

Monday, September 22, 1980

# Villages say leisure better in Keys

By WILLIAM SCHEMMELE

You can rather accurately gauge how well Key West is doing by the size of the crowds which come out to applaud the sunset. When times are bullish, a huge fishing dock and parking lot

called Mallory Square will be swarming with tourists, Conchs (as Key West residents are known), jugglers, dancers and assorted characters. They come out with live iguanas on a leash. They come out with drinks in hand. They come out even when skies

are black with tropical storm clouds and there's not a chance on this earth that the sun will make its nightly splash into the sea.

Lately, the sun's big show hasn't had much of an audience. The Conchs and the characters still turn out, but the tourists have been depressingly absent — not only from Mallory Square at sunset, but from hotels, shops, Hemingway's house and the open air bars on Duval Street.

At prime time on a Saturday night, you can march into Sloppy Joe's — Hemingway's favored hangout — and take a seat right at the bar. There's no longer any wait to have your picture taken under the sign that reads "Southernmost Point in the USA."

Refugeeophobia, or fear of Cubans, has decimated the crowds which used to flock to this tight little island (four miles long, less than a mile wide) 134 miles south of Miami. Blatant racism — coverage of last spring's Freedom Flotilla apparently stirred visions of hordes of ravenous refugees rampaging through Key West's downtown shopping streets and tourist areas, illegally occupying the deluxe suites at the Pier House, stripping grocery shelves and leaving barely a conch fritter for out-numbered visitors and Conchs to survive on. Most Conchs swear they never beheld a single refugee.

"I saw some," a local writer admits. "They were airlifted out of the navy base right after they docked. Key West really took a bum rap on this one."

So bum, in fact, that this hotel owner claims he lost more than \$50,000 during the height of the April-June boattail. Many nightspots on Duval and Front streets began closing early; some died quietly in their sleep.

THE IMAGE problem created by the boattail came along just as Key West was recovering from unfavorable publicity over conflicts between old residents and new waves of American immigrants, many of them gay, who took a liking to the leisurely lifestyle and began moving in in substantial numbers a few years ago. Conchs contend those animosities were as exaggerated as the refugee situation.

"Everybody here's a non-conformist in some way or another," a barkeep muses. "Mind your own business, and don't make love in public, and nobody much cares what you do."

You may fly into Key West — and Air Florida, which has a lock on service into the uninternational International Airport, adheres reasonably close to schedules. But to really appreciate being here, you've got to make the 100-mile drive over the Florida Keys and come to that sudden, screaming halt at the top point where U.S. 1 dead-ends at the ocean. The next stop is Havana, Cuba, 90 miles away.

WHAT WILL IMPRESS you initially about Key West is its end-of-the-rainbow isolation. Sure, on the outskirts there are fast food restaurants such as Wendy's and McDonald's, but in its heart Key West is imbued with its own tailor-made mystique. Blended from 160 years' association with seamen, pirates, artists and all manner of square pegs who found their round hole here.

Substantial Victorian houses, once the domain of the 19th century sea captains, stand four-square, trimmed with gingerbread, behind banks of bougainvillea and flame trees.

Ernest Hemingway lived in the Spanish colonial at 907 Whitehead St. Between safaris to Uganda and taunting

the bulls at Pamplona, Hemingway stayed home long enough to write some of his most colossal works, including "For Whom the Bell Tolls," "A Farewell to Arms" and "Snows of Kilimanjaro."

Tough old Papa was a sucker for a moving kitten, and several score descendants of his original brood still lounge around the grounds of the house, which is now a registered national landmark open to the public.

When the words just wouldn't flow anymore, Papa would stomp out for a few drinks with the sea captains and ne'er-do-wells who made a second home of Sloppy Joe's on Duval Street. These days, somebody would have to steer Papa in the right direction, for the Sloppy Joe's which he knew is now occupied by another bar, and the original, interior and all, moved to a larger location down the street.

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON preceded Hemingway to Key West by almost a century, and many of the tropical birds he painted here in the early 1830s are displayed in a restored home a few blocks down Whitehead Street from Papa's place.

Harry Truman also enjoyed depressurizing in Key West. Grateful natives have named a major avenue for him, and a laundromat for his musical daughter, Margaret.

