

travel

Fort Jefferson

Built for war, used as prison, now Gibraltar of the Gulf

Millions of Americans saw Fort Jefferson on television last week during the three-hour showing of "The Order of Dr. Samuel Mudd" on CBS. Few viewers realize that Fort Jefferson is now a national monument and a possible travel destination. Here is a report from two journalists who recently flew there.

By RICHARD and MARY MAGRUDER

Our tiny Conch plane hangs suspended between a sky dotted with cotton clouds and a sea green with islands. Behind us are the Marquessas, coral reefs famous among rum runners and dope smugglers. Ahead is the great six-sided fortress known as Fort Jefferson, on a tiny coral atoll in the middle of an endless sea.

Fort Jefferson was the largest of the coastal forts built from Texas to Maine during the 19th century. It was never converted to a Union prison, and its most famous inmate was Dr. Samuel Mudd.

Mudd set the broken leg of John Wilkes Booth, assassin of Abraham Lincoln, and was sentenced to life imprisonment on this island for conspiracy. He was pardoned after four years because of his part in fighting a yellow fever epidemic.

WE ARE FLYING with Nick Dunn of Air Tortugas, who makes this flight daily from the Key West airport.

"There it is, dead ahead, Fort Jefferson," Dunn said. "It's miles from nowhere, taking up all but the tiniest bit of Garden Key."

We nose down towards the little cluster of atolls that make up the Dry Tortugas. They were named by Ponce de Leon, with the appendage dry added generations later to warn seamen of the lack of natural water on the islands.

Thousands of frigate birds, sooties, terns and gulls wheel below us, like thick clots of summer bugs around a lantern. We make half a dozen circles over Garden Key, where the great six-sided fort stretches to every edge. Dunn aims for a series of markers showing a watery runway offshore, and then for the amphib ramp off to one side of the fort. We clamber out and stared at the most imposing fortress of its period that we have

seen, from New England down past the Carolinas, beyond Alabama and Mississippi to Texas.

THE FORT WAS started in 1846 and was built over 31 years. Construction was halted by the Civil War. Federal troops occupied it in 1861 to keep it out of the hands of secessionists from Florida, but it saw no combat except for a few short-fall shots between the mortars and Confederate gunboats that came too close for comfort.

Only about 500 men ever occupied Fort Jefferson when it was in use as a fort. As a prison, it housed mostly those who were regarded as incorrigible or as threats to the newly won Federation.

Our pilot leads us around a corner of the massive old building. Each wall extends for the length of two football fields and rises to 50 feet above the surrounding moat.

The guard towers on each point rise 65 feet above the sandy little coral reef. The fort is made of a hard rust-red brick, and it is a remarkable, lonely old ruin.

Its very location, almost 70 miles beyond the nearest road, assures the uniqueness of this fort as a destination for visitors, whether they come by air or sea. That placement assures that it will never become a popular waystop on anybody's tour to anywhere.

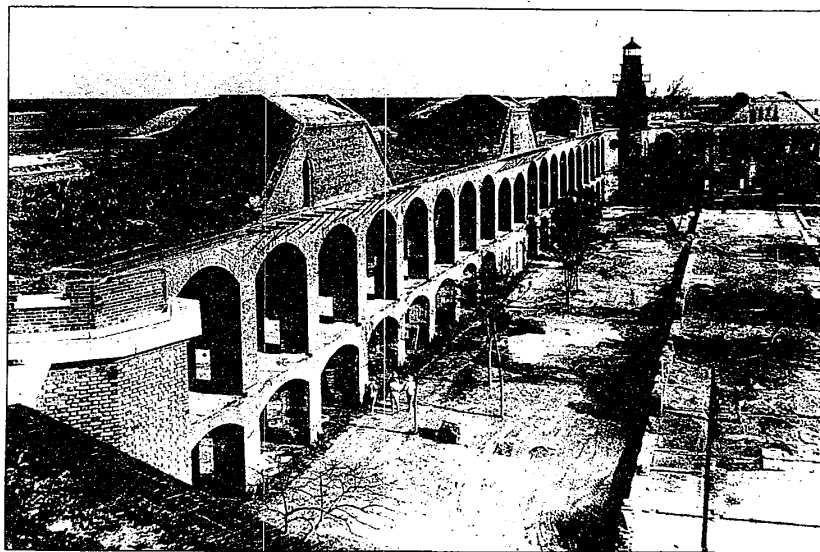
A few charter craft make it out to the fort, as do occasional private sailboats and power boats. Dunn comes every day in his little plane. Otherwise, the fort stands alone.

