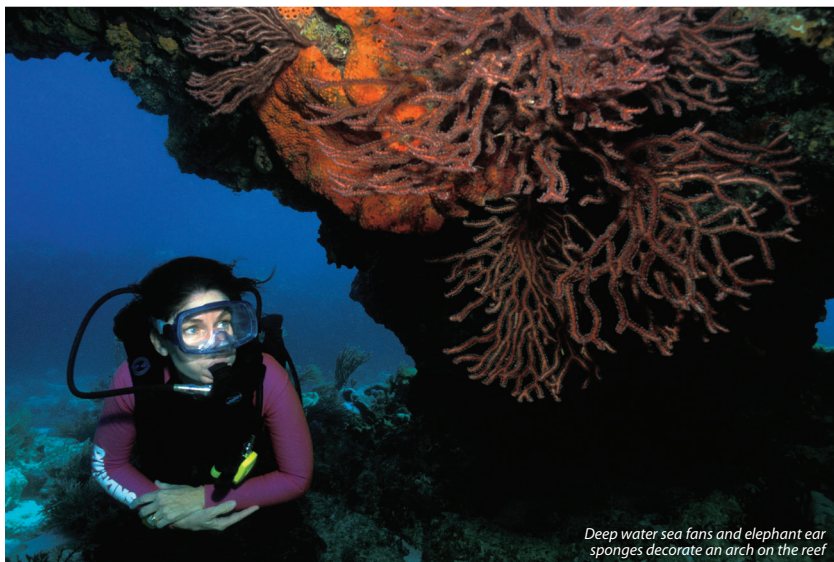


*Clear blue water and abundant shallow coral make diving and snorkeling a pleasure in the Keys*



## Diving in the Keys



*Deep water sea fans and elephant ear sponges decorate an arch on the reef*

The Florida Keys encompass 100 miles of coral reef stretched out in a long arc along the Atlantic. Throw in the reefs off Biscayne Bay to the north and down to the Dry Tortugas in the south and you've got 200 miles of diving. Most of it is in the 20ft to 50ft (6m to 15m) range, and a lot is between the surface and 20ft (6m). There are some very nice sections of the reef in the 50ft to 80ft (15m to 24m) range, and quite a few of the wrecks occupy a profile from 50ft to 130ft (15m to 40m). If you're a member of the technical diving community, you can even find some great dives well below the sport diving limit, although those are not covered in this book. The point of this description is that the Keys have something for every diver, from novice to expert.

Since the reefs are located anywhere from two to six nautical miles off shore, all diving is by boat. The ride out to the reefs can take 20 to 45 minutes, depending on the type of boat and

the distance to the dive site. Nearly all shops offer four dives each day: two in the morning and two in the afternoon. A night dive is usually offered once a week, sometimes twice.

The conditions that affect diving in the Keys are somewhat different than other parts of the world. The Gulf Stream, for instance, plays a major role in visibility. If the stream is close to the reefs, divers enjoy sparkling blue water, regardless of wind or tide. Visibility is normally in the 40ft to 70ft range (12m to 21m) on the outer reefs, but can be higher or lower from location to location. In general, the outer reefs offer better visibility than the inner reefs. In the lower Keys, where numerous cuts allow free flow of water from bayside to oceanside, the visibility tends to fluctuate daily with the tide. In the upper Keys, where longer island masses tend to limit water flow from bay to ocean, the visibility tends to fluctuate on longer cycles with the position of the Gulf Stream.