

the florida digressions

Fock 2: The Duval Crawl

Florida meant more to me than just Sarasota and the esteemed Nooch, though. Key West -- Cayo Hueso, Bone Island, Mile Zero, The End Of The Road -- that tiny island, whose proud boast is that it is the Southernmost Point in the U.S. of A., was my home for the winter of '93-'94. I was a vangabond -- that is, a vagabond living in a van -- for five months, in what was probably the best winter of my life.

No place is paradise, but Key West can make a better claim to that title than most places can.



There are flowers year round, the trees are always green with lush tropical leaves and fronds, the Old Town section defines quaint, the ocean waters are always warm for boating and snorkeling and the like, the sunsets are the best anywhere, and there is the frivolity and madness of Duval Street.

I wasn't a total freeloader. I had a minimum wage job in one of the many T-shirt shops on Duval Street. My typical day involved a 7:00 a.m. wake-up at one of the several stealthy sleep spots I had scoped out. That was followed by a 7:30 workout at Pro Fitness, a cheap, local, basement gym that had been advertising a One-Year-For-\$99 special. I joined mainly for the morning shit-shower-shave aspect, but soon figured I might

as well use the equipment for a bit each morning since I was there anyway. From there, I went to work till 5:00. A description of those shifts would be just as boring as the job itself, but I will say that my co-workers, who hailed from places like Cuba, Poland, Yugoslavia, England, the Philippines, Israel and San Diego, made each day interesting, and sometimes fun.

Iwona Jurasz, from Warsaw, was the best. She once commented to me that Key West seemed so conservative. WTF? Conservative?? I asked where she had lived before moving here. "Greenwich Village" was her reply. "Oh," I said, "that's about the only acceptable answer you could have given." She was a treat. One afternoon, we both stood on the work table where I pressed the decals onto the shirts, and bellowed along with the lyrics as the store stereo blared Four Non-Blondes' *What's Up?* The store manager, a strange Londoner named Richard, could only shake his head, but the customers thought it was great.

Iwona and the rest of them were all in the same boat: trying hard to make it on low wages in an over-priced town. Each lived in a tiny but expensive apartment, some sharing with three or four roommates, and all worked at least one other job. I had checked rents when I first arrived and was horrified. Plus, every place wanted a full-year lease. Screw that! I knew that I probably wasn't staying that long. And, besides, I knew Max would house me well enough.

Once the workday was done, I would drive out beyond the large public beach to Faraldo Park, a small dirt lot with a couple dozen evergreen trees, and make camp. I'd set up my small propane grill and cook me up a couple of fat, juicy Cheeseburgers



In Paradise as I watched the sun set into the ocean. After feeding, I'd lounge in Max for a while and read. I read twenty or more of Shakespeare's 37 plays that winter, plus magazines, newspapers, and some fantasy novels. And, of course, I would scribble some blings.

Once the burgers were sufficiently digested, I'd go for my run. Many miles were logged in that beautifully mild winter night air. After years of frigid runs, having January nights in the 60's, and even 70's, was unbelievable. I'd often start and finish at the bathhouse at Higgs Beach, the other public beach, about two miles away from Faraldo. That way, I could use the outdoor shower after the run, and clean myself up for a couple of hours of sociality downtown.

It was a frugal existence, with no superfluous snacks, and carefully-rationed nighttime fun money. When I did go out during the week, it was usually just for an hour or so, for a relaxing beer at any of a dozen favorite bars. Weekends, of course, offered later nights, and took larger chunks of that ration -- sometimes larger than planned, but I rarely regretted that.

Between the lean meals, the morning workouts, the evening runs, and the forced moderation of all things party, my winter in Paradise got me in tremendous shape. Dugg and Lin even commented that I looked like I had been at Marine boot camp instead of at a place of laziness and excesses.

It was the best winter of my life, in many ways. I had one key on my keychain. Just one. Simplicity, simplicity -- Thoreau's mantra. The only reason I even had a keychain was so I wouldn't lose the key as easily. And, of course, it was a bottle opener.

As Roadrage2000 progressed indirectly but inexorably towards Sacramento, I found that some of the memories of the nights in downtown Key West were vivid, while others were, appropriately, blurred. It had been a few years, but the Duval Street experience stayed in my mind pretty well.

