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Exploring the underwater world of the Upstate

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By Jessica M. Sibley (Contact / Staff Bio)
July 24, 2009 - 11:59 p.m. EST

These antique boats and motorcycles can't be test-driven. And unfortunately, they won't even start.

But, that doesn't keep thousands of visitors from visiting them and a host of other attractions at Lake Jocassee each year.

You have to a part of a specialized group to even see these specific wonders of the gorge, however, as they have found their permanent homes under water.

Believe it or not, lakes Jocassee and Keowee are popular dive sites for scuba enthusiasts locally and in nearby states.

Robert Porter, scuba guide for Upstate Scuba LLC, has explored each lake in depth (excuse the pun) to find what many people never get the chance to see.

"That's part of why scuba diving is so exciting to so many people," he said. "It's your chance to experience something that only a select group of people ever have."

Upstate Scuba and Off the Wall Diving Adventures offer charters to various dive spots frequently, while a certification class at Upstate Scuba is fast approaching for the month of August.

The activity, or hobby for some, is a challenge that any avid diver would encourage you to try.

"We even have a course called Scuba Rangers where they dive in a pool with the help of a parent or certified diver," Porter said. "The Rangers is for kids ages 8-10. Then, for ages 10-14, we have a course where they can dive as deep as 60 feet."

But for adult recreational divers, the max distance they can descend under water ends at 130 feet.

"You need to be certified as a technical diver to go past 130 feet," Porter said. "Because there are other issues that arise once you go beyond 130 feet that we don't touch on in a recreational course."

And while breathing is a big part of scuba diving, there are a great number of things to learn and remember when heading into the depths of any body of water.

"When you first use a regulator and mouthpiece to breath, your body thinks 'OK, wait, this isn't natural.' But then, you realize that it's working and you can breath under water," Porter said. "People end up really liking it after they get used to it."

The main key to properly breathing while scuba diving lies in the idea of never holding your breath.

"When you first start, most people go through their air tank in about 20 minutes," he added. "But we try to teach that it's best to breath out for 15 seconds then breath in for 15 seconds. You want to keep a natural buoyancy when diving so that you're not disturbing the bottom and not floating to the top."

Photo

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Jessica M. Sibley

Divers from Upstate Scuba prepare to descend in Lake Jocassee. An old motorcycle and boat are just a couple of things at the bottom of the lake that excite scuba divers.

Photo

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Courtesy of Barry Keane

During a trip to Pensacola, Fla., a group from Upstate Scuba explores the underwater scene of the Oriskany aircraft carrier. "We take numerous dive trips that are open to the public," said Robert Porter, scuba guide.

Photo

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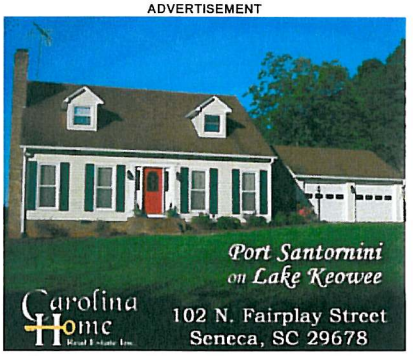
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For recreational diving, most people can become certified in just a month, taking classes that mix book learning with practice in pools as well.

Paula Porter, Robert's wife and diving partner, said she first dove on their honeymoon in Cancun.

"It was great, I really enjoyed myself," she said. "It's a world unchanged and untouched by society. It's serene and peaceful and really something to behold."

And the Upstate has been lucky, as officials are doing everything they can to promote scuba diving in our lakes.

"There are even boat ramps that have been closed off so scuba divers can explore certain areas without needing a boat," Porter said.

On Jocassee alone, there are sunken boats, motorcycles, an old lodge, a graveyard, an airplane wing and a "forest." Lake Keowee structures include an old pump house and steel bridge as well as plenty of fish to watch as you glide through the water.

And while the full equipment for scuba diving can run more than $1,000, rental equipment is readily available for those wanting to experience the atmosphere under the surface.

A wetsuit, mask and flippers will get you started on the scuba diving path. Enjoy!

For more information, contact Upstate Scuba at (864) 653-3483 or visit www.uptatescuba.com



Jessica M. Sibley

Robert Porter is just a second away from splashing into Lake Jocassee on one of many dives he has completed in the area.

Courtesy of Barry Keane

Here, the Keowee Pump House is still intact at the bottom of Lake Keowee and is a popular dive site.

Photo

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Special to the Daily Journal/Messenger

The Keowee Pump House, shown here before the area was flooded to create Lake Keowee, is now about 70 feet under the lake's surface.

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