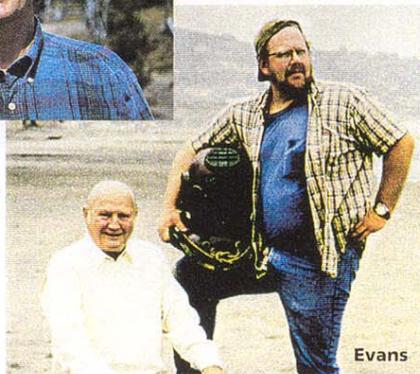
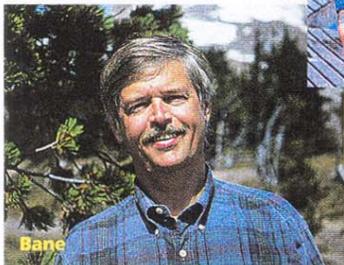
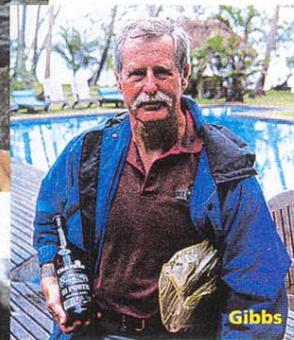
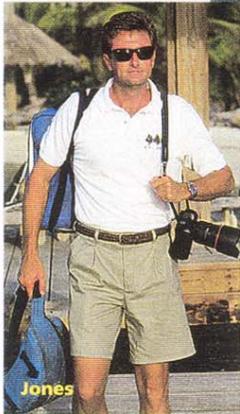
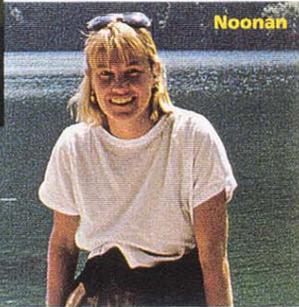
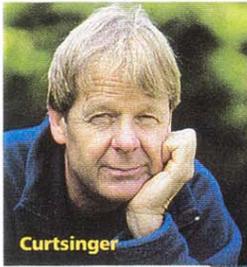


# CONTRIBUTORS



**Bill Curtsinger** (Caymans) specializes in underwater photography and has spent much of his career shooting and writing for *National Geographic*. His recent articles have featured Bikini Atoll, gray reef sharks, and Hawaiian monk seals.

A longtime correspondent for *Outside*, **Meg Lukens Noonan** (Caymans) lives in New Hampshire with her husband and two daughters. She is the coauthor of *Albatross: The True Story of a Woman's Survival at Sea*.

**Andrew Rice** (Utah) surfs, kayaks, dives, skis, and, generally speaking, is up for any challenge. He is the author of *Outside Magazine's Adventure Guide to Northern California* and is working on a similar guide to Southern California.

A former assistant to Ansel Adams, **Chris Rainier** (Utah) specializes in photographing vanishing cultures. His books include *Where Masks Still Dance: New Guinea* and a work-in-progress about traditional tattooing around the world.

A regular contributor to ISLANDS magazine, photographer **Darrell Jones** (Florida) is an avid surfer and diver. He makes his home in South Florida.

A documentor of arcane cultural practices and remote locations, **Art Brewer** (Fiji) first gained renown some 30 years ago as a surfing photographer. His work has appeared in ISLANDS, *Surfer*, *Esquire*, *Surfing*, and *Rolling Stone*.