Duval (rhymes with crawl, as in "doing the Duval Crawl" bar-hop) is one of the truly entertaining streets in the country. Running plumb line straight across the width of the island, northwest-to-southeast, it is slightly over a mile in length. It's facetiously called "the world's longest street" because it reaches from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic.

Spring Breakers flood into town from late February through mid-April, bringing the kind of frenzied drunken inanity that only "\$8 All You Can Drink from 7-to-11" extravaganzas can provide. Everywhere you look, rented mopeds, piloted by tipsy tourists, buzz like skeeters and bleat like violated goats. This four-mile-by-one-mile island has 300 bars, according to reputable sources, but the vast majority of the fun is found on Duval. All those the high-season high jinks only serve to temporarily overshadow the inherent, subtle insanity of this bizarre street.

You start at the northwest end, on the Sunset Pier at Mallory Square. You're jumbled among a throng of people of all ages, and from widely diverse backgrounds. There are easily 2000 people here for the nightly Sunset Celebration. Amazing.



Your ears pick up a variety of languages and dialects, none of which make any sense at all. All around you on the pier, and on the plaza adjacent to it, jugglers juggle fire and knives, singers sing a eclectic selection of songs, a Gypsy tightrope-walker named Will balances and jokes and juggles, a bagpiper wails his version of "Amazing Grace", and vendors vend trinkets, jewelry, T-shirts, wind chimes, framed photos, and assorted flotsam and jetsam (sometimes literally) from small, portable tables. One vendor sells coconut postcards: a hand-painted coconut with a white painted rectangle for a mailing address and another white painted box for your message. You compose the message, provide the recipient's address, fork over twenty bucks, and they mail your nut for you.

You procure a refreshing pint of malt beverage from another small stand on wheels. The aroma of popcorn, hot dogs, and Conch fritters fills the warm, clean, seaside air, as you jockey for position to get a good view of the golden sun slipping softly into the shimmering blue waters of the Gulf. Gulls and pelicans glide by in silhouette as the silent and fiery show plays out in front of you. A three-masted schooner adds romantic fancy and artistic perspective to the scene. Moved by the utter beauty of it, you join in a hearty round of sincere applause as the final dot of brilliance winks and is gone.

One of the performers bellows out "Don't anybody leave! Here's another sunset in ten minutes!" The crowd chuckles, and most of them promptly shuffle off on their various ways. But the performer's facetious remark is not totally without truth. The savvy sunset fan lingers, though, knowing full well that the sky is not done showin' off.

The front-row people have abandoned their seawall spots, so you take a seat on the edge of the concrete pier, and dangle your sandaled feet over the water. The thin slices of cloud that have been drifting high above begin to catch the rising rays of the vanished sun and slowly become ablaze in white,

then gold, and then pink, before cooling to a blue-gray. It's a tremendous encore. Even after many, many sunsets, it's still surprising to turn to the east and see how dark the sky has become. Evening is definitely here, and Duval Street beckons.

The walk from the pier is short. It crosses the brick plaza, and an undulating stone side street that leads you downtown. Billie's Bar and Restaurant looks like a nice place, but it's just too close to Mallory; you need to keep going, you need to get to Duval. To your right, the Sponge Market and the Aquarium also seem to be most worthy of a perusal, but that will have to be for another day.

You round the corner and find yourself on the first block of Duval. The buildings all around are reasonably old – 1920's is a good estimate – with those ornamental trimmings that just aren't done anymore, and with white-railed upstairs porches. The streetlights, though new electric versions, depict the same era. Short palm trees and several varieties of red-flowered, thick-leafed trees are spaced every few yards along the sidewalk, with dozens per block. Some are at ground level, and some grow out of desk-sized brick planters. The trees give a cooling and softening feeling to the narrow street that is full of people, lights, sounds, and motion. It is vibrant and buzzing, but without hurry or fret. The soul, which had been lulled into somnolence by the sunset, jump-starts with anticipation. This is a Party Street, babe! Your thirst reflex twitches.

The sidewalks are a stage, a podium, and a pulpit, with the public feeling very free to entertain, to enlighten, and to preach. On typical nights in '94, and in various subsequent visits and stays, this is what you might have encountered on a leisurely Duval tour.

At the first corner, you almost get hit by a train pulling back into its station. Not on rails, mind you: it's a Jeep-like vehicle shaped like an old-time train engine, towing a half-dozen roller-coasterish cars filled with tourists taking a scenic and historic tour of the island. They drive slowly and they clog traffic.

