

aquarius aquanautica

photos by Dan Burton



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habitat

It's like any other scientific research trip, except that you spend ten days 60 f/18 m below the surface.

Your "hotel"—the world's only operating underwater habitat devoted to scientific research.

Welcome to NOAA's Aquarius, in the midst of the coral reefs off Key Largo, Florida. Operated by the National Undersea Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Aquarius's mission is to study the coral reef ecosystem in scuba while living in saturation. The 43-foot-long habitat is home to five scientists and a support technician at a time, and allows them to conduct up to nine hours of diving a day. Without decompression worries—their bodies become saturated at ambient pressure during their first 24 hours in the habitat—the researchers can conduct more research in a week than most others can do in months.

The living conditions are quite pleasant—if you're not claustrophobic. The scientists live and work in three rooms: a communications center, bedroom, and the main center of activity, the kitchen.

The intensive hours of diving put in by the Aquarius tenants use up calories, calories that need constant replenishing. According to *Scientific American* editor Glenn Zorpette, who recently visited the habitat with photographer Dan Burton, junk food was everywhere. "Almost the entire time I was there, they were eating," he said.

This is not lost on the extensive topside support team, which has contracted for 2,000-3,000-calorie hot lunches with a Key Largo restaurant. The lunches are immediately put on



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a speedboat, and brought down in waterproof, pressurized containers from the support barge above. Talk about take out delivery!

And if that wasn't enough, some divers bring bananas and foil juice packs along with their equipment as they venture out for the day's diving.

The aquanaut crews are coed, which made Zorpette ask assistant habitat manager Chris Borne, "Has a pair ever made it in the habitat?" Borne wasn't sure—the bedroom is the only room not monitored by video—but doubted it. "With curious sport divers peeping in the windows, and microphones everywhere," Zorpette said. "There isn't much aquanauts can do on the sly."