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The City of Mermaids celebrates turning 60

BY SUSAN COCKING

Diving 30 feet deep in Weeki Wachee Spring, I bear no resemblance whatsoever to the lovely mermaids who perform underwater ballet in this submerged theater three times a day.

Clad in full scuba gear with extra neoprene layers to ward off the 73-degree chill, I bump into rocks, kick up silt, frighten slider turtles and barely fit inside the mermaids' castle.

Suddenly, mermaid Ashley Furlong -- a gorgeous brunette wearing a bikini top and silky fishtail -- swims out of a tunnel into the spring. She takes a short breath from a free-flowing air hose lying on the stage, smiles at our group of divers, and performs a few graceful backward somersaults for Sean Wilson Griffin, a U.S. Navy sailor learning scuba while on leave. A couple of divers snap photos.

Just another magical day at the City of Mermaids -- one of Florida's oldest tourist attractions now celebrating its 60th anniversary.

The show goes on nearly every day, pretty much like when former U.S. Navy diver Newton Perry built the glass-windowed theater six feet below the spring's surface in 1947.

These days, a cast of 19 mermaids and two mermen perform *The Little Mermaid* and *Fish Tails*, interspersing choreography with quick breaths from compressed air hoses.

Between shows, groups of recreational scuba divers are allowed to plunge into the spring, admire the natural and manmade props and scenery, and view the entry tunnel and airlocks where the mermaids relax and change costumes between routines.

'A MAGICAL PLACE'

And this summer, for the first time since 1980, a small group of cave divers is exploring the deep underground river that feeds the spring. At 400 feet deep, the explorers say it might be the deepest water-filled cave in the U.S.

"A magical place. There's no place like it in the world," merman Eric Ducharme said.

Ducharme, 17, and his finned friends act like they are special -- and they are.

Who among us could perform smiling dance routines 20 feet deep in chilly water for a half hour wearing uncomfortable, nonthermal costumes while occasionally grabbing a quick breath from an air hose? Not to mention fending off pesky turtles, show-stealing manatees and the occasional alligator.

The performers regulate their buoyancy solely by controlling their breathing. No weight belts allowed.

Mermaid Nikki Wilkerson, 21, says it is a rewarding occupation.

"I don't think I'll ever leave," she said. "If we go places, even if we don't say it, people know who we are."

Although all of Weeki Wachee's underwater performers are scuba-certified, few put on air tanks for recreation on their days off.

"I hate all the scuba gear and everything like that," Wilkerson said. ``There's more freedom on the air hose."

They also take pride in their free-diving abilities, plunging more than 100 feet deep on a single breath. A few have carved their names in the limestone near the spring bottom.

"The mermaids have tagged the cave!" laughed cave diver Walt Pickel of Tampa.

That was among the discoveries that Pickel and volunteer divers from Karst Underwater Research, Inc. made earlier this summer upon entering the Weeki Wachee cave for the first time. The explorers have mapped nearly 3,000 feet of passage beneath the main spring to a vertical depth of nearly 400 feet, making Weeki Wachee perhaps the deepest underwater cave system in the U.S.

"More people have walked on the moon than have explored that cave," Pickel said.

He said narrow, limerock passages with rippled sand floors give way to a large room dubbed "Power Cave" that's 100 feet wide by 85 feet tall.

"You could drive five semis next to each other through this cave," Pickel said.

The explorers owe their success to Florida's long-standing drought, which has reduced the cave's firehose-like flow of 170 million gallons per day to about half-strength.

"This has been an untouchable gem," Pickel said. ``Mother Nature forbade it. We'd like to do this as long as the cave allows us."

The land around Weeki Wachee Spring and the adjacent water theme park, Buccaneer Bay, is owned by the Southwest Florida Water Management District -- known locally as Swiftmud.

LEGAL BATTLES

But although Swiftmud enjoys a cordial relationship with the cave divers, it is embroiled in a legal battle with the park.

After Swiftmud purchased 442 acres around the spring from the city of St. Petersburg in 2001, the agency wanted to work out a new lease with the water park, which also is an incorporated city. Swiftmud spokesman Michael Molligan says they want a new lease to ensure the safety of park visitors and to protect the spring from dredging.

Robyn Anderson, a former mermaid who doubles as mayor of Weeki Wachee (population nine) and general manager of the park, wants to continue operating under the terms of the current lease.

Anderson believes Swiftmud is trying to shut down the mermaids, which Molligan denies.

"They have portrayed us as terrible people trying to shut them down," Molligan said. ``We recognize the historical significance of the attraction. We need a lease that everything is protected there."

The issue is expected to go to court in late August.

Barbara Wynns, 57, and Vicki Smith, 67, still practice their routine once a week and perform once a month. Neither can imagine life without diving in the spring.

"There's not many places you can come and relive a dream," Smith said.

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