You dodge this Conch Tour Train, and you hear, as if by divine cognition, passages from the Bible. You look to your right, and you see a couple, a bearded and slightly-balding man in simple clothing and sporting a bit of a paunch, and a rail-thin woman with short dark hair and a perpetual squint. They are standing on the corner of Front Street, alternating readings from the Good Book, progressing, presumably, from Genesis to Revelations. They are still in the Old Testament somewhere, you can tell, but, like everyone else, you move on without asking any questions; you don't want to get caught up in one of those "have yew accepted Jayzuz as yer save-yerr?" conversations

You turn back to the street, only to be accosted by the Belligerent Beggar, a well-tanned and fairly healthy-looking man with flowing, all white hair – even those he's only 35 or so. "Hey, buddy," he begins boldly, and without hint of supplication, "give me a quarter?"

"No, I don't have any change at all," you lie.

"Well, give me a dollar then," he retorts indignantly. You try to laugh it off as a joke, and walk onward. "Give me something," he insists to your back, "you cheap son of a bitch."

[When he said that to me, I whirled back on him and got in his face, loudly enough for the whole block to hear: "I don't owe you one damn thing! Don't you dare to insult me, YOU PATHETIC



LOSER! Why don't you get a job?? You're not crippled, you're just fucking lazy! Get a goddamn JOB!! You insult me again, and I will kick the living SHIT out of you!!!!" I never did see him again, though he had haunted that same spot for months prior to my explosion. Think he got a job? ☺]



There are plenty more panhandlers along Duval, but most ask politely, and might say “bless you, sir”, even if you decline to donate. Some simply hold or prop up a crudely-lettered, corrugated cardboard sign with something clever on it, like “Why lie? I need a beer”, or “Donate to marijuana research”, or “Will take abuse for spare change.” They get some coin just for the attempt at humor (though not from me).

Everyone wants your money on Duval Street: the trick is to give you something that you will deem worth the exchange. The Bongo Poet does. Always stationed on that first full block, he catches the crowds on their way to and from sunset every day. He’s seated on his folding stool behind three good-sized bongo drums, wearing a friendly smile and long rasta braids that would’ve made Marley proud (Bob, not Jacob), with his little black doggie snoozing beside him. He sees you coming and times his rhyme with your arrival: “Here’s a guy who’s looking cool / Yeah, he’s sharp, he ain’t no fool / Hey, just maybe I’m in luck / And he’ll be givin’ me a buck.” The bongo beat is brisk and cheerful, his smile is infectious, and you happily drop your change into his plastic bucket as you pass. Then you hear him size up the next touch: “Here’s a little baby, she’s so cute / That’s a fact, ain’t no dispute / Her mama’s givin’ me some loot / Just drop it right here, in the chute...”

Within a few more steps, his voice is drowned out by the live band at the Hog’s Breath Saloon. It’s easy-but-bouncy rock that is appropriate for the relaxing, outdoor bar that is bathed by gentle breezes beneath a canopy of tropical trees. The HBS is a perfect setting for some late afternoon, post-beach mellowing, but it rocks the block at night. You stop in for a frosty-cold, and groove to the vibes, man, for a while. The urge to stay long is strong, but this street has much more in store, so you take your half-empty second plastic cup of Hog’s Breath Beer, and resume the tour.

Now you have really entered the retail gantlet. In the next several blocks, there are dozens upon dozens of shops selling T-shirts, souvenirs, artworks of assorted genres, beach and boating goodies, and God knows what else. There are so many that you won’t even notice them anymore. Sprinkled among all of those shops are sidewalk vendors, who peddle cheap jewelry and such out of wooden carts. Ice cream stands, hand-rolled cigar booths, and a variety of upscale, high-priced, internationally-flavored restaurants abound as well. But they are all too ordinary to stand out here, where all but the most extraordinary is taken in yawning stride.

To your left now, just up the street from Hog’s Breath, is The Biker’s Image, a clothing and accessory store that caters to the motorcycle world. It proudly bears the Harley-Davidson logo on its window, and harbors an impressive yellow V-8 hawg at its doorway. Amid the black Harley shirts and skull-and-crossbones bandannas that fill the window display, hangs a beautiful jacket: genuine leather in red-white-and-blue American flag style, tastefully done, with USA in proud and dignified letters across the back. It’s sturdy, it’s warm, it’s an amazing piece of clothing, it’s ... \$400. Oh well.

