

Illinois' Pearl Lake is an excellent scuba spot for divers of all levels

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By Brian E. Clark, Special to the Journal Sentinel

In an earlier life, Pearl Lake in South Beloit, Ill., was a sand and gravel pit that supplied construction and road projects around the region for decades starting in the early 1900s.

But 50 years ago, mining ended and the pit filled with water. The Witte family took it over, began the long process of reclaiming the surrounding land and turned it into a recreation spot now popular with swimmers and campers.

It's also a hot spot for the scuba set, with scores of student divers using the lake on a typical weekend for check-out and certification courses, as well as fun dives. I've been diving there several times this summer with two of my kids for their scuba classes with Bob Dankert, who teaches with [AquaMunkee Scuba](#) out of Cross Plains.

Dankert, who has dived in waters from the Great Lakes to the Bahamas to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, said Pearl Lake is an excellent place to dive in the later summer and early fall because it has better visibility than other inland lakes in the region at this time of year.



Janet Defnet observes bluegills from the front windshield of a sunken school bus at bottom of Pearl Lake in South Beloit, IL Courtesy Pearl Lake/Greg Kent



Diver Janet Defnet exits an old "Woodie" station wagon at the bottom of Pearl Lake in South, Beloit, IL Courtesy Pearl Lake/Greg Kent

Moreover, the owner of the lake has placed "attractions" underwater, including a school bus, small submarine, a nude "Lady of the Lake" statue and a 10-seater airplane. There are also metal platforms at various depths, which are helpful for teaching. The Lady of the Lake statue was placed there by Midwest Diving Specialists of Normal, Ill.

"They've got a good setup there, too," said Dankert, who has been teaching for AquaMunkee for two years. "The facilities are nice with benches specifically designed for divers, adequate toilet facilities, and the security is good so you don't have to worry about your gear being stolen.

"They really do a good job of accommodating divers, so that makes the whole experience better. It costs \$20 per person to dive there, but it's worth it. Pearl Lake is one of my favorite places to take students. I think it's important to start divers with a good experience right up front, and this place does that."

Mike Witte, whose father was an excavator at the pit, credits diving activities coordinator Greg Kent of Muskego for much of the success of the scuba program. Witte said as many as 200 divers use the lake on a normal weekend through the summer and into the fall.

"Diving is what it is here because of Greg," said Witte, who runs Pearl Lake with his wife, Sheryl.

"We opened back in 1963, about eight years or so after the sand and gravel pit shut down," he said. "It took a lot of work to make things look nice again after the pit closed."

Witte said the deepest spot in the lake is 85 feet and is where an underwater dredge operated for the last five or six years the pit was being worked. He said the lake was opened to scuba divers a few years after it was opened to swimming and fishing.

"We began putting in things like the bus and the sub in the 1960s with help from local divers," he said. "Back then, we'd just put the stuff out on the ice and let it sink when the ice melted. Now we're more refined. We really clean things up and then lower them down to the bottom of the lake using flotation bags so we can keep them upright and they'll end up how we want them."

Witte, himself a veteran diver, said while he's fond of the attractions, his favorite place to dive in the lake is on the west side where there is a lot of tile and vegetation.

"I like to look at the fish," he said. "The bass just hang out there in the tiles. There are lots of fish, but they are hard to catch. My dad was a die-hard fisherman, and he loved to fish out there."



Defnet poses with "Wally Gator" in Pearl Lake. Courtesy Pearl Lake/Greg Kent

Witte said the heyday for diving in the lake was in the '70s when many baby boomers took up the sport and used Pearl Lake for sport diving. "Back then we got bigger crowds," he said. "Now it seems like people who take up scuba do their training here and then take vacations to places like the Caribbean to dive," he said. "It's also become more of a family sport because of changes in equipment.

"Diving used to be something that pretty much just guys did. Now you see women and kids diving, too, which is a great thing. It's a sport you can do your whole life long. Greg Kent and I are both in our late 60s and we still dive and enjoy getting out there under the water a lot."

Getting there:

Pearl Lake, 1220 Dearborn Ave., South Beloit, is 80 miles southwest of Milwaukee via I-43.

More information:

For more on scuba instruction from AquaMunkee, call (608) 513-3693 or see aquamunkee.com/scuba.

Contact Pearl Lake at (815) 389-1479 or see pearllake.com. Non-divers can accompany diving friends, but must pay a \$10 fee. The resort has a large sand beach. Camping is also available for tents and RVs.

Brian E. Clark is a Madison writer and photographer.