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Key West Or Bust
by
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In last week's article I mentioned we would be taking a trip to the Continental United States' most Southernmost spot... Key West, FL. Neither Judy nor I had been to Key West and we weren't sure we wanted to go after several friends gave us their impression of it. However, we had it on our list of 1st time events we wanted to do together, along with parasailing, white water rafting and rappelling so we decided to make the trip, in spite of the negative info we had been given. To make the trip more interesting we invited two friends who had been there before to go with us.

Judy and I asked two friends to accompany us on our trip south. Manny and Elena are neighbors of ours who still have family living in Southern Florida and they gave us an insight of the area and took us to some of their favorite restaurants which was great. They had been to Key West previously and knew Miami as it was back in the 60's. Mix their knowledge with their pleasant personalities and great sense of humor and we had the makings of wonderful traveling companions and a fantastic vacation.

Miami's South Beach was our first stop and it was as exciting and beautiful as we had heard it would be. Garishly painted buildings brought back the images of the 40's and 50's we've all seen in movies and TV programs. We were fortunate to arrive when they were having a street festival with arts, crafts and food tents occupying most of Ocean Drive which had been closed off to vehicle traffic. We got in town just before lunch so we headed to the number one restaurant that we had been told by Manny and others was a "must experience" eatery... Joe's Stone Crab Restaurant.

We decided on lunch there because they normally have two and three hour waits during evening dinner time. We were seated immediately and ordered their specialty of Stone Crabs. Folks, if you're like me and have never eaten Stone Crabs before, you've got to go to this place. I assumed they were like King Crabs or Snow Crabs but they're breed unto themselves. We were told it would be a "pricey" selection, and it was, but it was worth it. We ordered the large order with sides of Lyonnaise Potatoes and Asparagus and in a short time a huge plate of crab claws was put before us, with four containers of their special mustard dipping sauce. Never have I had anything so delicious and unusually different.

That evening Manny took us to a Cuban restaurant so we could experience authentic Cuban cuisine as would be served in downtown Havana. Again, we were pleasantly to great atmosphere and tremendous quantity and quality of the food served. The following day we drove through beautiful Coral Gables and heard the history of how it was born; drove the streets of Little Havana and ate lunch at another popular Cuban restaurant and sampled additional Cuban specialties.

Then it was off straight South on U.S. Route 1 through Key Largo, Islamorada Key, Marathon Key, Big Pine Key and the lower keys of Dutch Key, Ohio Key, Sunshine Key, Bahia Honda Key, Summerland, Big Coppitt, Big Torch, Little Torch, Cudjoe, Sugarloaf, Saddlebunch Keys, till we reached our ultimate goal... Key West. Even though it's only 154 miles from Miami to Key West the drive took a little over three hours because of the two lane road and traffic, but viewing nature's beauty along the way made the trip seem so much shorter.

As I mentioned earlier the information we had received from various friends made me visualize Key West as a small, rural flavored island with few people and most of them falling down drunk or dressed in drag. I pictured dirt paths and dirtier streets throughout town with few modern conveniences. The reality we experienced was anything but.

We arrived after dark and drove straight to our suite of rooms at the Hyatt Windward Pointe Resort on the south-eastern end of the island, near Key West International Airport and facing the Atlantic Ocean. The next day we drove around and decided to get a good view of the interesting spots by taking the 1 ½ hour trolley tour around the island. I would recommend it to everyone who visits the Key for the first time. The driver made the trip interesting and funny and was quick to answer any questions we had... such as, "why are there so many chickens running around the island freely?"

His answer was they are descendants of fighting cocks that were set free after cock fighting was made illegal over 50 years ago. As more and more Cubans settled on Key West they introduced cock fighting as one of the local sports, on which Key West's most famous resident of years gone by, Ernest Hemingway, was purportedly a frequent gambler. Although the City Council has officially outlawed the 2,000 plus free ranging fowl there is no real official effort to collect them or corral them. The rooster has become a island hero and many locals shield them from capture.

Key West is full of museums, art galleries, specialty shops, restaurants and, of course, bars. If a person can't find a decent place to eat it's his own fault. We ate lunch and dinner in different restaurants every day and never had a bad meal. The weather made dining out under the skies delightful and we sought out those eateries which are frequented by the locals. Many of them are located on the famous/infamous Duval street which contains all the bars, restaurants and shops one could want, but many of the really neat places are scattered throughout the island.

