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## Flower garden banks diving trips

Experience Flower Garden Banks aboard the *M/V Fling*. Be prepared to exceed all of your expectations by our professional staff, clean and comfortable rooms, and delicious meals. Our 2- and 3-day sports trips offer excellent diving opportunities at one of the most Pristine coral reefs in the world. At Buoy 3 at Stetson Bank, diving begins at Low Key on a stretch of coral reef between the mooring U-bolt and the north drop-off. This is where the reef top is a flat, vanilla-colored area of clay rock ridges with its signature line of geological claw marks. The outcrop is spotted with sea urns and sponges covered with a palette of red, yellow and blue. Fining along the guidelines, I find a couple of arrow crabs crawling around and the boy flutters around on top of the bottom visible in the moonscape. When the spectacular formation of the 10-line star coral (*madrosis decraxis*) is in sight, I know I'm near the bluewater drop-off. When I arrive at the 80-foot-deep reef, which falls to nearly 200 feet, I'm surprised to see the huge body of a scallop hammerhead shark swimming towards me by itself in the 12 o's headline. I manage to prepare my camera and the 12ft shark fills my frame before it turns and darts away into the depths. Stetson Bank is the third reef in the Gem Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Trio located in northwestern Mexico, 75 to 115 miles off the coast of Texas. All of the sanctuary's reefs sit on salt domes formed 190 million years ago. Apart from its two cousins 35 miles away, Stetson Bank has a solid stone and claystone base rather than a limestone base produced by coral. The reef's habitat is about 36 acres, with a series of sponges and fire coral stationed pinnacles protruding 10 feet high along the north side of its crest. Known as a hotspot in the Northern Bay for seeing and photographing fish, Stetson is home to several notable fish such as Sailfin Brenni, golden (morphin) smooth trunkfish, and even long lure frogfish. 13 miles away, East-West Flower Garden Banks is the northernmost coral reef on the American continental shelf. At 28 degrees above the equator, it is a natural miracle that allows for just the right combination of stable food supply, hard surface, temperature, light and Gulfstream vortex. They rise to a depth of 65 feet above the surface, producing thriving coral populations - the 1st live reef is 400 miles away. While they remain some way off the radar for many divers, healthy, sustainable and close are desyns used by divers who know these two exceptional reefs. The coats of arms of both banksA dense array of hard corals, mostly brain and star corals, many of them forming huge, megalithic shapes that create majestic living seascapes of wonderful shapes and shades. Sanctuary researchers say its live coral cover (22 different species) is a remarkable 51%, and has not declined since annual readings began nearly 30 years ago, and these reefs have become some of the healthiest reefs in the entire Western Hemisphere. Unfortunately, in July 2016, this remarkable success was stung by a death event that affected corals and invertebrates in a localized area of East Flower Garden Bank Reef (affecting only 1.5% of coral reefs). Also last summer, the sanctuary endured higher water temperatures that were more persistent than normal, resulting in coral bleaching and paleness in both banks. The good news: As of November 2016, sanctuary researchers have not reported mortality from bleaching, and they want a full recovery. The cause of the July death event remains undecided, but has not spread beyond the original area of impact. Beyond coral, the sanctuary's tropical fish community includes spotted drums, crawling cowfish, cacao damish and yellow-haired phlegans to name just a few of the more than 250 fish species in this diverse habitat. Manta being regularly found in both Flower Garden Banks. Sanctuary staff work with the Wildlife Conservation Society on manta ta (and shark) tagging activities. These giant chest wing filter feeders sometimes circle for more than an hour. The shows they put on for divers can happen at deco stops 15 feet from coral reefs and the surface. One of the hottest dives in the garden occurs during the cool months from February to mid-April. This is when hammerhead sharks gather at East and West Flower Garden Banks. Although not a guarantee, the sanctuary's winter divers offer a good opportunity to see scallop hammerheads, some, or even schools like the Galapagos. During the summer months, whale shark cruises irregularly through the gardens. More than a few divers encountered the largest fish at sea on their first ever offshore trip. Perhaps the most spectacular marine animal event in the sanctuary is an annual phenomenon known as coral spawning. This magic trick of nature occurs at a highly predictable 8-10 nights after a full moon in August, when you broadcast corals and release a terret package of eggs and sperm that rises to the water column in a spectacular display across the reef. It is a blizzard of animal life in the making. Head to Texas and experience the glory of the Gulf Coast in an off-road radar diving locale where you're likely to witness manta beings, have a coral reef experience like no other, or bump into hammerheads and whale shark. When going in winter, aka hammerhead season, from February to May, only on weekends (hammerhead sightings descend from mid to late April). The summer season runs fromUntil late October. Two- and three-day liveboard trips are offered on Mondays- Wednesdays, Thursdays-Fridays or Saturdays-Sundays in the summer through Labor Day. After Labor Day, it's only on weekends. Dive conditions Water temperatures are in the high 60s to high 70s in winter. Summer lows to mid-80s. Viz is 30-60 feet in winter and 75-100 feet in summer. Operator Flying Charters will make two- and three-day trips over winter weekends and summer in *M/V Fling* from Freeport, Texas. Texas Bluewater