We wander in and out of the gun emplacements, the old kitchens, the officers' quarters (now occupied by the U.S. Park Service men who maintain the fort as a National Monument.) We visit the lonely cells of prisoners, now long gone.

A squat little outdoor structure that looks like it might have been a solitary confinement hell hole, turns out to be a bread oven. Another, strangely shaped outbuilding, with thick firebrick walls, was where lead bullets were made.

Here were the foundations of the barracks, long since torn down. Here the commandant's house, the armory and the enormous gap-roofed building where powder was stored.

We stroll for more than an hour down the long, arched corridors of



Fort Jefferson was started in 1846, built over 31 years. First a fort, federal troops occupied it in 1861. As a prison, it housed those regarded as incorrigible or a threat to the federation. Today its towers guard

deserted gun rooms never used, crumbling stairways and locked doorways.

the second level, through connecting gun rooms that were never used in battle and through the main cell block where most of the prisoners were kept.

"AND THIS WAS Dr. Mudd's cell," Dunn says. It is a sad quiet moment. "He cut that trench all the way around the walls and across the parapet to drain the condensation from the walls. He cut that trench with a spoon handle to get rid of what he once described to his wife as this most unendurable humidity."

"Imagine."

We can only imagine. The gusty air of the Gulf is welcome as we go up a crumbling stairway through a partially bricked-up door. Here we can see it all, from the black iron lighthouse tower added as a precaution decades ago, across angled roofs to the sea. Weeds and small bushes grow out of little soil-filled pickets in the brick.

The only noise, other than our occasional murmured remarks, is the cry of frigate birds wheeling insistently overhead.

We sit atop the mortars, staring out to sea. We do a final silent turn around the quadrangle, exit through the tunnel into the sun and board the plane.

Nobody says a word. We are airborne and climbing through angels-three before Dunn begins to nod his head. "It got to you too, right?" he asks.

"Yes. It gets to everybody. It even gets to me, and I come here every day. There is something sad and special about that old place."

"It's been called the Gibraltar of the Gulf for a long time now. It stands out there on that little coral reef, beautiful, proud, lonely, sad and a little obscure. But it was well worth seeing, wouldn't you agree?"

Oh yes, we agree. It's an anachronism, but old Fort Jefferson is one of the most rewarding one-day excursions we've taken anywhere in the world.

If you'd like Nick Dunn to do his number on you, he can be reached at Air Tortugas, Key West Airport, or by phoning 1-305-872-2003. You can also reach the fort by charter boat or by your own boat. Camping is allowed, but take your own water.



travel log

Iris Sanderson Jones

Ah, what a life—next joke, please

"If you die in the South and go to heaven, you'll change planes at Atlanta."

I heard that old joke several times during the 12 hours between missing one flight and catching another here at Atlanta. I wasn't the only stranded traveler. Everyone in Atlanta International Airport was swapping stories about planes missed and flights rescheduled.

We were on an Eastern Airline flight from Detroit to Atlanta on the first leg of a trip to Mexico City, when we heard the joke first.

We were 20 minutes out of Atlanta when the pilot said "Ladies and gentlemen, Atlanta is foggy and the planes are stacked up coming to land. We don't have enough fuel to circle for an hour so we are diverting to Huntsville, Alabama."

"Typical Friday morning traffic jam," somebody said. "If you die in the South and go to heaven, you must change planes in Atlanta."

That's exactly what I wanted to do, change planes in Atlanta. All I could think of as I sat bolt upright in my seat was my connecting flight to Mexico City, due to leave in one hour, and the carefully planned itinerary that was riding on it.

Two friends were waiting for us on that plane, and a car-and-driver were waiting to take us straight out of Mexico City.

IF YOU LOOK on an airline map, you will see that all the air routes in the south cross here, making Atlanta look like the center of a flying ball of string that spreads out in every direction.

We landed two hours late, and literally pressed our noses against the window to watch our Mexico City flight take off without us. Our friends were aboard. Our driver was waiting.

