USA

HOME

The USA is a big country with lots of coast. Hence it has lots of good dive spots. Here I will stick to the best three overall areas: California, Florida Keys and Hawaii.   
Apart from that, cave divers can find heaven in North-central Florida, you can snorkel or dive with manatees in Crystal River, Florida and there is some good liveaboard diving on the Flower Garden Banks of Texas.

CALIFORNIA

California, or the Golden State, is the most populous state of the USA. It is located in the West, bordered by the Pacific Ocean. California has a long coast but most of the diving is done in SoCal, the southern part of the state.

You can dive the whole year round but most divers like fall and winter most. Sea temperatures at depth (18m/60ft) stay around the same amount of degrees, 11C/52F. Only at the surface they change more, from 15C/60F to 22C/72F. It is recommended to wear at least a 7mm full wetsuit or dry suit, a hood, gloves and booties. Dives are done from shore or from boats.  
Visibility can change lots. A normal day has a vis of 5m/16ft. It can be worse (3m/10ft) or lots better (15m/50ft). Check the tides table. High tide brings better visibility. Around the islands, the vis can be even better.

California diving is world-famous for its kelp forests. Kelp is a brown macro-algae that can grow up to 60cm/2ft a day. They form a habitat for many marine mammals and fish, like Seals, Sea Lions, Sea Otters, Horn Sharks, Rock Fish, Garibladi and Grey Whales. Wear a divers knife while diving the kelp. You can easily get stuck.

There are 4 main diving areas in SoCal. Around San Diego, you can dive La Jolla Cove Eco Reserve or La Jolla Point. You cruise through the kelp forest trying to find sea lions or leopard sharks. People that like wrecks more, can go to Wreck Alley. Different ships, some sunk intentionally, a fighter aircraft, a NOSC tower and a bridge form artificial reefs. Some of these wrecks are at 40m/130ft depth, so you need to have your Deep Spec or be a tech diver.

Catalina Island is part of the southern Channel Islands. It lies 35km/22mi to the south-southwest of LA. A roundtrip with the ferry from LA to Avalon, the islands biggest city, takes around an hour.  
Catalina has the Avalon Underwater Dive Park, the first non-profit underwater park in the US. In the waters surrounding the island, you will see flying fish, the orange Garibaldi, Leopard sharks, Giant Seabass, Seals and Sea Lions. Maybe you can spot a Great White too!

The Northern Channel Islands, Santa Barbara, San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Anacapa and Santa Cruz are a National Park. Together, they form a National Marine Sanctuary. The “Look but don’t touch” rule is for certain in place. You reach the separate islands by boat leaving from Ventura or Oxnard. The islands are surrounded by kelp forests and sea lion rookeries. More than 150 boats sunk around the islands but only 25 are discovered and some are diveable. There is also a guardian plane wreck near Santa Cruz.  
Migrating whales pass through the islands channels. Grey Whales (winter), Humpback Whales (summer), and the largest of them all, the Blue Whales (summer) can be seen.

As last we have Monterey Bay, south of San Francisco and San Jose. Just like the other SoCal diving places, Monterey Bay has its kelp forests. Sea otters, harbour seals and elephant seals are inhabitants of the bay. In migrating season, Humpbacks and Grey Whales pass by, sometimes followed by Orcas preying on the Grey Whale calves.

FLORIDA KEYS

The Florida Keys are a coral island archipelago in the south of Florida. Starting at the end of the Peninsula, 24km/15mi under Miami, they go south-southwest until the last -uninhabited- Keys, the Dry Tortugas. There are 1700 islands on the Keys, stretching over 195km/120mi, but only few are populated. 43 of the Keys are connected to each other through US Highway 1, the Overseas Highway.   
The islands lie along the Florida Strait, dividing the Atlantic Ocean from the Gulf of Mexico. Just offshore you can find the Florida Reef, the third biggest barrier reef in the world. The waters surrounding the Keys are part of a protected area known as the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Diving on the Keys is day diving. You go with a boat or you go from shore. The average visibility is good, unless a hurricane just passed. The Florida Keys are in hurricane territory. From June to October, diving can be cancelled because of these storms passing by. Apart from avoiding the hurricanes, you can dive the whole year round. Water temperatures ranges from 21C/ in January to 31C/87F in July and August.

A famous, shallow, dive is The Christ Of The Abyss, a 2.5m/8.5ft statue of Christ near Dry Docks, Key Largo. It is one of three made by the Italian sculptor Guido Galletti. It is only in 8m/25ft of water. Divers and snorkelers love to go (free)diving around the statue and taking pictures.

The Keys have a good amount of wrecks. The largest one, the 155m/510ft landing ship USS Spiegel Grove, was sunk in 2002. Hurricane Dennis did the diving community a big favour and put the ship upright. Now she sits as a massive artificial reef giving home to barracudas, goliath groupers and a big school of gobies. You can visit the Spiegel Grove from Key Largo, Tavernier or Islamorada.  
Other famous wrecks are the USCGC Duane and the USCGC Bibb, two coast guard cutters you can dive from Key Largo, Islamorada and Tavernier.

Popular reefs are the Molasses Reef and the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. They are located in front of Key Largo. While diving the reefs, you’ll encounter barracudas, French grunts, blue tangs, goliath groupers and lots of other fish.

HAWAII

Hawaii is the 50th state of the USA. The Aloha State lies in the Pacific Ocean and is the only one not part of the North-American continent. No, Hawaii is in fact the northernmost group of the Polynesian islands in Oceania.  
There are 137 volcanic islands in the Hawaii archipelago but most people only visit one of the 8 main islands: Niʻihau, Kauaʻi, Oʻahu (with Honolulu), Molokaʻi, Lānaʻi, Kahoʻolawe, Maui, and the Big Island.

Most of the people go to one island and go day diving. There are also some liveaboards trying to give best of all as Hawaii is 2400km/1500mi long. Most of them leave from Big Island.  
Hawaii has a tropical climate. That means that you can dive the islands the whole year through, although there is rainy (November till March) and sunny season. Water temperatures don’t change that much, going from 23C/74F in winter till 27C/80F in September. Visibility is usually great with sometimes, depending on conditions 30m/100ft plus.

Hawaii is volcanic. You’ll find lots of lava flow tunnels, arches, swim-throughs, canyons and caves. Because Hawaii is so remote, you will encounter lots of endemic fish. Word goes that 50% of its fish population is only found around the islands.

One of the most interesting dives is the Manta Ray Night Dive in Kailua-Kona, Big Island. Lights are built onto the ocean floor attracting lots of plankton and lots of mantas. Prepare to duck away as the mantas will come really close!  
Other popular dive sites on Big Island are Turtle Pinnacle, where green sea turtles get cleaned, or KPC where you maybe can see Humpback Whales in the winter months. There are more than 50 dive sites around the island and some sites are given different names. Whatever the name, be prepared for some good diving with pelagics and reef fish!

Lana’i has great cave dives. The two most popular are Cathedral I and II. They both are big underwater caves with holes in the ceiling so the blue light can shine in. The caves are filled with fish, like Moorish idols, snappers, moray eels and turtles.  
You can stay on Lana’i but most of divers will come to the Cathedrals from Maui, 30 to 45 minutes away by boat. In winter you maybe encounter humpback whales on the way over.