

Martin County's UNDERWATER WORLD

Many believe that travel to an exotic location is required to experience a quality dive. While destinations like Australia, Hawaii and the South Pacific do provide for phenomenal diving opportunities, Martin County residents don't have to go too far to get in some great dives. The waters offshore of Martin County contain many excellent dive sites. Whether you're going for lobster, spear fishing or just taking in some of the underwater wonders, this area has it all.

In Martin County, the continental shelf begins to widen and the general reef tract starts to spread out. Starting in the Florida Keys and traveling north along Florida's reef tract, there is a shift from the prevalence of true hard coral limestone reef communities to mainly sedimentary rock covered with gorgonians, sponges and algae. Within Martin County, the rocky reefs range from low relief hard bottom patches to high relief structures coming off the bottom up to 20 feet. There is a high diversity of fish and invertebrate species and the visibility is usually great.

The dive site known as the Loran Tower Ledge is a good example of a high relief site. The reef structure occurs in two tiers and the water depth is about 80 ft. at the base and 65 ft. on the top. It's located about five miles due east of the Loran Tower in Jonathan Dickinson State Park (hence the name). There are several undercut sections that form hiding spots for big grouper and moray eels. It is not

uncommon to see schools of snapper, fields of sea fans and the occasional sea turtle taking a nap.

Three Holes is a site located just one and a half miles offshore of Hobe Sound. It would be considered a moderate relief area, with a depth range of about 50 feet at the base to about 40 feet on top. Along with the usual suspects, aggregations of up to 20 goliath grouper and hundreds of snook have been reported.

Several low relief sites exist in Martin County. These sites can have relief as little as a foot and appear as nothing more than a small amount of fuzz on your bottom machine. Finding these spots can be a little challenging, but the payoff can be great. Because they are so difficult to locate, they receive a lot less user pressure. This, in turn, can provide for some awesome marine life experiences.

Not to be forgotten are the numerous artificial reefs that are located in this area. Two wrecks in the area that guarantee a great dive are Bull Shark Barge and the MG111. Bull Shark barge is located just off of Hobe Sound in about 40 feet of water. MG111 is located just north of the Palm Beach/Martin County line in about 60 feet of water. To get a list of all the artificial reefs in this area, contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission or log on to <http://myfwc.com/marine/ar/index.asp>.

Just remember, sometimes you need to go only as far as your own backyard to find what you're looking for. That's what makes this place so great. And as long as we all do our best to take care of these natural treasures, they will be around for future generations to enjoy.

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By Erick R. Ault
www.helterskeletons.com