You move on, stepping over a disheveled homeless man who has fallen asleep while sitting on the sidewalk, propped against the front wall of a shop. He’s probably in his 40’s, with red hair and beard, dirty and torn clothes, and raggy sneakers. He looks brittle. There are five feathers sticking out of his

beat-up baseball cap, the trademark that has earned him the nickname “Feather” among the locals. Lying across his lap is an old worn broom, the tool of his trade. Maybe he’s been tossed a buck or two by some of the merchants for keeping their sidewalks clean of litter and cigarette butts today, but, somehow, you doubt it.

After another few steps, the ruckus from Sloppy Joe’s reaches you. It’s the bouncing guitar music of Two Guys Havin’ Fun, with the bellowing of the Happy Hour crowd in accompaniment. The big brag is that Sloppy Joe’s was Ernest Hemingway’s favorite bar, but that’s misleading. In Ernie’s day, Sloppy’s was in a different location – a half-block away, down Greene Street, where Captain Tony’s



Saloon now sits, across from the Iguana Café – and, like all Key West bars back then, it was a dark and smoky dive of the pre-tourist era. Still, photos and likenesses of Papa Hemingway adorn the walls, shirts and souvenirs of Sloppy Joe's. Photos of the dozens of contestants in the annual Hemingway Look-Alike Contest line one wall. It's quite a sight to see a group of those guys together; makes you believe in cloning.

Sloppy's is still comfortably dark, with worn wooden fixtures, and the barkeeps clang a loud ship's bell when they get good tips, but it's doubtful that the T-shirt boutique would be Ernie's cup o' sauce. And speaking of sauce, you notice that your Hog's Breath Beer is gone, so you step on in to SJ's for a fresh one. The band is playing some rowdy, stir-'em-up songs, and the crowd is hooked. There is plenty of singing and laughing and boozing. You stay for a second frosty beer, they ring the bell for you again, and the band launches into their legendary "Scrotum Song." They preface it with a verbal disclaimer to all the parents with kids, and remind the kids that this is what happens when mom and dad bring them *to a bar*. After a little while, you shake off inertia again and resume your stroll.



You're on the 200 block of Duval now, and when you turn your attention back to where you're walking, you find yourself face-to-face with a typical Duval



Street barker. The sides of his head are shaved, and the top is spilling upward in a vertical spray of brown hair that sweeps back and, well, you can't even look because he is now nostril-to-nostril with you, barking, "Two-for-one, dude, two-for-one ALL night!! Live rock'n'roll!! You can't beat that, man! Best Party on Duval! Ricks! Dirty Harry's! Go in, man, go in!" He has a sheet of paper in his hand and he is shoving it into your chest. He's seen you every night, and done the same thing each time, but there's no hint of recognition. Then again, he launches this assault on a couple thousand people every night, and you don't stand out as much as, say, he does.

But you escape him, largely because he has turned his energies to the next wave of unsuspecting pedestrians. Still, no sooner have you spun away from him when a threesome of similar leaflet-bearing predators swoop on you from the mouth of what appears to be an alley. They all compete for your attention. "Clancy's! Best restaurant in---", "Ribs! You like ribs? Best ribs in---", "Red Garter Saloon! Best titty bar in Key West! Totally nude, dude! No cover!" You duck and dodge to get through, looking straight ahead, but you end up with more paper in hand, and a nagging feeling of redundancy by that last barker.

With your senses still in a whirl, you do a double-take at the next sight. Parked diagonally parallel along the curb is a row of Harley Davidson motorcycles. Gleaming and sparkling in the shine of the streetlights and the storefront spots, sit almost two dozen of the most beautiful machines ever sculpted by Harley, decked out with compelling artwork on their flowing fenders and polished fuel tanks, and all with dazzling chrome accoutrements. Most of their owners are off browsing or carousing, but the cluster that remain nearby (on guard, as it were) in their black jackets, headrags, well-worn jeans, boots, shaggy hair and scruffy beards, provide quite a contrast. You can't help but appreciate the splendor of these magnificent beasts, the kaleidoscope of color and brilliance holding you as your eyes move from bike to bike, each one seemingly outdoing the last. You know that the owners are keeping half an eye on you, but you also sense that it is pride, not concern that is foremost in their minds.

