

the florida digressions

Fock 4: Still More Conch Republic Reveries

Alabama was starting to run out of road, and there was not far to go to Mobile. It was sundown time, but there was no grand viewing point at hand. Old Sol simply ducked down behind the trees, then a couple minutes later the clouds above lit up some, then a few minutes more after that, it started getting dark. Huh. Even the sunsets are not scenic in 'Bama.

A pickup truck in front of me, like many others, bore a rebel flag sticker on his rear window. Under the Stars-and-Bars emblem was the sinister slogan, "The South Shall Rise Again." Oh, goody, that's just what we need. I remember thinking, "Fortunately, we are beyond such separatist nonsense." That put me in mind, again, of The Conch Republic.

Many people are unaware that it ever happened, but, in 1982, the Florida Keys seceded from the United States. They officially formed The Conch Republic, with Key West as the capital. A flag was designed, and passports were issued. Leave it to the Keys.

It all happened because the U.S. Border Patrol set up a roadblock where US-1 – the only access road to the Keys -- reached the mainland. Ostensibly, they were checking for illegal aliens, but their vehicle-by-vehicle search involved glove compartments and under-seat areas. Sounds more like a drug search to me, but what do I know? I'm no government official.

Traffic backed up for seventeen miles! Tourists and merchants and even beer deliveries (!) stopped coming to the Keys because the hassle was brutal. Keys officials appealed to the feds via legal channels, but got no satisfaction, so, in a huff, they went ahead and seceded. The announcement, which basically involved declaring war on the United States, was accompanied by the smashing of stale loaves of Cuban bread over the heads of some blue-suited and ear-phoned federal agents who just happened to be there. The Prime Minister of The Conch Republic (Key West Mayor Dennis Wardlow), then surrendered, after one minute of rebellion. The real kicker, though, was that The Conch Republic immediately applied to the United States for foreign aid, as a "vanquished nation." Damn plucky, I must say.

They never did get any aid, as you might expect. There was never even a syllable of recognition by the federal government that anything had ever happened. However, the roadblock was immediately discontinued.

The Anniversary of The Conch Republic is still celebrated every April 23rd, which is also Shakespeare's birthday. But you knew that.

Key Westers hate this, but they have to face the fact that there is no more preferable place in the country to live if you are homeless. Fifty degrees is considered a cold January night. Very few people, even those sleeping under cardboard boxes, will freeze to death at fifty degrees. Homeless people may not have homes, but that does not mean that they do not have brains. New York or Chicago homeless probably lack the means to relocate, but for those in the deep south, when winter exhales 30° winds all over them, they get to thinkin' about how nice Key West would be this time of year. Then, once they get here, they decide not to leave. As a result, the little island has a big homeless problem.

My own homeless problem, though -- and I was technically homeless there in '94, since I'm sure Max would not have counted as an official domicile -- was that, as April waxed to May, it was just too freaking hot and humid in the van at night to get any sleep. Nighttime lows in mid-April were already staying above 80. Also, my five-bucks-an-hour T-shirt shop job was wearing a bit thin, and prospects looked bleak for anything appreciably better. The time was not yet ripe here. It was time to hit the road north.

Though it lacks hills, vales, and towering pines, The Overseas Highway does have the sea. US-1 is the lone connecting thread for this chain of little islands. There are no "alternate routes."

It is not uncommon for a traffic accident to shut down the road. All traffic in both directions just stops until the wreckage can be cleared. You cannot be re-routed. You have two choices: wait, or turn around and go back where you came from (or to some bar that you passed along the way). Usually, the latter is the far better option.

If there is a fatality, it really complicates matters, and not just for the fatality. Monroe County regulations require that the accident scene be left "as is" until the coroner arrives. I don't know why they need to do this. I mean, what's he gonna do? Show up, take a quick look, say "Yep, he's snuffed it. Let's pack him up." Traffic been stopped for five hours in such instances. FIVE HOURS!

Pity the poor bastard who had a flight to catch in Miami, or the school bus full of little kids with no AC on a 90-degree afternoon. [Another regulation states that children cannot be let off a bus in such circumstances.]

Most of the time, of course, traffic moves along just fine. It's intended to be a fairly fast road, with speed limits at 55 on the open stretches (and virtually unlimited in some of the long stretches between well-populated areas), and 45 where the businesses are. Some spots bog down to 35, but they are few and short.

Naturally, though, there are the douchebags who have to ruin it. Noooooo, not the speedsters – they (we) just zoom on by and are gone. The ones who mess up dozens, even hundreds of people's lives on busy days, are the pokies. They come in a couple of recognizable categories: the RV's that go from 0-to-50 in Never; some elderly who can't handle the rush of adrenaline that comes with smashing the 40 MPH barrier; and the oh-my-goodness-look-at-all-the-water sightseers.

