

# Lagniappe

*Of Hemingway, Key West and Spring Break*



Family vacations can be trying. They consistently seem to involve an unpredictable blend of the best and worst of times, and I've found that maximizing the best while minimizing the worst does not come naturally.

What with three young and highly energetic boys, my wife and I learned early that an extended holiday vacation spent entirely at home could be a trying experience. Youthful attention spans are short, and a young boy's threshold for boredom can be set alarmingly low. Sometimes a change of scenery is required.

For us, long holiday weekends were a snap. Living a few hours from the Florida panhandle's best beaches, we'd simply pile in the car and head eastward. The beach resort where we habitually stayed made it easy, providing rapid access to

recreational diversions sufficient to keep everyone more or less content and at peace. Days were spent constructing a multitude of sandcastles doomed by the incoming tide, and nights involved a lot of take-out pizza and cruising Blockbuster for movies that would pass muster with mom.

Spring break presented a greater challenge. Too long to remain homebound but too early for the local beaches, at times spring break seemed to us a sadistic punishment imposed by the public school system for crimes unspecified. So one year we decided to spend spring break away from home and on vacation.

As per protocol, my wife and I waited until the very last minute to arrive at this momentous decision. Raised in the Sunbelt, our two older boys were eager for snow, and we

considered various destinations involving ski resorts. Not much was available at that point, however, and we consequently reversed field and shifted our focus from winter sports and wood burning stoves to beaches, sun bathing and warm, salty water. Within a remarkably short time we were winging our way to Miami and driving eastward on Card Sound Road to Key Largo. Final destination: Key West.

I'd been to Key West several times before, albeit never as a father with young children in tow. My experience had been positive. If New Orleans is the most European of American cities, Key West is a yet more subtropical anomaly, culturally and geographically detached from the rest of the country. I'd liked the eclectic and eccentric native population, the fact that dogs were welcome just about anywhere, the surrounding ocean and even the innumerable chickens scratching in the dirt. Adding to its appeal, Key West and Ernest Hemingway are inextricably linked, and Hemingway, both the author and the man, long have intrigued me.

When I was ten, I happened upon *Farewell to Arms* and thrilled to the book's terse prose: "In the springtime we went to war." I found compelling the emotional restraint of its protagonist; left alone with his lover's corpse after her death by labor, Lieutenant Henry tells us: "But it wasn't any good. It was like saying goodbye to statue. After a while I went out...and walked back to the hotel in the rain." I read the book over and over.

But what of Hemingway and Key West? Anxious to leave Paris and based largely on the recommendation of his friend, John Dos Passos, he and his new wife, Pauline Pfeiffer, chose Key West as their new home. The dilapidated village that greeted them in 1928 bore only a passing resemblance to the crowded island city of today. Its population, a mélange of Cubans, Afro-Americans and white American "conchs", had diminished from 26,000 to 10,000 over the years following World War I. Its once-thriving cigar industry was

moribund, and most of its workers made their living from the sea. The Cuban influence was strong; fully half the natives referred to their home as Cayo Hueso.

In *To Have and Have Not*, Hemingway's only American-based novel, the author described the village's "...unpaved alleys, with their double rows of houses; the open-doored, lighted Cuban bolito houses, shacks whose only romance was their names, , , ...the brightly lit main street with the three drug stores, the music store, the five Jew stores, three pool rooms, two barbershops, five beer joints, three ice cream parlors, the five poor and one good restaurant...the street that led to jungle town, the big unpainted front house with lights and girls in the doorway...". He established a circle of friends amongst the locals, learned how to fish the Gulf Stream and drank in his favorite bars. In 1930 he made Key West his permanent address, and in 1931 Pauline's uncle purchased for them a white stone house on Whitehead Street.

This period of relative domestication was to be short-lived. Five years later in *Sloppy Joe's*, the Key West bar Hemingway made famous, he met and immediately began to woo a young writer, Martha Gellhorn. In 1940 she would become his next

and penultimate wife.

We flew into Miami, rented a car and began the drive south. For the first 60 miles or so the older boys clearly were excited and peppered me with questions ("Which key is this?" "What's the next key?" "When do we get to the long bridge?"), but as darkness fell their enthusiasm waned, and my soliloquies extolling the Keys' natural beauty provoked only a single question, much repeated: How much longer? Finally we arrived.

I'd heard of Casa Marina and vaguely recalled its location and appearance. First opening to the public on New Year's Eve 1920, the Casa Marina was built by a railroad tycoon, Henry Flagler, as a luxury hotel intended to suction up wealthy tourists disgorged at the terminus of his key-hopping southern line. The hotel subsequently had served as a military hospital and then a federal office building before returning to its original purpose. Downtrodden by decades of tropical storms, hurricanes and the more mundane exigencies of the passing seasons, it was renovated in 2000. From the outside the gleaming white edifice continued to resemble an

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exceptionally well-kept governmental office building.

Our suite was on the ground floor facing the ocean and blessedly featured a bedroom that locked from the inside and was thus securely separate from the communal living area, where all the boys (theoretically) would sleep on a fold-out sofa. Our balcony looked out on the hotel's small beach, a luxury on an island where over the years coastal development has served to divert many of the currents which for centuries before man's arrival had faithfully provided replenishing sand. The pool and adjacent bar were quite fine, and the restaurant served breakfast al fresco in the morning sunshine, an arrangement greatly appreciated by the parents of three young boys biologically incapable of remaining seated at mealtime.

So what does one do with young children on a family vacation in Key West, long renowned as a raunchy off-shore paradise and favored destination for gays eager to savor its sun-soaked pleasures in a libertine atmosphere free of disapproving stares? First, as with previous family campaigns involving Montana, Manhattan, San Diego and various less ambitious destinations (eg, the De Soto Caverns of Childersburg, Alabama), I first had to disabuse myself of the notion that the reality of our experience would bear anything more than a passing resemblance to the itinerary my wife and I would have pursued had the vacation been kid-free.

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