With bikes as beautiful as these, it is baffling that the riders don't smile more; the intimidating black apparel, topped by the ever-present scowl of the biker, along with their propensity for such obnoxious over-revving, makes it more difficult to like them. But, after all, to each his own, especially here. This is a true slice of America, all right.

"*Tesht! Yak shi masz?*" hits your ear, as one Polish tourist greets another. Another pair passes by, rattling off German-sounding conversation. The lilting Middle Eastern accent drifts over from the

doorway of the nearby T-shirt shop merchants. French, Japanese, Spanish – everywhere there is Spanish!

But this is still very much America, as the shout of the drunk college kids singing along with some Happy Hour guitarist in Rumrunners Bar – “...took the Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry...and them good ol’ boys were drinkin’ whisky and rye...” – clearly demonstrates. Fun is abounding in there, and your hand is empty, and your throat has gone a bit dry again, so you saunter in to grab a cup o’ suds to travel. You stay for a bit, though, because shitfaced collegians are pretty damn funny to watch. But soon you break the grip and turn back out onto Duval.

Your gaze stumbles at the next sight. It starts with the dingy Ron-Jon cap, goes to the thick bush



of dark hair that it sits on, then to the hairy and swarthy face in the midst of that bush, and the darkly-mirrored glasses, then to the dirty brown trench coat, with bare legs and untied sneakers below. Then you see the sign that he is holding: “2 + 2 = 7” in big numerals, and in smaller letters beneath, “4 is propaganda.” Unlike the others, he stands stock-still, expression blank and constant, one hand propping up the sign, and the other half-raised with the two-finger peace sign. You’re curious, but, for some reason, not curious enough, so you let it be. “Key West...” you mutter, moving on.

Yet another open-air bar reaches out to you. It’s The Bull, classically British in architecture, but with all of its large windows removed for business hours. It’s cozily dark

inside, a wooden hall with beamed ceiling above, and a U-shaped bar in the middle. The Billy Joel sounds of Partners In Crime flood out to you; the dueling pianists are the best music yet. You chuckle as you get to the corner and look to your right down Caroline Street: a life-sized (though not especially life-like) wooden bull appears to be bursting through the side wall of the building. Some laughter above your head calls your attention to the balcony of The Whistle Bar upstairs, full of revelers spying on the pedestrian parade that you are part of. The atmosphere in here looks good, and the music is lively, so you pop on in for a cold one. And the Bass Ale draught is icy cold indeed. The second pint seems even colder than the first, and the live tunes keep winding you up more and more.

But, hey, you’re still just on the 200 block, so it’s time to move on, Hoss. You dismount your barstool and head out across Caroline Street. Right away, you feel some of the intensity ease off. The chaos of Binge Block is behind you. There is some breathing room now; not every establishment is pressed up against the sidewalk, and the noise level is noticeably lower. It is a more comfortable party zone.

There are some outdoor restaurants, like Caroline’s and The Hard Rock Café, that lounge comfortably under cool, tropical trees. Even Fat Tuesdays is set back at the top of a flight of steps.

Inside Fat’s, the mainstream rock singer keeps a lively clamor going on, but you can block that out by now, not even hearing it if you so choose. Along the back wall of the bar, twenty shiny, stainless steel freezer-blenders spin their drums contentedly, mixing syrup, slush, and booze into potent libations. They look tasty, so you go in and grab a strong sounding one to go.

Across the street, in small booths under the sprawling branches and multiple trunks of a



venerable banyan tree, several artists display their works. There are hundreds of paintings, drawings, portraits, etchings, and caricatures, as well as countless necklaces, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and rings – all made by local artists and craftsmen. Some are beautiful, some are bizarre, some cost a pittance, and some cost a mint. The artists themselves sit pleasantly and contentedly behind their wares, pleased at the reactions of the passers-by, but still eager to sell, sell, sell. Even in art, *c'est le nom de jeux*.

You continue southeast and things get even calmer. On the north side of the street, next to the Hard Rock, stands a stately mansion that is now the Key West Woman's Club. It is preserved as a historical building, and its large empty yard adds to the refreshing feeling of breathing room. Across the street is the Wreckers Museum, the oldest building in Key West, having been constructed in 1829. Closed and silent, it creates a natural no-sale zone.



