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Photo: Sanna Emmett

The sea is an inviting blue; the sky clear and sunny. Divers make final adjustments to their kit as the boat slows then stops. Like skydivers readying to exit a plane, we line up in single file at the stern of the boat. "You are about 150 yards up-current of the wrecks," the captain calls from the bridge, then issues the call to action: "Dive, dive, dive." In rapid succession, we giant stride from the stern platform, dump air from our BCDs, and begin a slow-motion free fall into the depths.

The current propels us towards our target, which is a collection of wrecks - two freighters and a barge - that together are known as the Zion Train/Eso Bonaire Wreck Trek. These intentionally-scuttled vessels lie in 30m of water, six kilometres off the coast of Jupiter, Florida. During the descent, we are greeted by large schools of spadefish and jacks. Underwater visibility is 20-30 metres, which is often the case at this site. The shadowy outline of the first wreck soon comes into view, then moments later, we see them.

Goliaths are the largest species of grouper. Measuring up to two-and-a-half metres long, these barrel-shaped behemoths can weigh in at up to 300kg, making them the largest boney reef fish found in tropical reef environments. Coming face to face with one of these giants will certainly get your attention; descending to discover dozens of these big fish gathered on a single wreck is something you'll never forget. Even to a South Florida native like me, it's an encounter that never gets old.

Once decimated by unrestrained fishing pressure, decades of protection have given a new generation of Goliaths time to grow to maturity, and they are once again becoming familiar sights on the reefs and wrecks along the coast of Palm Beach County, Florida. A number of sites hold resident populations of Goliath grouper, and on any given day, you stand a good chance of seeing five to ten of these big fish hanging around. But on this late-August morning, we are seeing something special. The Zion Train is no longer just home to a few resident fish. Instead, there is what could only be called a herd, with more than 60 fish packed on and around the battered superstructure of the freighter. It is spawning season, a period beginning in early August and running to the first week of October. At this time, large numbers of Goliath grouper gather on a handful of key spots on the Florida coast, where the warm, clear waters of the Gulf Stream current come close to shore.

Based on their size alone, an encounter with a Goliath would seem intimidating. But these big fish are not aggressive, and in fact will almost always yield ground when a diver advances. Knowing this, I settle close to the sea floor and begin a slow, calculated advance towards a group of ten or so Goliaths hanging near the bow of the freighter. As I close the distance to three metres, the fish begin to shift to left and right, keeping me at least a body length away. I know not to make any sudden movements, as this would almost certainly startle them into a hasty retreat. The largest fish in the group stands its ground, emitting loud booming sounds created by pumping water rapidly through its gills. When this territorial display fails to move me, it is the fish that retreats, disappearing into a dark recess within the side of the ship.



Monster goliath grouper are a wonderful sight



Turtles will happily pose for photographs

There are six known sites along Florida's east coast where these spawning aggregations take place. These include two natural reef formations and four artificial reefs. The only other location in the world where this annual ritual has been documented is in the southern Gulf of Mexico, some 27-40km offshore of Florida's west coast. In addition to the Zion, similar gatherings take place at sites including the MG-111, which is a busted-up barge lying in 19m of water some three-and-a-half kilometres inshore of the Zion, and the Hole-in-the-Wall, a giant swim-though in the side of a ledge in 42m of water, with an opening large enough to park three lorries inside. The fourth location is a reef site called Three Holes, lying in the same depth as the MG-111, but seldom visited as the underwater clarity is not often as good as the other three.

From there, the only two remaining spawning aggregation sites on Florida's East Coast are the Mizpah wreck in 26m of water offshore of West Palm Beach and the Castor Wreck, which lies farther south in 34m of water off Boynton Beach. There is an interesting note to this last wreck;



The Florida reefs are alive with shoals of reef dwellers

"On those occasions when I have used a rebreather to observe these aggregations, I have snuck in close enough where I could have reached out to touch these 'sleeping' sharks"