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Travel

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Gulf Islands — sun, sand and no worries

This is the second of a series of articles about the Gulf Islands of Florida.

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THERE ARE supposed to be two traffic lights on Marco Island, but I never did find the second one. The first one is across the toll-free bridge at the corner of Collier Boulevard and Bald Eagle Drive, amid a cluster of small offices and shops.

The Chamber of Commerce is there, so you can get a list of accommodations and dining places plus a map to help you get your bearings.

If you want to see the island as the Calusa Indians must have seen it centuries ago, turn left on Bald Eagle Drive and follow Highway 92 to the Goodland Bridge, where the Everglades spread away in patches of woods and water. You could get a canoe lost there in a hurry.

If you want to see Marco as the fishing village it was at the turn-of-the-century, turn just before the bridge into the village of Goodland. An early developer moved all the island's old wooden houses into Goodland when plans were first made to develop Marco Island as a tourist resort.

ISLANDERS EAT at the Goodland Fish House, a tiny thatch-roofed place on the water next to the Goodland Fish Market. They also go around the corner to the Marco Island Lodge for Sunday brunch and Sunday afternoon jazz sessions.

Most of the tourists you meet will be unaware of the jam sessions, but locals know about it so get there early for a good seat. (The only campground on the island is also in Goodland.)

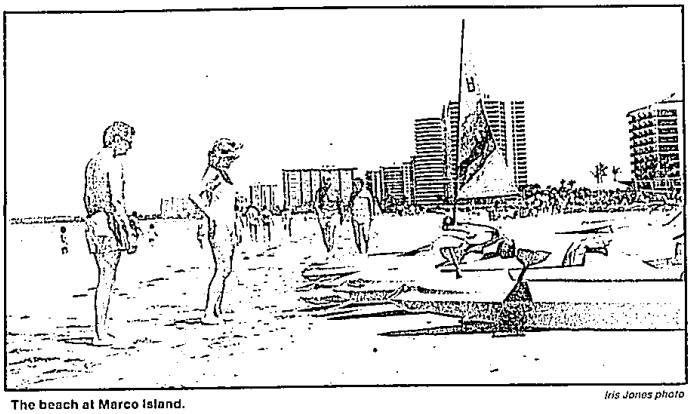
Bald Eagle Drive is quite literally the home of at least one eagle, sometimes visible high in the trees. If you turn right instead of left on Bald Eagle Drive at the traffic light, you will quickly find yourself in Old Marco, original settlement site and location now of the Port of Marco Shopping Center.

A 200-year-old Gumbo Limbo tree supported by a steel leg looks like it is walking from shop to shop across the brick courtyard.

THREE OF the better-known island restaurants are in this direction: O'Shea's Wharf Restaurant, dinner and dancing with live entertainment; the Cafe de Marco, good food in a small wooden building run by a young Philadelphia couple; and the Old Marco Inn, German food in a century-old setting.

Most people don't turn either left or right on Bald Eagle Drive when they cross the bridge to that first traffic light. They go straight ahead up Collier Boulevard to the high-rise condominiums and hotels against the far skyline. Collier is lined with shops, two-story apartment buildings and high-rises that separate the boulevard from the four-mile-long beach.

THAT BEACH is what attracts us all to the gulf islands in the first place, of course, a wide strip of golden sand that nurtures vacation life from early in the morning until long after the sun goes down.



The beach at Marco Island.

Iris Jones photo

There is a parade of people walking and jogging and shelling on the beach early in the morning in both directions. There are serious decisions to be made here. Should you take off your shoes and risk cutting your feet on the shells that glory the beach, or should you risk getting your shoes wet when you wade into the sea after that perfect shell just beyond the water's edge?

If you start out with the sea on your right, you are likely to keep your eyes turned down to the water's edge or out to sea where the sailboats triangle the emerald water. When you get to the end of the beach and turn around, you might lift your eyes to the whole spread of high rises curving around the beach in front of you.

OF ALL the decisions you must make during a hard-working day on the beach, the only one that really affects your vacation style is where you have chosen to stay among those various high- and low-rise buildings.

There are only three or four hotels on the island, with restaurants, bars and other hotel facilities. The rest of those high buildings are apartment buildings or condominiums, most of which can be rented for a night or a week.

Would you rather pay for a hotel room with easy access to food services, especially room service, or would you rather pay about the same price (sometimes less) for a two-bedroom condo with a living room, kitchen and balcony?

The beach, of course, is the attraction that draws travelers to Marco Island and the other vacation spots along the Gulf Islands.

I have the best of both worlds at this time at the Eagle's Nest Resort, a time-share condominium complex with signing privileges at the Marriott Marco Beach Resort next door. The Marriott is the biggest hotel on the island.

I HAVE finished my morning beach walk and am having breakfast now on the balcony of my seventh-floor condominium. From here I can see the red tile roofs of the pool villas and the sun lovers beginning to gather now for their mid-morning sunning ritual around the pool.

I did my stint in the pool, floating on my back counting the coconuts in the trees overhead, and now I must make more of those difficult decisions, the kind that come with the hard-working life of a vacationer.

