

Key West: Southernmost outpost has a colorful culture

By Penny Musco



Bob Krist/Florida Keys News Bureau

Busker Will Soto juggles on a tightrope at the Mallory Square sunset celebration, a daily ritual for visitors to Key West, the subtropical island at the bottom of the Florida Keys island chain.

Key West began its history as the continental United State's southernmost outpost inconspicuously, as a private purchase by an American citizen in 1822.

Two months later, Navy Lt. Matthew Perry claimed the area for the entire country, and in 1828, the Territory of Florida incorporated the sparsely populated town.

The armed forces arrived in 1823 to protect its deep-water port and the critical shipping lane from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean from pirates, then again as the Seminole

Wars heated up, and the federal government shored up its coastal defenses.

Several industries flourished in Key West through the years – shipwreck salvaging, salt production, sponge fishing, citrus farming and shrimping.

The city's proximity to Cuba gave rise to an expatriate Cuban community (Jose Marti plotted his revolution here) and cigar factories. The sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor – Key West citizens erected a monument to the victims – triggered the Spanish American War, and led to an expanded military presence, as did subsequent conflicts.

Perhaps the event in Key West's history that sparked its reputation as a top vacation spot was the Florida land boom of the 1920s, aided by Henry Flagler's railroad connecting the Keys with the mainland, finished only years earlier.

A series of hurricanes damaged the tracks, with a 1935 tempest sounding the death knell for the railway. But its route and bridges were converted to the Overseas Highway, Route 1's southern terminus, completed in 1938.

It was down this road that my husband and I traveled from the Miami airport, seeking an escape from a brutal Northeast winter.

We knew Key West had evolved into a funky, freewheeling kind of place. After all, it symbolically seceded from the Union in 1982, in reaction to the U.S.

Border Patrol's short-lived decision to check the citizenship of everyone leaving the Keys.

The resulting traffic backups and loss of tourist dollars led the city to declare independence and proclaim itself the Conch Republic, named after its distinctive architectural style. The border stops are gone, but the symbolic republic remains.

Despite Key West's wild and crazy notoriety, we hoped to find some R & R there – and we did. In fact, we found several Rs ...

REST

The six Historic Inns of Key West – including Lighthouse Court 💎💎💎, Merlin Guest House 💎💎 and Key Lime Inn 💎💎 – are charming, tranquil accommodations within walking distance of the sights, yet far enough away from busy Duval Street to ensure a

good night's sleep. Continental breakfast and drinks served poolside begin and end the day in verdant bliss.

REJUVENATE

Many visitors (and natives) flock to Mallory Square at sunset to experience an eclectic mix of performers, vendors and artists bidding goodnight to the light. But sunset is also a sight to behold at Smathers Beach and at Fort Zachary Taylor State Park, both with serene stretches of sand overlooking gorgeous turquoise water.

RECONNOITER

Calling Key West home for more than 10 years, author Ernest Hemingway found solace – and inspiration – in the tropical paradise. Tour the Hemingway Home and Museum, and don't forget to count the number of toes on the more than 40 cats that roam the grounds.

President Truman loved the area so much, he declared, "I've a notion to move the capital to Key West and just stay." Visit his Little White House and discover why he (and other presidents) used the former naval station headquarters to unwind.

These and other attractions are easily explored on foot or two wheels (the self-guided Pelican Path steers you in the right direction). If you prefer a group experience, sign up for walking, biking, seaplane, watercraft or trolley excursions.

RELAX

Mangia Mangia 💎💎 offers homemade pasta and other Italian fare in a pleasant courtyard bordered with twinkling lights. Another site for lush al fresco dining is Blue Heaven 💎💎. Popular with both locals and tourists, family-owned El Meson de Pepe serves Cuban fare in a laid-back atmosphere.

REMEMBER

Nearly 70 miles from Key West lies Dry Tortugas National Park, accessible only by boat or seaplane. Set aside a day to take in this park and its clear waters teeming with colorful coral and marine life. About 300,000 birds pass through the park annually, making it a birdwatcher's delight.

Rangers relate the history of massive Fort Jefferson, initially built to protect the lucrative shipping channel, then used as a military jail during and after the Civil War.

The story of its most famous prisoner, Dr. Samuel Mudd, convicted co-conspirator in President Lincoln's assassination, is a fascinating one, as are the present-day tales of those who set out from Cuba in rickety vessels to reach this nearby patch of U.S. soil.

And if you still haven't gotten enough peace and quiet, try camping there overnight.