

## Weeki Wachee 400 feet deep

**The drought has slowed the springs' flow enough for divers to reach record depths.**

By CHANDRA BROADWATER

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WEEKI WACHEE - The home of the Weeki Wachee mermaids may also be the deepest underwater cave system in the country.

On Friday night, divers from the Tampa-based Karst Underwater Research group got farther than any other divers in history to determine that the caves are at least 400 feet deep.

With the help of about 20 people on land, the exhausted but excited two-man crew emerged from the cool, crystal-clear springs at about 4:30 a.m. Saturday after beginning the dive at 6 p.m. Friday.

"Weeki Wachee is a crown jewel that everyone's coveted and wanted to get into," said Karst Underwater Research president Jeff Petersen. "But nature's prevented that. This is a historic event."

Drought conditions have slowed the usual flow of the springs by nearly half, to about 97 cubic feet per second, Petersen said. As it has gotten drier on land, the not-for-profit research group began testing the flow in late May to determine when conditions would be right to dive.

Now divers can withstand the currents to make their way past the heavy flow and then drop into the cavernous underwater world. There the flow dissipates because the caves are so broad.

"It's still hard. You pull with a lot of strength to get in," Petersen said. "And if you let go, you go flying back."

He likened the flow to hanging on to a flagpole in hurricane winds.

Once inside the caves, divers used torpedo-looking snub-nosed scooters and lights to go as deep as they could.

At about 350 feet down, one of the divers could see that the cave turned and went farther down toward a pit, Petersen explained. The crew thinks the rock probably comes back up like a valley of some sort to about 250 feet deep.

So what's it like down there?

"Imagine the Lincoln Tunnel," Petersen said.

Think about all those lanes for cars and all that earth and water above, but picture it as a natural formation with lots of giant boulders and rock all over the place.

A diver all the way down there is like a little weightless spacecraft floating along with a light- a tiny object in an immense alien world, he said. Wherever the light goes is where the eyes follow to paint a mental picture of just how big or small a cave is.

"We lose track of just how far it is to go down," Petersen said. "A 150 feet down is like 15 stories. So if you think about 250 feet down, that's like 25 stories of a building underground."

Researchers believe the Weeki Wachee caves are connected to another system known as Twin Dees Spring. Karst divers have previously located the main water source of this spring, located southwest of Weeki Wachee, and tracked more than 2,000 feet of passages at about 300 feet deep in some places.

They also think the system connects with a well drilled on the northbound side of U.S. 19 by the Southwest Florida Water Management District for water sampling. That well punched into another cave underground.

Weeki Wachee spokesman John Athanason called the weekend discovery "amazing."

"To think that's all in our back yard," he said. "We hope this helps to educate the public and for us to preserve the springs."

As long as the drought continues, Petersen said, Karst divers will continue to explore as much of the caves as humanly possible. They plan to dive again this weekend.

"If the aquifer starts recharging, we'll probably have to wait until next year," he said. "And that's assuming our families don't kill us first. We're never around right now."

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