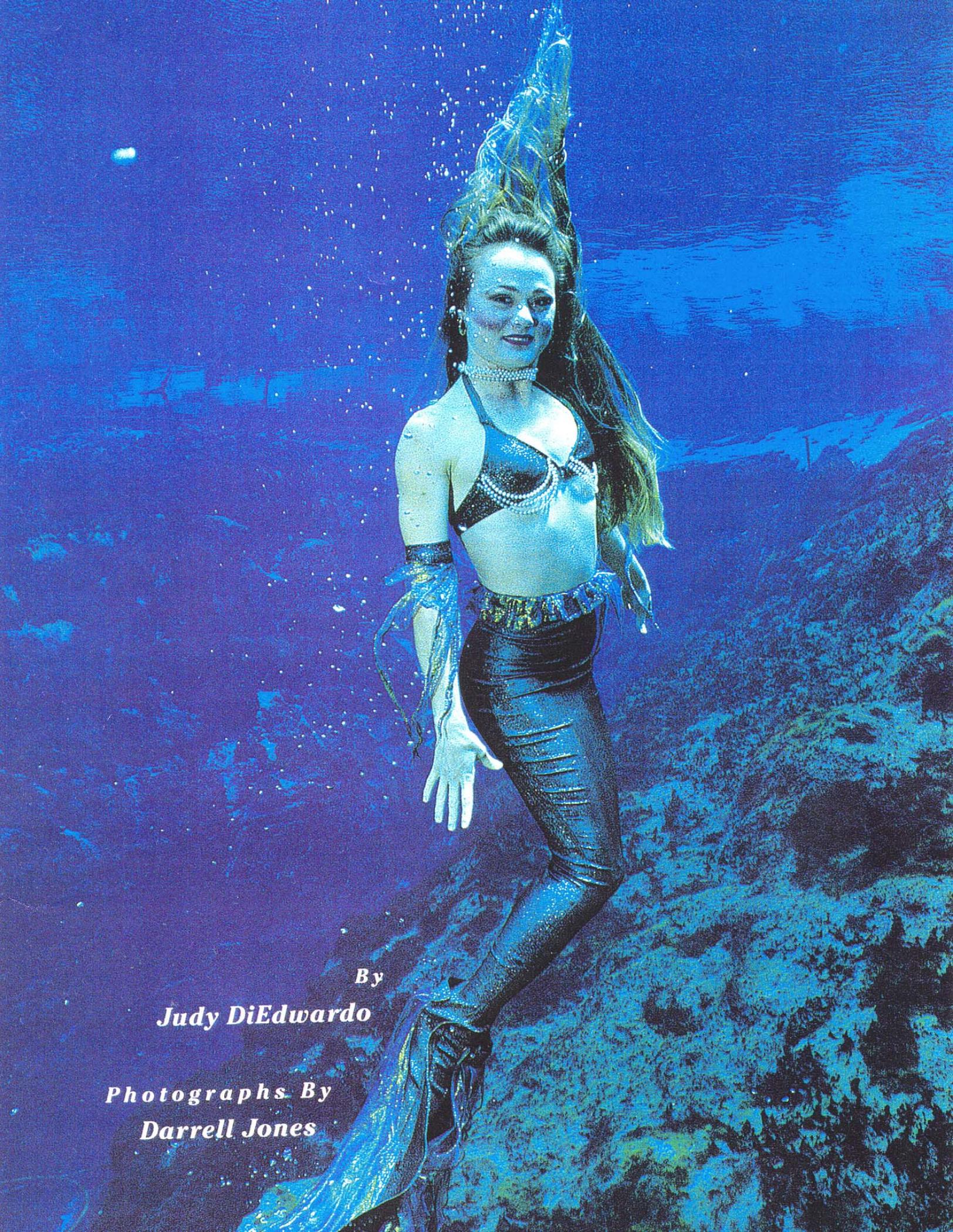
PADI Instructor and writer **Judy DiEdwardo** (Florida) is based in North Palm Beach, Florida. Her profiles of diverse subjects including Jean-Michel Cousteau, Yoko Ono, and George Burns have appeared in numerous magazines.

**Tony Gibbs** (Fiji) is a senior editor at ISLANDS magazine. He is the author of eleven nonfiction books and seven novels, including his latest mystery *Fade to Black*.

Recently dubbed the "George Plimpton from Hell" by *The Wall Street Journal*, **Michael Bane** (Pipin Ferreras) is the author of *Over the Edge: A Regular Guy's Odyssey in Extreme Sports*. His next book, *Dive! An Unconventional Introduction to Scuba*, is scheduled for publication in 1998.

Los Angeles-based **Ty Allison** (Pipin Ferreras) specializes in sport and adventure photography. His work has appeared in *Travel & Leisure*, *Men's Journal*, and *Outside*.

Diving legend E. R. Cross introduced himself to photographer **Vern Evans** ("Diving's First Wave") in curious fashion. "He hit me with his cane, I guess to see how I would react. So I hit him back," says Evans, whose work has also appeared in *People*, *Premiere*, and *Entertainment Weekly*.



