

Jules Lodge offers a unique kind of vacation getaway

LODGE FROM 18

front desk wanting their room key and directions to their room," said lodge manager Rick Ford. "Our name doesn't say 'Beside the Sea' or 'Near the Sea.' It usually takes a few minutes before people realize I'm not kidding, that we really are located 'Under the Sea.'

"We're obviously not a hotel for everyone."

EMERALD LAGOON

Jules, lying on the bottom of two-acre Emerald Lagoon at Key Largo Undersea Park, is a cozy little place that resembles more a space capsule than a hotel. Originally dubbed La Chalupa, Jules Undersea Lodge was once an underwater research laboratory off the coast of Puerto Rico before it was moved to Key Largo and converted into a hotel more than a decade ago.

Guests expecting a diving experience equivalent to that on picturesque Keys coral reefs might be disappointed. Jules isn't situated in pristine waters off the coast, but in a small, mangrove-encased lagoon where visibility is poor and schools of colorful fish are limited.

The appeal of the lodge is the novelty of spending the night underwater. Although there are several underwater research laboratories throughout the world, Jules is the only underwater hotel around. Its one-of-a-kind stature doesn't come without a price: Jules' two bedrooms each rent out for between \$175 to \$1,000 a night, depending on the number of people and the package selected.

Although pricey, Jules offers more than its communal bathroom, boat-size kitchen and sitting area decorated in mermaid motif. There's a telephone and stereo system, as well as several televisions and VCRs available for guests to watch house videos, including *Jaws* and *The Deep*.

DINING IN

Guests strictly dine in during their stays. A member of Jules' staff dives down at breakfast and dinner to prepare gourmet meals, including steak and lobster feasts. If fresh, hot pizza sounds more appealing, there's free delivery thanks to water-resistant plastic suitcases also used to transport luggage and just about anything else.

Compressed air piped down through air hoses fills the lodge, which allows guests to stay for days and prevents the water from rising and flooding the rooms.

A four-by-six-foot "moon pool" entrance in the floor of the building makes entering the hotel much like surfacing through a Jacuzzi-size hole.

Upon surfacing, divers find themselves in the wet room, the center of three compartments that comprise the tight-quartered underwater habitat. It is here that guests leave their diving equipment and towel off before entering the living areas of the lodge.

Aside from air conditioning and an unlimited supply of hot water, the best lodge accommodation is arguably the view. Guests — "aquanauts" as they're called at Jules — can gaze out three 42-inch porthole windows, where resident parrotfish and mangrove snapper occasionally gather to nibble on algae and check out their new neighbors.

CABIN FEVER

There's no such thing as cabin fever at Jules. Guests can come and go as they please, taking underwater strolls around the lagoon with either scuba gear or long "hookah" air tubes that hang from the surface. (For those who aren't scuba-certified, a three-hour basic diving class is offered on site.)

The sights are few, however, with the exception of passing fish and some archaeological artifacts sprinkled on the lagoon bottom. Divers are not permitted to enter the adjacent marina, where boats motor to and from Largo Sound.

Although the average lodge stay is two nights, a few guests have made themselves right at home. Rick Presley, 35, a Miami aquanaut, spent 69 days and 19 minutes in Jules' Lodge in 1992 to set a world record for living under the sea. Presley didn't make any decompression stops — breaks divers take on their way back up to prevent dangerous affects of nitrogen. Ford said there are no decompression problems from 21 feet, which is considered a relatively shallow dive.

About 8,000 overnight guests have swam through Jules without incident since its opening, but there have been a few problems.

In 1995, two Dade County schoolteachers staying overnight at Jules as part of a strenuous five-day diving program were struck with decompression sickness — "the bends" — after spending too much time underwater. The women, who did not make any decompression stops, recovered after being treated at a hospital.

For reservations or more information about Jules Undersea Lodge, 51 Shoreland Dr., call 305-451-2353.

The best feature of this lodge is arguably the view.