Speaking for our group our two favorite places to chow down were the first and last place in which we ate... "Abbondanza Italian Restaurant", on Simonton Street was our first night out and "Top of the Roof" restaurant on Front Street was the place we ate our last night on the Key. Both had great food and ambiance.

For those who were disappointed with their first visit to Key West let me share my insight with you. We went with the attitude that we were going to find out as much we could about the island and its people, therefore we went off the beaten path a great deal and talked with many of the locals. They are happy, almost eager, to talk with their visitors so no one will go away with the wrong impression of their home. Many we talked with had visited the island and returned home, sold their homes, quit their jobs and returned to Key West as permanent residents. The place is laid back but its not the den of iniquity it is made out to be. At one time it could very well have been but one can see the successful effort to become more family friendly. There are approximately 26,000 residents and over 3 Million tourists invade their home every year, so they want us to come and enjoy ourselves because their livelihood depends upon us reporting good things to our friends.

One of our best experiences was our scooters we rented our second day and kept for two days. I hadn't rode any motorcycles in over 30 years so my confidence and ability were both lacking, however after a few trips around the block it wasn't so bad. What was the best fun was having our "biker babes" climb on the back and take off down the street at full tilt. (A scintillating 40 miles an hour.) I'm sure people were startled to see seniors our age tooling around town... me with my ball cap on backwards and my "babe" hanging on to my waist, but we forgot about them and just had fun. Manny and Elena stayed close all the time and sometimes took the lead. At times it would have been more convenient to have our car but then we wouldn't have had the experience of scratching another "first" off our list of things to do.

Even the night the local constabulary thought it wasn't right for me to make a running stop at a stop sign. It was late and we were on our way back to our hotel and I still wasn't comfortable stopping and starting the bike so I kinda slid through a stop sign since no other vehicles were present. Well there was one vehicle... a cop car parked on the side of the road and he was on me quicker than a frog on a lazy fly. Suddenly blue and white lights were flashing in my mirror and I pulled off as soon as I could. Manny and Elena passed by and pulled off a little ways in front of us... hangin' loose just in case it got nasty.

The young officer came up and asked me if I knew I had not fully stopped and I said I did it out of fear... the fear of not being able to get the darned thing going again. He asked for my license and took it back to his cruiser to call whomever they call, checking to see if I was a dangerous perpetrator on the run. You would think they could turn off those lights when they go back so as to not draw attention to us just sitting there... but no. All the time I was thinking, "this will be my first traffic ticket in over 35 years..." He came back and said he could see I wasn't the most accomplished biker and could understand my difficulty, therefore he would not give me a ticket... however, people's lives were more precious than my fears so I needed to be a little more careful in the future. I

assured him I would and thanked him for not giving me a ticket. As he pulled away I carefully got the scooter going again and responsibly chug-chugged our way safely back to our hotel.

We enjoyed ourselves tremendously and look forward to returning soon. We walked the streets in a relaxed manner trying to gather in the colors, the sights and the smells so we could absorb flavor of the place. People watching was our favorite sport and we did it constantly.

Ernest Hemingway is Key West's most famous former resident and his home, now a museum, was very informing and gave us an insight to his work, leisure times, and various wives. He was a lover of cats as well and there are still 46 felines at home on the grounds... some direct descendants of Hemingway's original brood. We stopped in front of Sloppy Joe's Bar on Duval street, which was his favorite bar and took advantage of their 24 hour, live feed camera on the sidewalk by making a surprise phone call to two of our friends in the Villages and waving to them on their computer screen. Great fun!

Each evening at 5:15 we made our way to Mallory Square and the deck bar of the Hilton Hotel located on the water. We ordered appetizers and drinks and sat down to wait on Key West's most famous attraction... one that is not man made or controlled. The popular and beautiful sunset that brings thousands, nay, hundreds of thousands of people to the Key just to witness it in person as only the Key can present it. What's the big deal some might ask? Well, as the sun slowly sank to the horizon... lower... lower... lower... and then.... gone.... the crowd spontaneously broke into applause knowing they had just experienced something almost religious in nature. They were clapping not for the sunset they viewed but the Producer of the show who brought it to them in such fantastic splendor.

In our travel around the Key we heard a phrase I would like to end this week's article with since it truly shares my feeling about our trip to the Key and especially the sunsets we watched. "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments in life that take our breath away."