By  
*Judy DiEdwardo*

*Photographs By*  
*Darrell Jones*

# Gators,

I TAKE A DEEP BREATH, STEELING MYSELF AS I EDGE TOWARD

the mysterious, icy blue water.



Well, okay, in

all truthfulness the water temperature is a constant 72 degrees, each and every day of the year.

But that's icy by Florida standards. Plus, there is something inarguably mysterious about the source

of the crystalline pool where I stand poised to take the plunge – a vast underground

reservoir that lies just a few layers of limestone

below the surface of this state's sandy peninsula.

# Monkeys,



The 82,000-square-mile Floridan Aquifer, which extends to parts of Alabama, Georgia,

and South Carolina, not only provides clean drinking water for millions of people, it gushes up

at more than 300 places, creating one of the largest concentrations of freshwater springs in

& Mermaids... the world. Long before theme parks sprouted in Orlando,

before hotels lined Daytona Beach, or cruise ships plowed out of Miami, people trekked to the

wilds of Florida to visit the same fabled springs that brought Juan Ponce de León in search of the

Fountain of Youth.



I have set out to visit three of the more venerable destinations just

to see how they have held up over the years. But the daring teenage boys on the two-story

dive tower here at Edward Ball

Wakulla Springs State Park have

come in search of nothing but

fun. For them, these waters

# Oh My!

*Three of Florida's most enduring natural attractions still put on a worthy show.*

are an adolescent proving ground. They compete for bragging rights, diving from the tower to see who can go the deepest or hold his breath the longest. I creep toward the spring and make my entrance in an ungainly, flamingo-like dance of toe dipping and body splashing. I don mask and snorkel, gasp my way into the water, and I am instantly in limbo, somewhere between pain and pleasure. Logic tells me that 72 degrees is actually quite warm, but my pounding heart, throbbing limbs, and the ice-pick jab to my forehead tell me otherwise.

The walls of the cavernous spring are stark but inviting. I float along, past perch, largemouth bass, and schools of mullet that flit through eel grass that lines the shore. The initial shock of the water begins to wear off and, really, it's not so bad. True, I am somewhat numb, but delightfully so. Indeed, I feel quite energized.

I flop over, backstroking along, watching the daredevil young men dive from the tower. And I think: Hey, looks fun, maybe I'll try it.

"OVER THE YEARS DIVERS have explored more than a mile of that cave down there and the end is nowhere in sight," says Don Gavin as he maneuvers his glass-bottom boat over Wakulla's bubbling springhead.

Along with the other passengers, I stare through 80 feet of impossibly clear water at the mouth of one of the largest freshwater springs in the world, a place where water is pressure-squeezed from the earth at a rate as high as 600,000 gallons per minute – enough to meet the entire daily water needs of the nearby city of Tallahassee, population 141,000.

Most remarkable about this spring is what isn't seen. The cave narrows from its 60-by-100-foot entrance to a 10-foot-wide tunnel, then roller-coasters downward, joined by four known tributaries in its descent. Destination? It's uncharted. But mastodon bones have been discovered here, along with the remains of at least nine other Ice Age mammals deposited as far as 1,200 feet into the cave system.

"Deep inside that cave there's a room big enough to fit the whole state capitol building," Gavin tells us. He is one of several boat captains who guide visitors on dreamy cruises along the Wakulla River as it cuts through the 2,888-acre wildlife sanctuary. A towering

obstacle course of Spanish moss-laden cypress trees – some dating back more than 250 years – sway in silent vigil, their enormous knotted roots looking like elephant's feet. The nine-mile-long waterway is home to more than 150 species of wading birds and migratory fowl. Stark white snowy egrets sail overhead. Male wood ducks, resembling meticulously painted windup toys, circle a swamp tupelo. Limpkins squawk from the shore. Alligators crawl from the green-black water to bask on the muddy riverbank.

