

Crystal River, Manatee Snorkel, Caloosa Dive Club, 20 February 2010
By Barry Erhardt

It was an early start to the day on Sunday that would prove to be an experience to remember. It was a little cool, but would warm up soon. Six people arrived at the boat launch and after a brief safety video (Manatee safety – not ours) and briefing we were ready to board the eight person pontoon boat. Nancy Fuentes, Walter Wilt, Mark & Leslie Van Cleave and Barry and Priscilla Erhardt were scheduled for this trip. Walter didn't feel well and he and Nancy left for home. Walter paid for the trip for Nancy and himself even though they didn't go. We were very sorry that they would not be going as the weather was perfect for the day's trip. We said good-bye to Nancy and Walter and would miss them. The eight person pontoon boat was waiting for us to take this journey. This was a self guided trip. Captain Mark Van Cleave piloted the boat up the river heading to the first location reading the map coordinates. Past Xmas Island heading toward Buzzard Island and past the canal opening that goes to Magnolia Springs and Three Sisters (we will get back to that later). As we passed Buzzard Island, didn't see any buzzards, we were now one mile from the dock and headed toward Banana Island, there's no banana's there either, the Island is just banana shaped, from the air that is. Around Banana Island to the back side where Big Spring or King Spring was located. This would be our first location that we hope to encounter Manatees. Leslie was a little apprehensive about coming into contact with these big animals. Telling someone that they have nothing to worry about is different then having direct experience that this was completely safe. This first location took us further up the river past several possible Manatee locations as the dive shop



personnel informed us that the early boats would stop at the closer locations first and they fill up fast, but the further ones may offer less people to start out with. When we arrived at the first location, It was called Big Spring (or King Spring), there weren't any other boats there when we arrived, but two charter boats with swimmers, snorkelers, and even divers entered the water by the roped off area of the spring where there were a few Manatees. Big Springs is the main diving and snorkeling area on Crystal River. The spring is 30 feet deep and a cavern that drops to 50 feet deep and there is a Manatee statue at 19 feet. We only saw a few Manatees surfacing in the roped off area. The area was getting crowded with people. Only one or two Manatees passed our side of the ropes. Swimming with a wild animal much larger than yourself is something that you must experience. The gentle, and oh so polite, Manatee brought a smile to everyone's face. There were mangrove snapper, mullet, and sheepshead jacks swimming all around us. After about fifteen to twenty minutes we swam back to the boat as the next group of charter boats arrived and we pulled anchor and left. So, off to Three Sisters Springs we went.



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Three Sisters is rated the number one location on Crystal River for viewing Manatees. Mark piloted us back past Buzzard Island and around to point up the canal under the bridge. As we traveled up the canal there were many Manatees traveling toward Three Sisters springs and out of the springs as well. This was going to be the spot where we would have our best encounters. As we got close to the spring we saw approximately twelve charter boats anchored. Leslie was now warming up to the idea that she wanted to have direct contact with the big animals. She was

excited about the idea. “Let’s go, I’m ready” she said. As we arrived at the spring entrance Mark waited patiently for several groups of Manatees to pass and then let several charter boats depart. We anchored to a pole in the canal and jumped into the waist deep water. What looked like rock bottom was really soft silica sand and you sank into. Barry almost got stuck, but managed to get his feet free and put on his fins and was swimming to the springs. Mark assisted Leslie off of the boat and gently into the water. Three Sisters is a complex of three spring areas with several large and small vents and sand



boils. The Three Sisters Springs are located on Crystal River, Florida. They are located in a channel that leads from the springs. There are concrete columns preventing boats from entering this area. This prevented the boats from getting hung-up on the rocks, anyway and the channel is narrow and not passable by boats. You can swim, snorkel, and even kayak into this area, the water is not very deep going into the springs. The water was much clearer in this location than the last. This was due to the volume of clear water discharging from the Three Sisters Springs. We entered the water and swam toward the channel to the springs. There was a roped off area outside the springs that had several Manatees resting. This area is called Idiot’s Delight Springs. The Manatees remained behind the ropes as there were many excited people all hoping to get close to them. If they only knew that if they remained quite and calm the Manatees would come to them, but with all the commotion they were creating most of the Manatees were content to stay where they were. There were a lot of Manatees there and too many for Idiot’s Delight Spring and they were going into Three Sisters and Magnolia Springs. The Gulf’s water temperature was still too cold for them to remain for very long without getting back to the warmth of the springs. Manatees don’t do well in water warmer than 65 degrees and the springs were 72 degrees. Barry swam into the channel and onto the Three Sisters Springs. There were many Manatees passing you going in and going out as he swam into the springs area. The current was strong and you had to kick hard against the current to get into the springs. It was well worth the effort as you enter the springs. The water was clearer and much warmer than Crystal River.

Spring one is 8 to 10 feet deep, Spring two is 15 to 18 feet deep and Spring three is 4 to 7 feet deep. There were many people in the springs area. They were stirring up the bottom and what would be crystal clear water was cloudy, but clearer than the river itself. Anyway, the springs area was beautiful and a great adventure. Barry was there for a while having one adventure after the other with the Manatees. He took several underwater pictures, looking for some clearer water to get a better photo. One photo of a Manatee he waited for over ten minutes of a resting Manatee to start to surface to take it's picture. It wasn't George Clooney but it was handsome for a Manatee and Barry was happy. Manatees can hold there breath for a long time while they are resting. The swim out of the springs was a quick one as the current propelled you out of the springs area. You just had to dodge around the Manatees, snorkelers, swimmers, kayaks, and boulders, that's all, and you were out.



Barry related his experience in the spring with the Manatees. They love being touched and rubbed under their neck and belly. If you get just the right spot they will roll over on their side and just love you for the attention. Also, if you are missing a spot, while you are rubbing them, they will take their flipper and move your hand to just the right spot. You can almost see the smile on their face as you interact with them. Mark and Leslie said that they started into the spring, but the amount of people coming and going along with all the kayaks made it difficult to get into the spring, so they decide to stay out at Idiot's Delight Spring where there were many Manatees. Leslie said she had the time of her life and it was a terrific experience. She finally got to touch a Manatee and it was much different than she had expected, and very rewarding. Mark and Leslie said that they couldn't wait to do this again. Priscilla remained on the boat taking in the sites and watching the Manatees come and go.

With all of us on the boat we headed back to the dock. The days outing lasted about four hours. The cost of this trip was a very reasonable \$30.00 per couple or a total of \$90.00 for the trip. A small price for such a great adventure. Hope that Nancy and Walter will make the trip next year, we missed you.

Thank you,

Barry Erhardt