nod to TJ who is right behind me.

We land on her upturned port side and do a quick check on equipment then signal each other to head to the stern. I see to my left all of the superstructure and masts, and we follow what seems to be a paved flat road ahead. Soon hundreds of schooling fish surround us. Atlantic spadefish and barracuda are as thick as mosquitoes on a hot afternoon in the Everglades.

Since she's been down for 20 years she is covered in a fine carpet of soft red and green sponges and yellow corals. Big schools of jacks maintain a friendly game of chase with each other, while I stare at parting schools of snappers and grunts.

TJ and I arrive at the stern and take time to snap a couple of pictures of the massive propellers and shafts. This is a great spot to see big goliath groupers and bull sharks off in the distance.

We turn around and glide with the gentle current back toward the bow, and I pause to shoot some big clumps of purple soft sponges with a pair of colorful surgeonfish. It's stunning to see such bright colors with the aid of my underwater strobe.

Cruising over the superstructure and main bridge, trumpetfish hover in the corners, safe from the currents and damselfish and sergeant majors seem to be endlessly locked in a turf war. I marvel at all the beefy barracudas patrolling overhead.

I gaze out over the sandy plains of the bottom and notice that our spearfishing buddies have been successful, judging by the bulging game bags that trail behind them. I hope that the barracudas don't get too nosy.

After surfacing we change over tanks as the captain relocates our dive boat over The Duane. This time there are already a few boats tied up to the mooring buoys so we decide to do a hot drop instead of tying in ourselves. This is when we go down current to jump in then drift onto the wreck.

There's better visibility because I can see The Duane almost as soon as we

jump in. The sight of her takes my breath away: just so big and majestic, her masts so tall and looming. Stunning.

Covered in a mosaic of corals and sponges, her walls and decks explode in color. Stairs that are carpeted in clusters of sea urchins and sea fans seem to be swaying in tune with the ever-present clicking of the crustaceans.

Off the port bow I see a pair of bull sharks over six feet long, but they are too fast for a photo op (Like you never heard that one before.)

Before I know it, it's time to leave and start our slow ascent toward the surface, where I know that once on deck we will have stories to tell. But Mother Ocean always has the best story. You just have to listen.

The Bibb: Latitude: 24°59.71;
Longitude: 80°22.77

The Duane: Latitude: 24°59.38;
Longitude: 80°22.92

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