We retired to Eastern Airlines Ionosphere Lounge, as inabsentia guests of our flown-away friends, who brave this airport often enough to make it worthwhile spending \$40 a year for a membership.

Rescheduled for an 8 p.m. flight to Mexico, we took a taxi into Atlanta and it was rainy. When we returned, the airport was jammed with people trying to fly out. The flights could take off, but they had to come in first and half the planes in the U.S. airline industry were circling overhead.

Two businessmen sat down nearby. "I've been here since 2 p.m." one of them said.

"Hell, I've been here since 10 this morning." "I'm on standby-by for the 8:15 and the 11:15, and if I don't get on one of those, I'm going to sleep somewhere."

"I'd stay overnight, but I don't have any underwear."

PEOPLE WERE talking about the new Atlanta terminal which is supposed to open in September. Others were talking about how this happens twice a week in Atlanta.

A voice on the loud speaker announced "Flight 102 is on the ground and will depart in 30 minutes. Flight 703 has been delayed another 40 minutes."

And a voice behind us said cheerfully, "If you die in the South and go to heaven, you have to change planes in Atlanta."

We finally changed planes in Atlanta. The 8:15 flight left at 10 p.m. Our car and driver were gone from Mexico City. We took a second-class bus full of Saturday afternoon celebrating rancheros to our destination, San Miguel De Allende.

And I wrote a lot of post cards to the people who always tell me how romantic it is to be a travel writer.



Hard rust-red brick walls standing stark beneath a scorching sun rise 50 feet above the moat that surrounds the fortress/prison.

Tripping

COMES THE SPRING and with it an addition to the bookshelf.

Now available from Icarus Press in Indiana is "The Book of Festivals in the Midwest," a timely ticket to festivals and fairs, numbering more than 500, in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, and Kentucky.

Included in the comprehensive, paperbacked, 197-page listing are festivals and fairs around the Midwest, maps, dates and locations, contact people and concessions available, admittance fees, accommodations, attractions, campground and RV park guide, and a two-year calendar of events.

The book is available for \$5.95 from Icarus Press, Box 1225, South Bend, Ind. 46624; or call 1-219-291-3200.

Missing from the Michigan entries, Palmer Park, Ann Arbor, and Lafayette air fair dates, and the Ann Arbor Film Festival, for people ahead of the

game and planning the year's agenda. For that same group, however, the Stroh's International Frisbee Tournament at Atlantic Mine near Houghton is July 4-6; the National Cherry Festival in Traverse City is July 6-12; Abbott's Magic Get-Together in Colon is Aug. 13-16; the Paw Paw Grape Wine Festival in Paw Paw is Sept. 19-21; and the Plymouth Chicken Flying Contest Oct. 5.

CHICAGOING SOON? A Chicago Holidays brochure from the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau has 37 plans with which to take in the Windy City's amenities.

Pricing ranges from \$49.90, double occupancy, for two nights for the Ascot House "Hideaway Holiday," to the Ritz-Carlton's "Deluxe Interlude" at \$225 per couple, double occupancy, for two nights. The Ritz includes room for

two, bottle of champagne on arrival, pre-theater dinner for two, two tickets to the Drury Lane Theater, breakfast for two in the room or in the cafe, use of the spa and swimming pool, two-night parking, and taxes and gratuities.

For information, write the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau, Department J, 332 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60604. Include 25 cents for postage and handling.

CONNECTICUT may be your destination this year. If so, take advantage of the free "Your 1980/81 Connecticut Vacation Guide."

The 46-page book comes complete with points of interest listed by subject and community, a recreation map showing tourist attractions, also events, golf courses, campgrounds, the

ater and music festivals, and swimming facilities and lodgings.

For a copy write Travel, Department of Economic Development, 210 Washington St., Hartford, Conn. 06105, or call 1-203-568-3948. The publication will be available after May 1.

"AFRICAN FURNITURE and Household Objects" will begin a stay at the Indianapolis Museum of Art April 9. There will be 250 pieces in the exhibit: containers, baskets, pottery, bds, stools, games, cooking utensils, and other items daily used in African family life.

The art institute is at 1200 W. 38th St., Indianapolis. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, closed Mondays. From Indianapolis, the show heads to Kansas City, San Francisco, Memphis, and New York.