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State of Diving



A hairy frogfish is just one of the possible surprises at Blue Heron Bridge (left).

All in the Timing

FLORIDA'S WEST PALM BEACH BY TERRY WARD

THERE'S A TWO-HOUR WINDOW for the bridge," says dive guide Mike Walker of Walker's Dive Charter, prepping me for West Palm Beach's Blue Heron Bridge. The hours before and after high tide make for a manageable current and — like the wave of a magic wand — turn the Intracoastal Waterway between Palm Beach and Singer Island crystal clear for a precious window of bottom time.

But there's no need to kill time waiting for the tide with 100 dive sites in the area. We're speeding aboard *The Wetter the Better*, following the curve of Palm Beach's privileged coast. Walker points out Rush Limbaugh's house and the old Kennedy estate, and the Breakers resort passes in a blur. But for all the riches nearby, the real treasure is underwater.

Less than a mile offshore, at the Breakers Reef, we drift for nearly an hour over fingers of coral blanketed with gorgonians, whips and swaying soft corals. In the course of waiting to dive the bridge, we're treated to some of diving's greatest hits — a large nurse shark, a giant green oel unspooling streamerlike through the corals, schooling spadefish and a loggerhead with just three fins that lets us swim next to him for a full five minutes.

We surface, wolf down fresh pineapple and within minutes are back at the bridge, where it's prime time to get back in the water. Eager to bid adieu to the rushing cars, skyscraper condos and looming power plant of the built-up top-side, I slide off the back of the boat.

The small wreck of a dinghy emerges



from the sandy bottom, a scorpionfish lurking on its overturned bow. But Walker is fixing his macro lens on something rarer — a bumbee shrimp, tiny and striped, picking its way across a large starfish. Next we spot a long-arm octopus near a pile of shell carcasses, and I tickle the sand nearby, coaxing a sticky

arm to grab hold of my finger. "When we did a cleanup dive here a few weeks back, lots of people brought up bottles," Walker told me earlier. "But they were full of octopuses, so we had to throw them back."

We're down for almost an hour, hardly passing the 12-foot mark, except for a gander around the wooden fenders on the eastern side of the bridge, at a whopping 16 feet. The fenders are carpeted with orange soft corals and purple barrel sponges, the colors rainbow-bright in the shallow water. Schooling Bermuda chubs paint quicksilver highlights in the blue, and a stoplight parrotfish follows a hogfish through the columns. A seaweed blenny peeks from a barrel sponge, and a tiny rough-head blenny the color of a lemon Starburst pokes its head from a tube — critters absolutely everywhere. A bristle worm inches across the gravelly bottom; nearby, a red-lipped batfish pouts for Walker's paparazzi routine. A large ball I mistake for plastic trash turns out to be a lump of eggs bookended with clusters of apple murex shells. Walker told me that the Little Blue Heron bridge (the eastern stretch of the bridge), under construction through 2011, is a hot spot for frogfish and seahorses.

But that will have to wait till my next visit. Before we surface, we get one last treat: Finning back to the boat, we spot a hovering razorfish. It watches us for a brief moment before it spools, dropping straight into the brown sand like a sugar cube plunked into so much café au lait.

Live It: West Palm Beach

WHERE About 70 miles north of Miami on Florida's East Coast; served by Palm Beach International Airport (PBI)

NEARBY Whitehall Relive the Gilded Age at the Flagler Museum, winter home of oil tycoon Henry Flagler; flaglERMuseum.com

STAY The Breakers It's the poshest digs in town, and another legacy of Henry Flagler; thebreakers.com

EAT Café Boulud This multiple award-winner with a gorgeous setting is worth the astronomical prices; cafeboulud.com