

High Adventure

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At the Florida National High Adventure Sea Base dock, a troop of scouts spent a portion of their Tuesday afternoon in scuba training. Across the way on the sea base grounds, scouts from Troop 889 out of Woodlands, Texas, suited up for some dive training at the pool.

Since its inception, scouting has been all about exploring and appreciating the wilderness. At the Florida Sea Base, opportunities are offered year-round for scouts — boys and girls from 13 to 18 —to explore a different world.

“About 80 percent of our scouts have never been here at the Sea Base before,” said Mike Johnson, executive director. “Around 50 to 70 percent have never been in the ocean, because they’re from all across the county. They’ll see and do things that they wouldn’t have experienced otherwise.”

The Florida Sea Base began in the late 1970s as the Florida Gateway to High Adventure, when Sam Wampler began offering sailing and diving programs from the Miami/Fort Lauderdale area to the Keys and Bahamas. With a rented warehouse to hold provisions and equipment, he operated out of his station wagon to pick up scouts as they arrived. From there, he’d suit them up and board them on a sailboat. At the end of their adventure, Sam would greet them at the dock, issue their patches and collect their gear.

With the program growing, he sought a permanent location and found one in the old Toll Gate Inn near MM 73, bayside, in Lower Matecumbe. With a grant from the Fleischmann Foundation, the property was purchased. In the first summer of the Sea Base, Executive Director Mike Johnson said close to 800 scouts were served in 1980. Today, that number has grown to 15,000.





“Sam would be excited and happy that more scouts and people are enjoying the Sea Base,” he said. “He’d also be pretty jealous. From 1988-92, we were beginning to hit a point where we were getting capital infusion and equipment. He’d be excited about the quality of equipment and facilities we have here today.”

The Sea Base operates 20 adventures from six locations, with three in the Florida Keys and the rest in Marsh Harbour, Bahamas, St. Thomas and St. Croix. Adventures like coral reef sailing, scuba, sea exploring and STEM Eco Adventure are administered out of the Lower Matecumbe Key facility. Various programming and adventuring are also offered at the Brinton Environmental Center at MM 23.8, including a new STEM program that launched last year.

“It’s a fun, new adventure where scouts go out and tag sharks, learn about coral and coral reef restoration, check seagrass beds and provide all this information back to NOAA, Mote Marine and University of Miami,” Johnson said.

Scouts in the Bahamas get to visit small villages, while those heading to St. Thomas get to board a 40-foot vessel in the crystal blue water of the Caribbean to snorkel the reef and collect data to help save endangered coral reefs and sea turtles. In St Croix, participants set sail, snorkel, boat and kayak and learn about ecosystems and underwater species.

In the Bahamas, U.S. Virgin Islands and St. Croix, Johnson says they don’t own anything other than some equipment.

“We just lease a dock and a marina,” he said. “The neat part about the Sea Base that I share is that the business model is don’t buy it or build if you can beg it, borrow it or lease it.”

Johnson, who took a summer job at the Sea Base in 1988, said it’s amazing to see the growth, success and the real value of watching scouts come through the facility and have a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

“Some have never been on a sailboat or never been on the ocean,” he said. “They’re learning to scuba, they’re out exploring and that’s incredible to watch and be part of.”

More information about the Florida Sea Base is at www.bsaseabase.org.