



Tony Piazza, Saginaw Underwater Explorers vice president, explores the waters surrounding Jamaica in February. From May until October, Piazza joins local scuba divers and other members of the group to dive in Michigan waterways. (Courtesy Photo)

Adventurers explore Michigan beneath the surface

By JENNIFER HOEWE
The Township Times

Armed with an assortment of wire brushes, Mike Fabish spent May 17 at the bottom of Little Traverse Bay scrubbing a white-marble crucifix.

The president of the Saginaw Underwater Explorers, along with five other group members, trekked to Petoskey, Mich. to remove algae from the "divers' memorial." As one of the group's season-opening events, the trip serves as a reminder of why the Saginaw Underwater Explorers was founded, Fabish, a Thomas Township resident, said.

"Our function is to provide safe diving and camaraderie for our members," he said. "One of the most challenging parts is finding someone to dive with. We provide that."

Nearly 50 years ago, a group of local residents collaborated with the YMCA of Saginaw to teach scuba diving basics. The Saginaw Underwater Explorers eventually became an independent entity, eliminating the element of preliminarily education, Fabish said.

The group now keeps divers in constant contact through monthly meetings and organized dives.

While divers of all experience levels are welcome, certification is necessary prior to membership, said Tony Piazza, the organization's vice president and Saginaw Township resident.

"This gives people the opportunity to meet with other area divers," Piazza said. "They can expand their diving opportunities throughout the season."

Running from May until October, diving season in Michigan permits exploration in the state's abundant waters. More than 24 local divers team up to navigate and explore the copious animals and shipwrecks hiding beneath the surface, Piazza said.

The fresh water diving experience outpaces its salt water opponent by better preserving underwater artifacts, he added. Wooden vessels found in the Great Lakes do not deteriorate like they would in salt-ridden areas. That noted, Piazza said members of the Saginaw Underwater Explorers take particular care to not disturb the wreckage during their dives.

"We're here to promote safe diving and the protection of the artifacts and natural resources in the lakes of Michigan," Piazza said.

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Periodic dives at Halthco Park in Saginaw County and assorted trips across the state keep members active during in-season months. An annual underwater pumpkin carving event wraps up the season in October, which pits members against each other in competition. They meet at Krystal Lake Campground in Vassar, Mich. to have their finished product judged by campers, Piazza said.

During Michigan's off-season, members often travel south for

more diving adventures. North Carolina and Florida are common destinations for these salt water excursions, Piazza said.

People are beginning to take greater interest in both local and distant waters, Piazza added. The 10-year member has seen membership rise and fall over the years, but most recently a notable increase has taken affect.

"We want to give scuba recognition and exposure to the public," he said. "We want to get people in-

involved."

Benefits of the \$25 yearly membership fee include access to an air compressor and certified gear inspections at a discounted rate, Piazza said. Certified divers are invited to attend one of the group's dives free of charge before officially joining, while inexperienced individuals can try on gear and participate in pool dives in February and March, he added.

For more information, visit www.saginawunderwaterexplorers.org.