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Times photos — JOHN PENDYGRAFT

Times staff writer Dawn Reiss dives at Blue Grotto, a privately owned freshwater cavern in a massive sinkhole in Williston, Fla., that reaches depths of 100 feet.

Prehistoric wonders at deep, dark depths

By DAWN REISS
Times Staff Writer

WILLISTON - There wasn't a pitchfork or red-masked devil in the gateway as I entered Devil's Den through a maze of bamboo and wood-planked paths.

Instead, a golden retriever named Lady greeted me near a sliding glass door polka-dotted with dive stickers. A fresh-faced blond with a distinct British accent helped a few customers from behind a counter.

"I promise, there aren't any gators or sharks or anything angry," she joked with a trio of divers. "I promise."

"But there are catfish. One is as big as my 3-year-old son. When he gobbles, it's disgusting."

I later learned that this particular 20-plus-pound catfish is John L., named for a friend of Ray Webber, one of the eight private owners who make up the corporation that owns Devil's Den, a prehistoric spring that has become a scuba haven.

After finishing with the early morning customers, Tami Tucker, 22, turned her attention to me. She had arrived from England at age 18 to learn how to dive in Daytona and found a husband, 28-year-old Paul Tucker.

"I just knew the moment I saw him," she said. "But I wanted a do-over, because I knew I was meeting my future husband and I didn't want him to see me in pigtails. Luckily, he thought they were cute."

The plan was for Tami, photographer John Pendygraft and I to go to Blue Grotto, another privately owned spring a mile away, for a deeper dive and return to Devil's Den. But Tami's husband, worried about the legality of her diving at another location as a company representative, suggested John and I go alone.

I felt the fear creep in, which was evident to everyone else. The day started with me forgetting how to set up a tank and John putting his wet suit on backwards. It had been a year since I last dove. As a novice, I always went on exhibitions led by an instructor, never alone. Unsure if I wanted to take the risk, I debated on the back steps of the dive shop before Paul suggested John and I do a trial run in his pool to ease our comfort level.

The quick run improved our confidence. We



While diving at Devil's Den, another freshwater cavern in Williston, Reiss used fish food in the form of brown pebbles to attract large catfish while at a depth of about 18 feet.

packed the equipment and drove past horse farms to Blue Grotto, a massive sinkhole that angles down to 100 feet. Like Devil's Den, Blue Grotto is a freshwater cavern also accessible for open water-certified divers. Both have attracted celebrities such as Tiger Woods and Celine Dion.

I wanted to dive Blue Grotto in particular because the owner, Ed Paradiso, tried to auction the 14-acre property in December as an ideal place for bottling water. Paradiso and his wife, Judy, rejected the top offer of \$1.65-million, leaving the site open to divers for now.

After a quick video briefing, John and I toddled down to the wooden pier with our tanks, weight

belts and buoyancy compensators. Natural sunlight filtered the sinkhole outlined by orange buoys and a chain-and-rope framework that led deep below. The cool water seeped into our wetsuits as we began our descent surrounded by small fish.

The "million candle-powered" lighting system that usually illuminates Blue Grotto was not working, but there was enough visibility in the dark water. Pinching my nose, I cleared my ears every few feet. We reached 50 feet, where a natural barrier of rocks and fossils make a crescent-shaped drop-off.

On either side, a yellow rope dipped into a narrow, pitch-black passageway that only cavern-certified divers or those with instructors can enter. Instead,

we continued exploring, bouncing up and down while struggling to master our buoyancy. We searched for the large carved peace sign. But without lights, the rocks blended together. After a quick stop at the 30-foot air bell, we made our ascent. Excited, but also slightly disappointed that we didn't see a whole lot, we drove over to Devil's Den.

The spring-fed sinkhole is nearly hidden, except on cool days when steam rises in the former farm field.

Tami, more than ready to go, guided John and I down a long wooden set of steps underground. We ducked beneath rocks to a sunken platform. The 100-foot circle of aquamarine water glistened as sunlight beamed down from a 40-foot opening more than 40 feet above.

Clutching a plastic bag of fish food, we submerged to a platform 18 feet below. I sprinkled the little brown eatable pebbles as two foot-long catfish vacuumed it up.

With our dive lights on, we quickly reached deeper depths as Tami beamed her light saber around the dark and rocky caverns. We peered at rocky imprints of fossils as I imagined the cave where, according to the Web site, bones of early man were found along with prehistoric remains of a sloth and mastodon, many that were later donated to the University of Florida.

We approached a small, rocky tunnel that seemed too small for a dive tank and person. Tami looked around and swam back out. We approached a deeper swim-through that caused John to stop briefly as the pressure increased. After pinching his nose tightly to help relieve the pressure, we continued.

Turning sideways, swimming up and down in narrow crevasses, we looked at the walls. Each turn brought something new as the strong beam of light illuminated things covered by the dark water.

Forty-five minutes passed in an instant.

All too soon, we reached the end.

We took our safety stop at 20 feet, swimming in open water as we looked at the catfish and white stones illuminated by the now-penetrating sunlight.

I only hope I will have a chance to experience it again.

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Tami Tucker, right, who works at Devil's Den, shows Reiss how to swim through the narrow rock crevasses, where prehistoric remains of a sloth and mastodon were once found.



Tucker, 22, feeds fish from the platform leading into the spring at Devil's Den.