

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

March 2, 2008



A TURN IN THE FLORIDA KEYS

By MARILYN BAUER, ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

In Florida's Keys, stay open to beauty, shopping and adventure

Start in Miami. We were two friends out for a week of sun, fun and adventure with no particular itinerary, but big plans.

Whether you are deplaning at the Miami International Airport or driving from the frigid north, every trip to the Keys should begin in Miami, preferably South Beach. It gives you a chance to admire the Art Deco architecture, dine on fine Cuban cuisine and spend a dance-until-dawn-what-was-the-name-of-that-cocktail kind of evening.

We checked into the Angler's Hotel and Resort, recently renovated under the watchful eye of preservationist architect Allan Shulman and interior designer J. Wallace Tutt III, famous for the design of the late Gianni Versace's mansion and several of Cher's homes. Built in 1935- one of the first in the area - this Mediterranean Revival complex was a favorite spot of Ernest Hemingway, arguably the Keys' most famous resident, which made it the perfect start to our trip.

The hotel has a distinctly European feel with rich woods, cream-and-beige color scheme and a menu in the lobby restaurant that makes you feel like you are in Paris, paying in euros. A peach bellini was \$16. All right then, onward.

A Marathon Begins on U.S. 1

The next morning we had breakfast at the famed News Café. This is the place for people-watching, good food, and a staff that will let you linger at a table long as you like. And you may like a long stay, because the adjacent shop sells international newspapers and magazines.

Aching to get on the road to experience nature that came without visible thong lines, we jumped into our convertible and eased on down U.S. 1.

Asphalt sidewalks soon gave way to patches of white sand surrounded by lush vegetation alive with sea birds. Funky souvenir shops - Mr. Shell, King Conch - sold life-in-the-Keys T-shirts and mondo craft-glass beads.

There's no question we'd left the city behind. If only we were out of cell phone range.

We resisted the temptation to stop at shacks devoted to key lime pie but did make a stop in Islamorada to see the 2008 HGTV Dream Home, a 3,500-square-foot, three-floor, \$2.2 million prize in a drawing that will take place this month.

Our second-night destination was the new Coral Lagoon Resort, where Nantucket meets the Keys. Our three-story cottage - light and bright in shades of periwinkle, saffron and teal - could comfortably sleep five more people. But we are staying in Marathon just long enough to visit the Dolphin Research Center and to take a boat out to Pigeon Key.

The Coral Lagoon's sister property, Tranquility (four miles south), is where you visit for beach time

and meals. Don't think for a minute that the car trip is a hassle. Once you taste chef Clinton Dell's perfectly prepared meals, you will be willing to make the trip on your hands.

The organic produce is grown especially for the restaurant, and Dell works his magic with seafood specialties such as horseradish encrusted grouper and crab-stuffed hogfish in a fruit beurre blanc sauce. Dell also serves filet mignon over a julienne of fresh spinach, beets and red peppers. The restaurant had just won a local award for its key lime pie, which takes your basic recipe adds a chocolate crumble crust and white chocolate mousse. Oh yeah!

The attractions in Marathon are all about the animals - the Turtle Hospital, Dolphin Research Center and the Crane Point Museum and Nature Center. These are great family-friendly stops that will keep adults equally entranced.

For anyone who grew up on countless episodes of "Flipper" (filmed at the center), visiting Flipper's grandchildren is a must. This fascinating research facility provides all manner of interesting dolphin education plus the opportunity to swim or paint with the residents. I spent some quality time with Rainbow, a 550-pound Atlantic bottlenose who breached, gave his signature call on demand and loved to cuddle. Did you know dolphins have belly-buttons? Or about 10 little hairs on their cute snoots, which partly qualifies them for mammal status?

Back on the road after an encounter with the Dolphin Center's gift shop (hey, it helps Flipper's grandkids), we began the incomparable drive to

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Key West. Traversing the two lane highway with water on each side and a sky reflecting the ocean, it is like navigating a through a dream.

The Casa Marina Resort & Beach Club was an extension of the dream. A grand stucco building built in 1920 by Henry Flagler's company for passengers traveling on what (for a time) would be the extension of his railroad, this historical landmark is on the south of the island on 1,100 feet of private beach.

It is elegant. You feel that if you visited the lobby or restaurant at just the right time, you might rub elbows with former guests such as Cary Grant, Rita Hayworth or Gregory Peck.

From the Casa we were able to walk to many of the fine (and fun) local restaurants, as well as the John Audubon House and gardens, Hemingway's former finca, where descendents of his six-toed cats still have the run of the place, and Harry Truman's "Little White House" winter lodging.

Party Time on Duval Street

After two days at the Casa, we moved to the end of one of the world's most famous party streets, Duval.

Ocean Key Resort and Spa is a charming yellow wind-around hotel with ecstatically appointed rooms - toucan painted armoires; lemon, lime and peach walls; and lipstick-red comforters covered in white hibiscus. (Did I mention the in-room spa tub?)

White wrought iron balconies extend over the water, allowing guests to experience the "southernmost tip" of the Lower 48 states.

If you are a party animal, Sunset Pier - with its daily sunset celebration, a tradition begun in '30s - is simply a stagger away.

Duval Street is not just a street but a state of mind. Here you can stop into Jimmy Buffett's original Margaritaville for "changes in latitudes" Shopping is great - whether you fancy designer duds, black leather with way too many zippers or conch-colored T-shirts sporting lizards, dog portraits or cocktails.

Art galleries offer the requisite dolphin painting, but you'll also find such things as folk art from Cuba, shoes from France, vintage T-shirts, and soap dishes carved from coconut shells.

And even though the cell phone signal was strong on Duval, I can't remember thinking about the office once.

IF YOU GO



MARATHON

Hotels: Coral Lagoon Resort
12411 Overseas Highway
866-643-5397
www.corallagoonresort.com

Tranquility Bay Beach House Resort
2600 Overseas Highway
305-289-0888
www.tranquilitybay.com