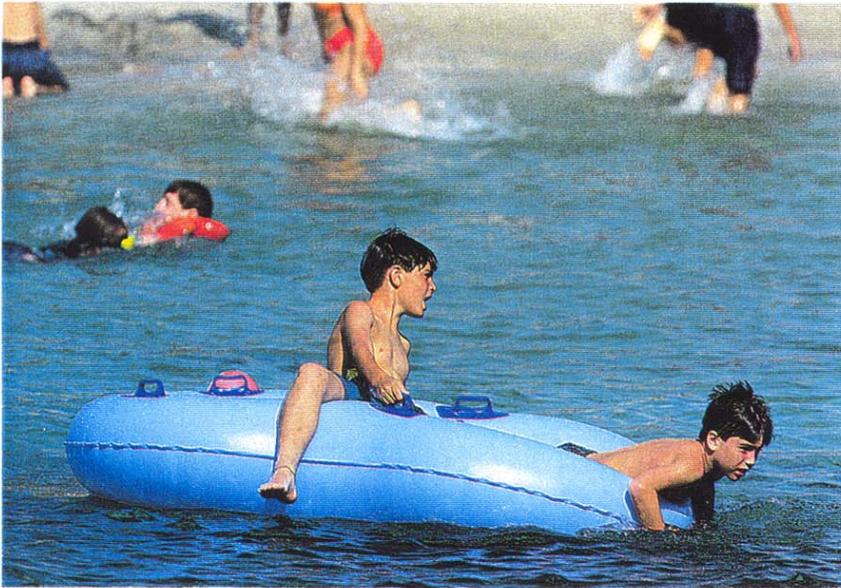
This earthly paradise has survived thanks largely to the late Edward Ball, a railroad and timber magnate who bought the springs in 1932 and built a 27-room Spanish-style lodge to accommodate visitors. The clear water and lush surroundings attracted moviemakers who used the spring as a location for portions of such films as *Creature from the Black Lagoon* and several of the *Tarzan* movies. Wakulla also caught the eye of Walt Disney, who considered it as a possible site for expanding his theme park empire, but Ball rejected Disney's proposal.

After Ball's death in 1981, the property was willed to one of his charitable foundations and later sold to the state with the provision that the land be preserved and the lodge maintained with faithfulness to the 1930s. The gift shop sports a Depression-era soda fountain, the dining room is a gracious affair in the tradition of the Old South, and none of the marble-floored guest rooms have televisions.

That's just fine, because after my bracing swim at Wakulla, I am hardly in a frame of mind for tuning in to the travails of the modern world. And I fall asleep thanking Ed Ball for building this place.



Despite the Amusement park atmosphere, the water is **Gorgeous.**



**Cool, clear water makes Weeki Wachee River worth a look-see.**

IT WAS THE SMELL OF MONEY, NOT THE RESPLENDENT LURE OF nature, that inspired Vermonter Hubbard Hart to bring the tourist trade to Silver Springs. In 1860 Hart began offering steamboat rides down the Oklawaha and Silver Rivers. And as adventurous travelers oohed and aahed at the sight of exotic birds, panthers, and bears, Florida's first "jungle ride" was born.

It was the handiwork of a local inventor, however, that really catapulted Silver Springs to the forefront of the tourism trade. Hullam Jones was just a teenager when, in 1878, he installed a glass viewing box on the flat bottom of a dugout canoe and created one of the first windows to the underwater world.

The town of Silver Springs was once a lush and verdant gateway to the wilderness. Its present-day incarnation, however, is like a carnival, with garish neon lights, fast-food stands, and souvenir shops vying for tourist wallets. The multimillion-dollar "nature" theme park built to showcase the springs has overshadowed the original attraction. With its meticulously manicured grounds, the 350-acre facility is more a paean to eco-minded opportunism than a salute to one of Florida's most beautiful natural resources.

Still, despite the amusement-park atmosphere, the water is gorgeous, which may explain why Silver Springs attracts more than a

million visitors each year. I bring my snorkeling gear along, but quickly discover the inviting springs are off limits within park boundaries. My consolation prize is a tour in a zebra-striped 4-wheel-drive vehicle where I'm treated to a mixed assortment of exotic, imported wildlife and a visit to a giraffe petting zoo.

Visitors can still take glass-bottom boat tours down the Silver River, but much of Florida's indigenous wildlife, including the manatee, is strikingly absent. Man-made dams along the Oklawaha River prevent these gentle aquatic mammals from navigating the seven-mile-long river.

