Lauderdale-by-the-Sea's BugFest appeals to first-time lobster hunters

Boaters and divers participate in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea's Great Florida Bug Hunt, a lobster hunting competition that is part of BugFest-by-the-Sea. BugFest runs July 24-29 and will feature seminars, diving workshops and live entertainment. (Mark Randall / Sun Sentinel)

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SouthFlorida.com

JUNE 18, 2018, 3:45 PM

L obster miniseason can be chaotic on the water, especially for first-timers.

To combat that chaos, Lauderdale-by-the-Sea will host seminars and diving workshops during the annual BugFest-by-the-Sea event July 24-29 that can help inexperienced hunters feel more comfortable in the water. It takes place at the Plunge Hotel, 4660 El Mar Drive.

Miniseason, taking place July 25-26, is the only time it's legal to catch and harvest spiny lobsters before regular season opens (this year on Aug. 6). It gives amateur lobster hunters first dibs on spiny lobsters before commercial fishermen can put their traps in the water.

More than 1,000 people participate typically participate in BugFest.. Lauderdale-by-the-Sea's beaches are the only ones that allow diving right from the beach.

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Lobster population appears in 'good shape' ahead of miniseason

Because most lobster hunters go to the Keys for miniseason, Lauderdale-by-the-Sea is less crowded, giving first-time hunters a better chance at landing a catch. Divers can also catch up to 12 lobsters per day in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, compared to the Key's daily limit of six per person.

"We mark ourselves as Florida's beach-diving capital," said Steve D'Oliveira, the city's public information officer. "Even though there are a lot of divers here, it's not as crowded as the Keys. And not many divers go off the beach, so you might get pretty lucky."

The festival is built around the Great Florida Bug Hunt July 25-26, which had more than 100 participants in 2017. In the contest, fishermen vie to capture the biggest lobsters in several categories by boat or off the beach anywhere in Broward, Miami-Dade or Palm Beach counties. Registration costs $20.

At 6 p.m. Tuesday, June 24, Jim "Chiefy" Mathie, a retired firefighter and seasoned lobster hunter, will host a one-hour seminar on proper techniques and local tricks to catching lobsters. Mathie will also give away copies of his book "Catching the BUG: The Comprehensive Guide To Catching the Spiny Lobster."

BugFest-by-the-Sea draws more than 1,000 people to participate in the week-long event based around lobster miniseason. (Sun Sentinel)

A miniseason kickoff party will follow the seminar at 7 p.m., when guests can enjoy a free beer and listen to live music from Scuba Cowboy.

Winners of the Great Florida Bug Hunt will be announced from 6 to 9 p.m. Thursday, July 26. More than $20,000 in cash, dive gear, trips and other prizes will be awarded to winners of the competition and a raffle.

John Chatterton will host a wreck-diving workshop on Saturday, July 28 that will be followed by two wreck dives on Sunday, July 29.

The festival will wrap up with a benefit concert at 6:30 p.m. Saturday, July 28 in Anglin's Square, 12 Commercial Blvd. Proceeds will upport Diveheart, a nonprofit that helps people with disabilities learn how to scuba dive. "Last year, we raised over $25,000," D'Oliveira said. "It's really special,"

For more information, go to LBTSEvents.com, or email Steve D'Oliveira at steved@lbts-fl.gov.

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