There are a few more shops just beyond them, of course. One, called Fantasy, even sells an amazing selection of broadswords, sabers, samurais, scimitars, daggers and assorted bizarre bladed weapons. Apparently, you can buy a four-foot-long, ornately-hilted, razor sharp sword (for about \$500 bucks), and just stroll right out into the public with it. It's tempting, just to see people's reaction when you start playing Aragorn in the middle of the street.

As the mercantile and bibulous intensity wanes, street musicians begin to take their share of the spotlight. You've just passed a multi-tattooed, shirtless, young guy who is using three inverted five-gallon plastic buckets as his drum set. A fourth bucket is his stool. He's really good, with his sticks furiously rattling out staccato riffs like musical machine gun fire.

Next, you pass two steel drummers who have set up near one another. The young one, his hair elaborately braided, pinks away without apparent melody, relying on the curiosity that his instrument itself will create (rather than his talent) to lure the attention -- and, hopefully, the handouts -- of passers-by. No one seems to be stopping. He needs work – maybe even a different line of work.

The second steel drummer, just across Eaton Street, is in the wide glass entryway of Chico's. The recessed, three-sided doorway of the classy clothing store makes a great, acoustic stage. This more seasoned musician is making his protégé look baaaaaad. He is an older black man, with a graying cropped beard and neatly trimmed hair, and he plays soothing jazz instrumentals with an easy background beat from a small drum box.

Surprisingly, a trombonist arrives, and, with an exchange of respectful nods, the two musicians fall into synch. The long, low, mooring chords of the trombone accentuate the jangling steel excellently. The combination is hypnotic, and you stall your walk and let these most unlikely tunes lift your mind away for a while.

Across Duval, St. Paul's Church creates a large and peaceful background for this show. It is a beautiful, tall, blinding white edifice, with its well-kept lawn surrounded by a white wall and a black iron fence. It lends an air of wholesomeness and safety to the area – at least until you catch sight of the bum who is “asleep” against the gate. But the safe feeling was about to evaporate anyway, as the fence that lines the far end of the yard is occupied, as usual. Some local Latino teenage toughies cluster there to snicker at the tourist parade; some beggars crave handouts, and some shaggy burnouts roll on the ground, laughing their asses off at God-knows-what. It's all harmless, though; just walk through with a smirk



or a blank look. This is a crowded street, and there is safety in numbers.

Then, as the storefronts resume, you find the braiders. They sit here and there, in the doorways of stores that have closed for the night, or just out on the sidewalk. Most are around eighteen to twenty-one years old, tying long thin braids into one another's hair, and into the hair of anyone who is willing to stop and sit with them for a while. There are many of that age group around, just hangin' out. The nearest full-fledged college is 150 miles away, in Miami, and it's not unusual for kids who are done with high school to just settle into the laid-back Key West lifestyle, instead of continuing to face the expense and drudgery of the higher educational system. Then again, a number of them might be Dead or Phish fans who have spilled down from the mainland to hang out for a few after a recent show.

The rest of the 400 block is a good breather, most of it being the La Concha Hotel – Key West's tallest building at a towering six stories. It's distinctive in its plethora of green awnings. Upscale clothing shops and jewelers face it; it's been nearly a block-and-a-half since you've seen a bar. You suddenly feel thirsty. Of course, there is the ground level lounge and showroom of the La Concha right there for you, but you hold off for something less respectable.

You cross Fleming Street and have to hustle to get out of the path of a Pedicab and a herd of scooters. The former is a manned, half-bike-half-chariot taxi; the drivers give their riders a verbal tour of the KW highlights as they transport them at a very pedestrian pace. The cabs are quaint, but they block just enough of the road to frustrate traffic for blocks. The scooters – like the Vespas in the movie

Quadrophenia – are like an amusement park ride; part of the lure of coming to Key West is to get hammered and ride the wimpy scooters all over the island. These people would not be caught dead on one of these pink putterers at home, but here, it's part of the "flavor".



gear and into her pants. The performers must wonder what the heck you have to do to get people's attention around here.

Then you come to Margaritaville, Jimmy Buffet's bar and restaurant. A good jazz-blues band has the crowd bouncing, and you step in to bounce a little yourself and have a beverage. A margarita seems fitting. The atmosphere is good, with dim lighting keeping the garish colors of the painted walls from being too loud. The band doesn't play any Buffet tunes. Come to think of it, you've never once heard a Buffet tune played here. Somehow, that doesn't bother you.