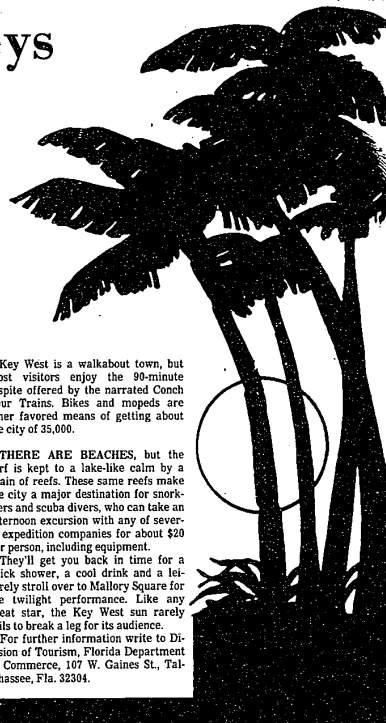
Although scarcely any of the recent boat people have rooted permanently in Key West, Cuban influence here is strong and long-standing. It can be savored in the Key West Cigar Factory and Museum, where aromatic crookies are still made by hand. It can be tasted in cafes, where the fare is black beans and rice, arroz con pollo, and coffee so strong it could walk to the table under its own power.

Key West is a walkabout town, but most visitors enjoy the 90-minute respite offered by the narrated Conch Tour Trains. Bikes and mopeds are other favored means of getting about the city of 35,000.

THERE ARE BEACHES, but the surf is kept to a lake-like calm by a chain of reefs. These same reefs make the city a major destination for snorkelers and scuba divers, who can take an afternoon excursion with any of several expedition companies for about \$20 per person, including equipment.

They'll get you back in time for a quick shower, a cool drink and a leisurely stroll over to Mallory Square for the twilight performance. Like any great star, the Key West sun rarely fails to break a leg for its audience.

For further information write to Division of Tourism, Florida Department of Commerce, 107 W. Gaines St., Tallahassee, Fla. 32304.



## A fishing story about one they gave away

KONA, Hawaii — From the back of the charter fishing boat, with four lines strung out behind, passengers stare past the wake to the bait that makes short, white slash marks on the sea. We are on a day tour organized by our cruise ship, the Oceanic Independence.

The bottom half of the big island of Hawaii is green, but the top half is under low clouds that break occasionally to make blue-white light on our wake and our lines.

Bob, bearded and permanently sunburned under his straw hat and glasses, has given us the scenario that will unfold if a fish strikes.

Each of us has been assigned a pole. If the pole hits the water with the high whine of unwinding wheel, our job is to scramble into the chair and hook the kidney harness around our waist to tie us firmly to the brass wheel. Bob's job is to bring in the other three reels. "And everybody else should please God get out of the way!"

"If a fish strikes, get in the chair and keep your pole as low as possible," he says. "The fish will go crazy running towards the boat, away from the boat, in any direction, or all of the above. You must let him run — if you try to wind when he's running, you'll break the line."

"When the line slackens, wheel it in fast. When the fish gets close, you'll pump him. Hold your pole up, but when the line slackens, drop the pole and wind like hell, then put it up again."

WE ARE ALL EAGER to follow his advice, but the hours go on and the fish don't strike. All afternoon, we hear about the good signs:

"The dolphin are jumping. That's a good sign."

"And the sun is coming out. That's a good sign."

Two hours later, the sun is shining out of a blue and white sky, and the dolphins have been performing for us on all sides.

They come leaping, friendly, out of the sea beside the boat, appearing first on the starboard side, then on the port side, then a hundred yards behind us.

The beer is getting low. There's a \$5 bet on who gets the first strike.

WE'D ALL GIVEN up when it happened. Some of us were in the cabin. Tim had gone to the john. Suddenly there was a high whine. The pole hit the ocean and everybody started shouting, "Tim, Tim, where's Tim?" "Well, dammit, somebody get into Tim's chair."

Tim came out of the head, running, leaped into the chair and began to wheel the marlin in. You could see his back muscles straining as he leaned forward, with Bob behind him, supervising and turning the chair.

The fish came out of the sea like a scene out of a Hemingway novel.

"Look at the size of him!"

"Wind, man, wind!"

"Don't wind when he's running away. I told you that already."

"When the line slackens, drop the pole and wind at the same time."

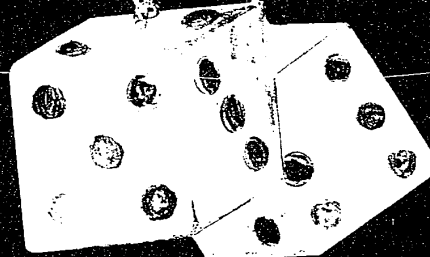
TIM DIDN'T say anything. He just gnashed his teeth and wound the best he could. Finally, despite our advice, he got the 150-pound marlin to the boat.

The captain leaped off the sundeck to gaff him; Bob pulled him in to the platform at the back of the boat, and everybody collapsed cheering. He was, after all, our fish.

We took the required picture on the dock. First Tim with his marlin and then all of us with our marlin. Nobody knew what to do with his marlin, so we gave it to the crew, who probably sold it.

Then we went back to the cruise ship and bragged about our fish. It was an exhausting day.

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