Safari operates a 4-pack charter from Surfside Marina, 1-Day Stetson Bank and 2-Day Flower Garden Banks. PRICE TAG 2-day flying trips (7 dives) start at \$585 over the weekend. \$535 for Thursday to Friday. Monday-Wednesday liveboard trips (11 dives) start at \$670. Bluewater Safari's Stetson Bank full-day full-boat 4-pack charter runs a total of \$1,700. The 2-day Bluewater Safari Full Boat 4 Pack Charter to Flower Garden Banks Reef runs a total of \$2,400. On day one from Houston's George Bush or Hobby Airports, head south on Highway 288 to Freeport. If you need one night, choose one of the affordable options - near clarion inn, Hampton Inn or Lake Jackson. If not, head directly to the *M/V Fling* and arrive at .m 30pm. Give them time to sample fresh Texas Bay prawns and oysters with a quiet puppy side at the Baytown Seafood Restaurant and the river across the dock. Day 2 The first dive at West Flower Garden Bank Reef is .m 7. A hot breakfast with pancakes, eggs and tacos is served. The 2.5-hour surface spacing gives time to the salon and lounge on the upper deck. After the second dive, you're time to enjoy reading, satellite TV, and snooze in the space of 13 miles to platform diving near East Flower Garden Bank Reef. A late afternoon dive is followed by a Texas-sized dinner (beef brisket, fajitas, pasta). After an evening dive, enjoy a warm brownie with whipped cream and ice cream sides. Day 3 Stetson Bank is a completely different reefscape from flower garden banks in the east and west. With its moon surface appearance, it offers rock elation, sponge-covered spires, snapper and chub schools. An added bonus is a steep drop-off on the north side near buoys No.1-3. Lunch is provided after the second dive as the boat begins its 5-hour run back to Freeport. Arrivals are usually from 5 to 6 p.m.m hours. You are at: Website Owner: National Marine Service | NOAA | Department of Commerce Description Rule No.1 when diving through the Flower Garden Bank National Marine Sanctuary: No matter how hard you attract corals or reef fish, you may keep an eye on open water or miss something big. It's really big. I learned this lesson through experience, as most divers do. I was coming to an end.Productive wide-angle photo dive at the East Flower Garden Bank, one of three different formations rising from the depths of the Gulf of Mexico, about 100 miles south of the Texas/Louisiana border. Like a sand desert oasis, the peak that forms the sanctuary is the northernmost reef on the North American continental shelf that hosts 23 species of coral and more than 170 species of fish. Most of the diving, I happily photographed kuromi and creore fish schools and hovered over healthy stars and brain coral formations. Then, as I began to surface, I took a sring look and double-took the silhouette of one giant fish blocking the sun. The fully grown whale shark, 40 feet long, sat quietly in the water with its wide mouth partially open and smoked plankton. The animal's eyes looked ahead and didn't seem to notice me as I made a beeline to take a closer look. Kicking furiously, I was able to get off some frames before the great fish was out of see with some flicks of its huge tail. I'm diving at Flower Garden Banks. You don't know what you're going to find, and that's what makes this place so special. Bathed in a Gulfstream vortex of blue water, the sanctuary is 56 square miles divided into three different areas: Flower Garden Banks and Stetson Bank in the east and west. Overall, the sanctuary has a total of 17 mooring dive sites that you can explore on a private boat or a 2-3 day liveboard cruise operated from Freeport and Galveston. Flower Garden Banks in the east and west is 12 nautical miles away. Both are topped with the hills of Chartreuse and colonies of chartreuse and hazel browns with symmetrical brains and mustard hill corals that usually extend to the edge of view over 100 feet. Parrots, sharp nose fugs, and kihada-hatsu fly around the reef, while Bermuda chub, barracuda, and schooling jack float in the middle water. If you take the time to slowly patrol the patches of sand between coral heads, chances are you'll find yellowhead jawfish, peacock flounder and sand tilefish. The third structure, Stetson Bank, is a much smaller siltstone-based reef located on the coast 30 miles from West Flower Garden Reef. It's only 700 yards long and beyond 200 yards, but its small size shouldn't fool you. It is a magnet for marine life, from sponges, fire corals, spyney oysters and arrow crabs to an array of feathered justers and invertebrates. The formation of the 10-line star coral near buoy #3 is by far the largest coral formation in Stetson, attracting creore fish, golden morph trunk fish and scorpionfish. Unlike the other two banks, Stetson also has a wall on the north side that plummets dramatically to 180 feet. With the nearest reef about 400 miles away, Flower Garden Banks attracts large oceanic visitors such as manta rays, mobra rays, loggerhead turtles and sharks. It is very common to see silky sharks, sandbar sharks, or nurse sharks on coral reefs. InIn late winter and early spring, flocks of eagle rays and scallop hammerhead sharks move through the area, and whale shark sightings are reported throughout the summer. Of course, the area is also famous for its annual mass coral spawning. Seven to 10 days after the full moon in August, the hard corals of Flower Garden Banks in the east and west erupt at the same time, releasing BB-sized sacs of eggs and sperm, often described as looking like a reverse blizzard. Spawning gradually floats to the surface, forming a musty mat of emerging coral polyps that will build the next generation of coral colonies. If you're looking for a coral reef experience with the potential for some big animal encounters, but without the hassle of security inspections and customs forms, think about your 2-3-day adventure at Flower Garden Banks. It is a place that can be full of fun surprises. Jesse Cancelmo Cansemo

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