Beyond Fleming Street, the 500 block begins innocently enough, with Fast Buck Freddie's (there's a name you can trust, huh?) clothing store on your right. In the doorway is a tap dancing mime in blackface, though people don't seem to be paying him much mind. Things like that, which would be eye-openers in Suburb, USA, are totally shruggable here. Across the street, there is a One-Girl Band, loaded up with at least forty pounds of instruments and household gadgetry. She's not bad, really, but she's not good enough to hold an audience either, except for the few of the Very Drunk, who are probably just trying to figure out how to get under all that



After a while, you knock down the last of your 'rita, and step back outside. Right across the street, there is another fun-sounding place called Mulcahy's Tavern. It's worth a look-see. You stroll in and take a vacant bar stool. An eager looking young woman in a plain white T-shirt comes right over to you to ask what you want. You take your time responding, and she seems to be rushing you, but laughing inside about it. "I'll have a pint of Bass," you say.

With an *oh-goody-goody* grin, she claps her hands in delight, and looks around for the taps. Finally finding them, she grabs a glass and quickly pours the ale. She hurries it over to you and says "drink, drink!" Puzzled, you take a good slug. "Drink more, drink more," she urges you. WTF? OK, you take another swallow. She grabs your half-full glass, runs to the tap, and tops it off." Double WTF?? She asks you, "you want a shot? Anybody here want a shot?"

To our collective baffled expressions, she smiles, "The bartender is in the bathroom, she'll be back any minute! Hurry!"

But the barkeep has just reappeared, and her pinch-hitter smirkingly steps aside. Barkeep knows something is up, but has no idea what. She eyes your ale a tad uncertainly, but you just lift it and sip from it nonchalantly, and she goes away.

When you depart several minutes later and turn left to continue up Duval, you find yourself staring into Jerry Garcia's unblinking eyes. His placid white visage, framed by a frenetic net of white hair, stands out strikingly from the window of Spare Change, a T-shirt shop that is several steps above the others. Around him are more very cool shirts bearing pictures or emblems of The Beatles, Bob Marley, R.E.M., The Cure, and others. Other primary-colored shirts display slogans that proclaim, for instance, "That's Mr. Asshole to you", or "La-dee-fuckin'-da." You tell yourself you will shop there some night.



Well, that gets you in the right mindset for the very next shop: The Environmental Circus. This has to be one of the biggest 1970's throwback stores anywhere. A classic, dimly-lit head shop, its crowded shelves and racks hold bongos, dugouts, tie-dyed shirts and pants and underwear, cool hats, old concert posters, funky jewelry, Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers comic books, and myriad reminders of a Time When The World Was Stoned.

The placement of the Circus was

perfect because you are now totally in

hippie mode, you have just arrived at Barefoot Bob's, and the Crisspy Critters are jammin'. On the sidewalk, young hippies are boppin' along with the music, and the indoor crowd is *movin'*. You can't pass this one by, so you plunge on in, only vaguely insulted that you are the only one whose ID was not checked. The bar is small, crowded, and totally *alive*. Tie-dyed banners deck the walls and ceiling, as do framed photos of The Dead in concert.

Mikey, a short dude with his Seton Hall Pirates hat on backwards, is wailin' away on his lead guitar in the best, most rockin' version of "Scarlet Begonias" that you have ever heard. Then Pete – another 5'6" dude (this is not a tall band), who was also one of the Two Guys Havin' Fun a few hours ago – on rhythm guitar, leads the way through a rockin' rendition of "Tangled Up In Blue", which melds into "Not Fade Away", and "Franklin's Tower", and "Feelin' Bad", and "I Know You Rider", and "Eyes Of The World", and on and on into the small hours of the morning. That "one" Rolling Rock you were going



to have has turned into two, three, four, and, well, it's gotten so that Shawn has another waiting for you before your empty bottle has even settled on the bar. Shawn, the barkeep, is classic 70's himself: skinny, with straight black hair halfway down his back, a tiny goatee, a Grateful Dead tank top, and a bizarre cap on mostly-backwards. He glides from spot to spot as if on wheels, and looks deeply stoned. You can't help but like him.

The music has kept you jumpin'. The tiny dance floor has been packed all night, and people have been dancin' all over the room. But nobody was even dancing with anyone; everyone is just bouncin' and boppin' and groovin' to the Critters, feeding them even more energy to rock the roof off.