The one animal found in abundance along the shores of the Silver River – the rhesus monkey – is not part of the native ecosystem. The first 30 monkeys arrived here more than 60 years ago when a boat concessionaire imported the wild animals

with the notion of making his attraction more "authentic." Not realizing the primates could swim, he released them on an island, from which they promptly escaped. Today there are more than 500 rhesus monkeys in the Silver Springs vicinity.

As with Wakulla to the north, Silver Springs became ripe for a Hollywood invasion once filmmakers discovered its clear waters. Of the many films and television shows shot here, perhaps the most well known were the six original

MGM *Tarzan* movies filmed in the 1930s and 1940s; *The Yearling*; and more than 100 episodes of the television series *Sea Hunt*. These early classics helped cement Silver Springs's reputation as an ideal location for shooting films, documentaries, and commercials.



**Escaped rhesus monkeys now thrive near this Silver Springs gibbon's cage.**

WEEKI WACHEE SPRING HAS ACHIEVED legendary status in the annals of Florida. Its vital statistics are interesting enough: it's located at the headwaters of the Weeki Wachee River, which flows 12 miles through the Florida wilderness to the Gulf of Mexico; it measures 100 feet across and more than 150 feet deep, with its bottom yet to be found; and it houses a wellspring that releases 170 million gallons of water every 24 hours.

For all their factualness, these descriptions are mere categorical distinctions, nothing more than dry textbook fodder. The true reason

for Weeki Wachee's celebrated status comes in the form of a mythical creature found nowhere else: the mermaid.

The lure of a beautiful, fish-tailed woman is undeniable. Especially to those desiring to emulate such a creature. For some of the 20 women who perform in Weeki Wachee's ever-popular mermaid show, becoming a mermaid is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. But it's not easy.

Ranging in age from 18 to 30, the mermaids-in-training undergo a rigorous 12-month training program before making their debut. They perform year-round, up to five shows each day, and spend about 15 hours of their week underwater.

Located above and behind the amphitheater that sits 16 feet below the water's surface is the mermaids' dressing room. The air is superheated to 90 degrees to offset hypothermia. At show time, the mermaids swim through an underwater tunnel that leads from the dressing room and winds directly into the spring where they perform their 30-minute show. Swimming against the current and out of the

It's hukey, yes, but  the crowd always  loves it.

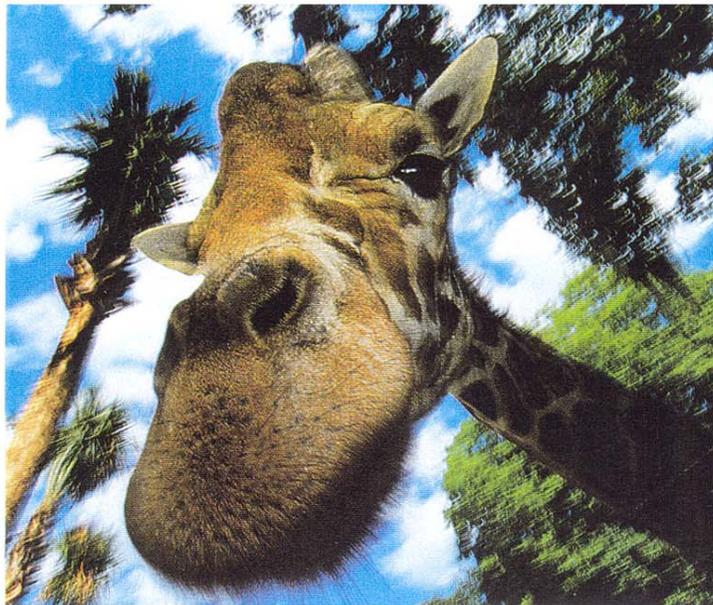
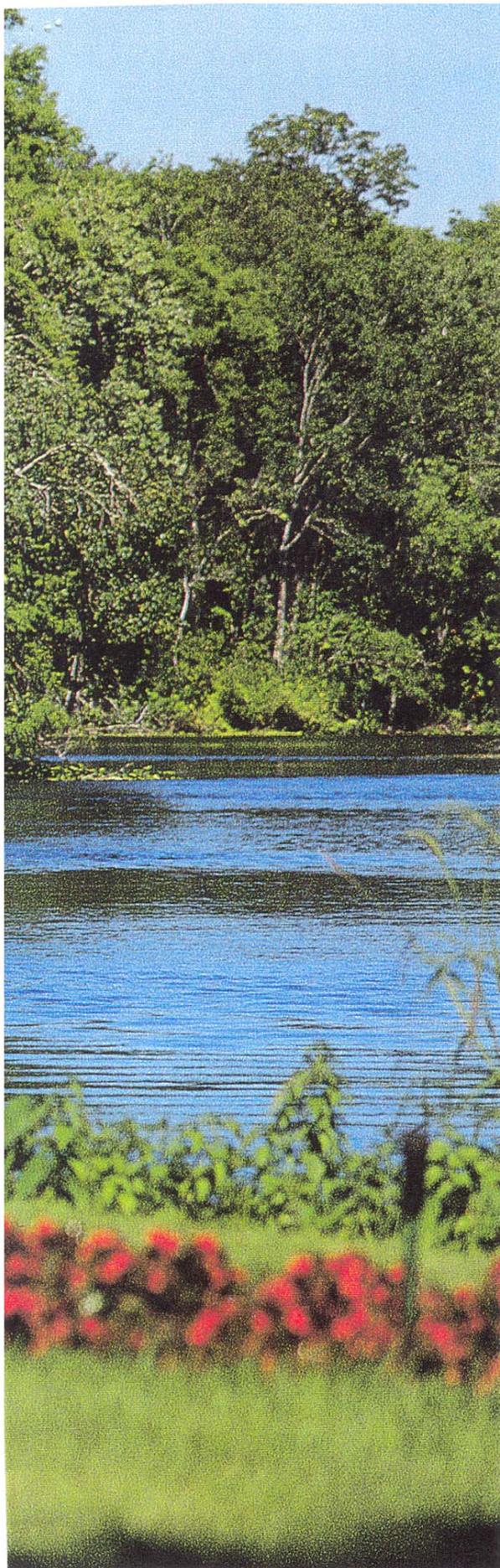
audience's view, the mermaids must navigate the craggy rock cavern as it narrows to just five feet.

