Cruise ships in Key West Harbor have been a point of contention between city officials and residents for some time. But love them or hate them, the huge vessels are providing a crucial service for this and every other port in the nation—serving as the country’s only training ground for underwater port security.

Bob Smith is director of the diving program at Florida Keys Community College. His students recently hit the water to inspect the hull of a Norwegian cruise liner. They and their 17 classmates were finishing up the first week of the two-week course.

“When they’re done here,” said Smith, “they can do this in any port and on any vessel. The advantage of Key West is that we have big ships, but we don’t have 150 big ships running around, making it too dangerous to put divers in the water.

“So we can train divers here to dive in cold dark water by putting them in a dry suit and blacking out their masks. But here, they can walk before the run by seeing what they’re doing the first time out.”

Students are all certified in one way or another in public safety before they start the course. Most, says Smith, are law enforcement officers or firefighters.

“We divide our class of usually 24 students into four six-person teams,” said Smith. “One team runs a side-scan sonar to identify possible hazardous objects in the harbor and channel.”

The scan creates a three-dimensional map of the bottom that give a second team a clear picture of what is out there. That second team, says Smith, dives in search of potentially dangerous objects identified from the maps.

The third team uses a special remotely-operated vehicle to inspect sonar to locate hazards.

Using side scan sonar to locate hazards

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Universal Diver Training is a new dive training agency aimed at comprehensive training of divers to ensure lifelong scuba diving activity through “Excellence in Education.”

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Universal Diver Training impresses upon the diver the responsibility of knowing and maintaining their life support equipment, in addition to being properly prepared and trained to function in the alien underwater environment.

A listing of recreational, specialty and advanced specialty certifications are too extensive to list, but can be accessed by visiting the agency’s website. There are also non-diving certifications and leadership certifications and programs available, along with a range of technical diving instruction for exploring beyond the 130 foot sport diver limit.

For more information call Bob Sheridan at Universal Diver Training, Inc. at (954) 974-5709 or visit the website: www.UDTintl.com.
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operated vehicle to do frequent searches of piers, he explained.

The fourth team takes on the cruise ship. According to Smith, they spend hours topside, working with the ship’s crew to shut down all the systems that can be deadly to a diver: rudders, thrusters, even the cathodic devices that run electric currents through the hull to control algae growth.

“We teach our guys to supervise that process,” Smith said. “Then we dive under the ship and look for hazardous devices.”

Smith says that the security the students learn is preventative.

“It’s unlikely terrorists would set a bomb off at the dock,” he said. “They would more likely want to put it off in the harbor, sink the ship there and close the harbor. However, if they’re going to plant an explosive device, the dock is the best place. The idea is to get there after they place it, assuming the rest of the world can’t prevent that from happening.”

Port security is all the more vital since the terrorism attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. That’s why officials at the college are especially proud to offer this cutting-edge course.

Smith says the community and cruise lines benefit from the training, even as it is happening.

“In the context of this training,” he said, “we are actually doing real hull inspections, a courtesy inspection.”

This is the third time the state has funded the class.

“We have four more scheduled under approved funding, and we’ve just requested funding for five more.”

He added that the Florida Department of Law Enforcement is footing the bill for the trainees’ tuition and housing.

Interested students need to be advanced scuba divers, “preferably certified public safety folks,” said Smith. “They need to come with some experience in dry suits, and some experience with underwater communications—full face masks.”


For more information or to register, contact Bob Jason, director of the UW Port Security courses at (305) 296-9081 or e-mail: rsjason@aol.com.

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