Eventually, you leave Barefoot's, sweaty and tired. It's still 75° or so out, even though it is lonnnng past midnight. Across Duval, there is an alley – no, it's a street, but it looks like an alley. Signs for other bars can be seen. One beams out "Saloon 1" and leather-clad men move in and out of the dark doorway. They definitely catch your eye, but not your fancy, so you turn left to resume your tour. You've barely moved a yard when this mechanical voice begins rambling on about shrunken heads and torture chambers and the like. WTF? Yes, there, under the large marquee and grand, elaborately decorated façade of the old Strand Theater, lurks Ripley's Believe It Or Not Museum. Odd devices rotate and whirr in the lobby. You recollect a sign that you saw on the back of a tour train: "It's certainly weird, even by Key West standards." Hmm, perhaps another time, you muse. It'll have to be; the place has been closed for hours.

You check the number above a doorway and are amazed to find that you have only made it as far as the 500 block. Better get a move on, champ, plenty of street left to cover.

As you shuffle forward once more, Duval seems uneventful. With the hour being what it is, you're reduced to a window shopper, and your chances for more sauce are slim. Maybe now you can fokush!!

Some highlights grab you as you make your way southeastward, among the outdoor cafes and eateries, the somewhat quainter (though still ubiquitous) T-shirt shops, and the various little motels and rooming houses: The Copa, a huge nightclub, where the line by the door often seems overstocked with attitude; Worldwide Flags (at 626 Duval), where flaggy clothing and accessories are sold, along with real flags from nearly three million countries, and Canada; Pizza Joe's, where a hot, thick slice of pizza really hits your late-night, hard-to-miss spot; the 801 Bar, where the alternative lifestyle is king, and several of the men are queens, at least those who perform upstairs in the nightly drag shows; Towels of Key West, which holds your gaze for several minutes with a gorgeous, spot lit towel portraying a deep and richly-colored sunset; and Tu-Ti-Fruit-Ti's Juice Bar, which is just a regular one-story home with its front porch converted to a large, under-awning, counter where you can get non-alcoholic concoctions made up of whatever fruits you can imagine.

Then, at end of the 1000 block, you find yourself at US Route 1, which is in its final mile. It starts in Fort Kent, Maine, and ends in Key West, at Mile Marker Zero, where Whitehead Street intersects with Fleming. What's really strange, though, is that neither street stops there; just the US-1 designation does. There is still a half-mile of road before you reach the end of the island. And it's far from being a highway at this point; it's just a narrow two-lane road through a very small town.

You cross it reverently, and you pass Bogart's, a cozy-looking pub, with big couches to fatass on while you drink. "Next time," you mutter, since it's locked up for the morning. Across the street, in a Mexican-style building, is Viva Zapata, with a bathtub full of ice and beer, and a thick, butcher-block-style bar, with years' worth of the initials and insignias of patrons past carved into it. It's closed too. Damn. Thirst sure is persistent on this street.

Then, there is salvation: a Circle K store! The beer in their cooler is yours for the asking price, and single bottles are lined up at attention, ready for assignment. [Unless you're out late on a Sunday night, then Florida alcohol sales are shut



down from 4 a.m. till noon, I believe. But, when that becomes relevant, especially near the “4 a.m.” part of it, there are other issues to discuss.]

Just past United Street, on the penultimate block, there is the Southernmost Hotel, just one of dozens of “southernmosts” on this corner of the island. When you reach the final street – fittingly named South Street – you look to your right, and you can make out the large monument proclaiming “The Southernmost Point In The Continental U.S.A. – 90 miles to Cuba!” It is shaped like an oversized buoy, and is painted black with bright red and yellow stripes. Tourists can be found posing for pictures there almost any time of day or night.

You walk straight ahead, and you find yourself at the Atlantic Ocean. You walk onto the small sand beach and look out to the east. The sky has brightened considerably, and the horizon is beginning to glow with vivid light. You sit down to watch old Sol return to usher in yet another shitty day in Paradise. He went all the way around behind the planet in the time it took you to walk one street. The dawn is quiet and warm. You kick off your sandals, stretch out your legs, and lean back on your elbows. Supine is not far away. The water licks playfully at the sand near your feet. You savor the solitude and feel totally unwound. You could easily sleep here.

Funny how the sunrise doesn't attract as much of a crowd...