Sailing? Wind surfing? go to the art galleries or to a restaurant in Naples? go a few miles down the Tamiami Trail to the tourist attractions of Everglade City? Maybe I should just stay here and read a book and ponder the situation until it's time to go to Quinn's Beach Bar next door and watch the sun go down.

The rising and setting of the sun are important activities on an island. I wouldn't want to miss them.

Travel in U.S.A. got its boost from interstate

America takes a back seat to no nation in providing a wealth of places to enjoy during a visit or a vacation and millions of Americans take to the roads each year to find some wonderous new place.

One of the reasons so many can enjoy vacations in the U.S. is the presence of the modern national highway system which began to be put together under President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956.

Everyone calls it the Interstate Highway System, but its official name is the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways and thereby hangs a tale.

On July 7, 1919, Eisenhower was a young lieutenant colonel who left Washington as an observer on a convoy of nearly 80 military vehicles to see whether the nation's roads were adequate for the national defense.

THE FIRST night, the convoy reached Fredrick, Md. The next night, it reached Gettysburg, Pa.; the next night, Bedford, Pa., 1654 miles from Washington. And so it went, all across the country, until it arrived in San Francisco after 62 days on the road.

" I think that every officer on the convoy had recommended in his report that efforts should be made to get our people interested in better roads," Eisenhower recalled years later.

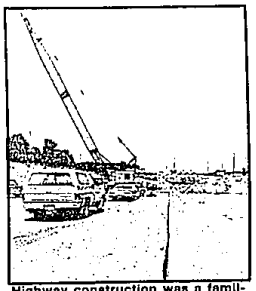
But he had a better chance than his fellow officers to do something about his recommendation. Three-and-a-half decades later Eisenhower was president of the United States and he signed legislation in 1956 creating the Highway Trust Fund to finance construction of the Interstate Highway System.

Today, after almost three more decades, the interstate system is more than 96 percent complete.

Sometimes called the greatest public-works program in history, the sytem has more than 41,000 of its authorized 42,500 miles completed. Only a handful of gaps remain on its rural portions, and construction has begun on most of them.

CONTROVERSY STILL rages over several urban projects, but, as one expert says, those have more to do with politics than transportation.

This vast network of limited access roadways, in every state but Alaska, has had a tremendous, and often unforeseen, impact on the nation.



Highway construction was a familiar sight in the '60s.

It has only 1 percent of U.S. road mileage, but carries 20 percent of vehicle mileage. It has spurred a trucking boom, but a decline in railroads. It has created new business centers at interchanges, but caused the death of businesses along older roads. It links 90 percent of cities of more than 50,000 population.

Interstates are safer than conventional roads, largely because of their special features: controlled access, a minimum of four lanes, a median strip between the two directions of traffic, no cross traffic, and acceleration and deceleration lanes.

BUT THE defense aspect remains. Pentagon planners worry about whether they can move troops and tanks "from fort to port" for rapid deployment overseas, and some interstate sections have been built with special defense needs designed into them.

The 1956 act, passed 12 years after Congress mandated the building of an interstate highway system, called for completion by 1970 at a cost of $27 billion. States pay 10 percent of the cost, the federal government providing 90 percent out of the Highway Trust Fund, built up by gasoline taxes.

Completion of the remaining 1,500 miles is estimated to cost another $22 billion, bringing the total to more than $130 billion. The system is to be completed by 1990.

"About 1990 or never," says Francis B. Francois, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. "It's possible that, instead of finishing it, some may recommend that we send up a flag, hold a parade, and declare victory.

"BACK IN 1956, everyone understood that the first priority was the completion of the interstate system, and that we would stay with it to the bitter end. But 30 years later, all of the players who made all the agreements have left office. And today's players are saying, 'What deal? What understanding?"

Many states, having built all their allotted insterstate mileage, care more about the deterioration of their roads, and about access of truckers, farmers, city dwellers, and everyone else to the system, than they do about its total completion.

In a sense, the system is a victim of its own success.

"There isn't any product that doesn't move on rubber any more," says John A. Clements, president of the Highway Users Federation. "Big corporations don't need big warehouses any more; they have mobile warehouses, trailers filled with parts made in Tulsa scheduled to arrive at a plant in Cleveland at just the right time.

"YOU HAVE such a high ownership of automobiles in this country that the interstate offers a variety of recreational activities for everyone. Someone with modest means doesn't have to sit in a ghetto and get hot; he can pile his kids into a second-hand car, get on the interstate, and go to a ballgame, or fishing, or hunting."

TO THE average American, though the biggest impact of the interstate system is simply the ability to drive vast distances at high speeds without traffic lights or cross traffic. Anyone over the age of 40 can tell tales of how long it used to take to get from, say, Chicago to Michigan vacation areas before the interstate came.

Younger Americans will never know the thrill felt by William L. Mertz, a veteran Federal Highway Administration aide (who says he is "sort of" the official historian of American highways) when he had his first encounter with a limited-access highway, the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

"I came to Pittsburgh, and all of a sudden it was like being on the Yellow Brick Road," Mertz recalls. "No traffic lights, nothing, you just kept going. It was absolutely startling to me."

The highway system allowed anyone to vacation in the U.S.A.