"The first time, I was a little nervous," admits 27-year-old Viki Monsegur, a Weeki Wachee mermaid for the past nine years. "But I got over it pretty quickly, and now it's fun."

The graceful athleticism of the mermaids is apparent as they perform choreographed moves suspended above the spring in costumes that feature a Lycra spandex monofin "tail," taking intermittent breaths of air from a carefully arranged series of air hoses. The highlight of the show is



A Weeki Wachee mermaid fuels up for her next performance with a quick stop at the snack bar.



**A giraffe gawks from not-so-wild Silver Springs.**

the traditional deep dive by a single mermaid, who descends out of audience view more than 100 feet into the spring. It's hokey, yes, but the crowd always loves it.

According to Weeki Wachee archivists, the current underwater breath-hold record of six minutes, 48 seconds is held by Marti Worsham, who graced the mermaid stage in the 1980s. Worsham reportedly achieved this feat after a descent to 117 feet while breathing compressed air. Signaling a safety diver to take the air hose, Worsham then made a leisurely ascent while holding her breath.

"She did it for the television show *That's Incredible!*" says Monsegur. "Marti always had really good breath control."

The mermaid attraction was popularized by ex-navy frogman Newton Perry, who purchased the spring, built the first underwater theater, and in October 1947 presented the first live mermaid show to the public.

The constant, year-round 72-degree water made the Weeki Wachee River a popular swimming and picnic area in the early 1900s. However, a half century later, it was Perry's shows that drew record crowds. This year, to mark the 50th anniversary of the show, a museum has been created to house props and memorabilia.

"The women spent months reviewing reel-to-reel footage for show ideas and the creation of the black-and-white video that now runs continually in the museum," says Karen Hall, a Weeki Wachee representative. "We have everything from mermaid tails to bathing suits on display, chronicling the history of this landmark attraction."

Part of the Weeki Wachee draw is the added bonus of seeing the endangered manatee. The spring is home to a family of 12 manatees that return each winter and occasionally make impromptu appearances during the mermaid show.

"Every now and then we'll see one or two manatees swimming around while we're performing, but generally they wait until the park closes before they visit," says 25-year-old Deena DiVicarro, a seven-year veteran. "We're always glad to see them. After all, it is their home." 