

Fatality in Forty Fathom Grotto; diver's body recovered

Anmerkung:

1 fathom (Faden) ist ein altes nautisches Mass und beträgt 6 ft (feet), d.h. 1 fathom entspricht ca. 1.83m. Falls die 40 Faden tatsächlich der Maximaltiefe des Grottos entsprächen, wären das ca. 73m

http://www.ocala.com/article/20081117/ARTICLES/811170994?Title=Search_for_missing_diver_ends_with_body

Search for missing diver ends with body
Officials say Sean Patrick Spiegel's body was intact and an autopsy is planned for today.

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EMATHLA — Divers recovered the body of a 25-year-old diving instructor missing since early Saturday morning when he and friends went for a dive at the **Forty Fathom Grotto in northwest Marion County** on Sunday night, hours after searchers first entered the water.

Sheriff's officials say Sean Patrick Spiegel's body was discovered in a cave around 8:15 p.m. roughly 105 feet from the surface. Divers made their first dive in the depths of the grotto, which extends to roughly 240 feet, at about 8:30 a.m.

Officials say Spiegel's body was intact, and an autopsy is scheduled for today to determine a cause of death. As part of the investigation, authorities took Spiegel's scuba diving equipment.

Divers renewed their search Sunday after authorities combed the grotto for more than 12 hours on Saturday, ending around 8 p.m., with no results.

Spiegel, according to sheriff's office reports, went for a dive at Forty Fathom with four friends about 1:30 a.m. Saturday, a few hours after the group had dined at an unidentified Ocala restaurant.

The grotto is filled with more than a dozen discarded items — including antique cars, boats and even an airplane — that offer attractions for

divers. Hal Watts, the property owner who leases the diving site to a company called the Commercial Diving Academy, said on Sunday that Spiegel and the others dove in the area of a submerged 1955 Chevrolet, which is located near the main entry point into the water.

Spiegel and his friends — Matthew James Berry, 22, of Attica, Mich.; Nicole Wilkerson, 23, of Brooksville; Doug Masters, 24, of St. Augustine; and William Sanders, 29, of Garnerville, N.Y. — were staying on the grounds in a rented log cabin, the sheriff's office reported. Early Saturday, Spiegel dove with Berry, Masters and Wilkerson, while Sanders stayed above water for safety reasons. **The foursome did use a rope to assist them in the dive.**

The group descended to 104 feet, staying underwater for about 20 minutes, the report notes. When Berry recommended they go up, Spiegel indicated with hand signals to the others that he had six minutes remaining and wanted to continue diving. About a third of the way to the surface, the others lost sight of Spiegel. Two of them could not locate him upon returning to the 104-foot marker.

The Sheriff's Office dive team had participated in the search but was not trained to descend to the depths that the grotto reaches, said Marion County Sheriff's Office Capt. Eddie Leedy.

Watts, who has been diving at the site since 1962, said it was once described as a "bottomless pit."

Thus, commercial and master divers who volunteered to assist in the search for Spiegel were utilized on both Saturday and Sunday. Some of them came from Gainesville, where, as it happened, the Gainesville-based National Association for Cave Diving was holding its 40th annual World Seminar on Saturday.

Leedy said about 10 different divers had been in the water at various times Sunday. But even with the volunteers the search was hindered in part because so few divers qualified to go to such depths were available. Moreover, the depth also limited how long they could stay in the water. It takes an hour to decompress and recover from just 10 minutes near the bottom of the grotto.

"The human body is not meant to do what these guys are doing," Leedy said.

Although the grotto covers about an acre or so at the surface, underwater it fans out, stretching for several hundred feet, including across NW 115th Avenue, the road leading into the facility.

In addition to the depth and breadth of the search area, and the lack of people sufficiently skilled to scour it, the water was **tea colored**, a rare condition attributable to flooding much farther north that injects massive amounts of tannin into the groundwater that feeds the grotto.
[Mexico: tannic acid; siehe Cenote Regina und Kim Ha]

The underwater visibility in the grotto is normally 50 feet to 60 feet, Watts said. But in its current state, visibility during the search was reduced to about **3 feet to about 10 feet**. Watts said that this has happened perhaps five times in his 46 years of diving Forty Fathom, and it will take a few months before the water clears up again.

"It's like putting you in a big room with the lights off and telling you to go find a tennis ball," Leedy said.

Spiegel, who was from Pace, a town of about 9,200 just north of Pensacola, was reportedly an experienced and serious scuba diver. He became an instructor in August after being trained at Forty Fathom.

Spiegel's friends have declined to comment.

Austin Miller contributed to this report.