I would love to explain to the latter group that the view looks pretty much the same at 55 as it does at 37. For that matter, they might like it even better if they pulled over, stopped, got those annoying 200 cars of their rear bumper, took a good long mind-filling look at the blue-green sea, then got back in the minivan and kept pace.

By night, when driving among islands, the road is simply the road. The roadside businesses are just there, and the miles between are deeply dark on both sides for as far as the eye can see. If you didn't know where you were, you could easily be convinced you were flanked by empty fields of beets or carrots, or by sweeping savannas filled with lions, impala, and wildebeests. "Darkness there and nothing more..." as old Edgar used to say.

When the moon is rising, you get the cool glimmering walkway of reflections in the flat surface of the sea, but once it climbs high enough, or if there is a new moon, all is dark, except for the almost indistinguishable line of the horizon.

By day, of course, the view, even at 60 MPH, is delightful. Blue-green water dominates, and the patches of solid ground where the reef top pops through for air are coated with short thick green shrubs. As you cross the channels and see the wide sides of the populated Keys, there are nice houses, many with boat docks. You would not suspect that, in some cases just a street away from those choice homes, squalid trailer parks and dilapidated cottages house the less fortunate working class that keep the mundane aspects of life on the islands working.

As you might think, based on the Keys' reputation, you can see some amusing things along US-1. In many places, the old version of the Overseas Highway – much narrower, with barely enough width for two cars (the old railroad bed) – still lies parallel to the current US-1. It is 99% inactive, with spans removed to prevent any kind of foot or wheel traffic. Those long inaccessible stretches of relic bridge have been nothing more than a pelican perch since the replacement bridges were completed in the 70's and early 80's. The pavement is faded, and stained all over with pelican poop, both old and new.

Small parts of the old bridges, though, have been kept available for fishing. On any given day, you can see quite a number of people hanging their lines down into the shallow blue-green water. I guess the fishin' is good because the people are always there, regardless of time of day or time of year.

I saw one particularly happy guy as I was zooming along the highway once. He was in the middle of a long level span of the old bridge, and he had just caught a really good-sized fish. Proud of his catch, he was holding it up over his head with both hands, yelling triumphantly, and displaying it for the passing traffic. I gave him a honkhonkhonk and a thumbs-up as I sped past... but then I had to laugh: right behind him, bearing down on him *really* fast, was a very hungry-looking pelican. Its wings were poised, and its gaze was locked on that prized fish. I never saw the resolution of this imminent drama, but I suspect that Mr. Fisherman learned a big, bad lesson in humility.

Paradise is not especially close to the mainland. The Keys string out for 126 miles from the tip of Florida proper. Miami is the closest true city, and it is a good three hours to the northeast. It's like driving from the Boston to Albany NY. Up there, in that life, that would have been considered a major trek, but down here, it's just what you do.

Key West itself has an old Sears, an OfficeMax, and a lame K-Mart -- I know, that phrase is redundant -- but none of the really large and popular chains have parked a store here. You have to take

the hike to the mainland for bigger game. Florida City, the first mercantile area on the mainland, at Mile Marker 125, has a huge Wal-Mart. And Circuit City, Best Buy, CompUSA, and their ilk lurk in Miami's suburbs, yet another twenty or more miles up Florida's Turnpike.

For most transplants here, after having such an array of mega-stores within fifteen minutes when they were back home in Boston or Rochester, it is a bit of an adjustment.

When I broke camp and departed Key West, there was one thing I needed to do, one goal that I had set when I first arrived, but that I still had to accomplish: run across the Seven Mile Bridge.

The Florida Keys are linked by 42 bridges on the final 126-mile leg of US-1. Nearly one-sixth of the entire drive is on bridges: a total of 18.8 miles. The longest of these spans is called Seven Mile Bridge; it's actually only 6.8 miles long, but they rounded up. It connects the city of Marathon on Vaca Key (Mile Marker 47) with Bahia Honda Key (Mile 40).



Well, **driving** across this bridge is a real treat. There is even a major road race across it every April that allows 1500 runners and turns away about that many others. To the south is wide-open, blue ocean under a clear, lighter blue sky. To the north is the Gulf of Mexico, dotted by a dozen or so tiny, green, widely-spaced, and uninhabited islands. It's delightful. It would be a splendid run, one would think to oneself: run with the wind at your back all the way, and have the bike waiting at the other end of the bridge for an easy ride back. What a grand idea!

So, on my way out of the Keys, with Max loaded to the gills (vans have gills??), I had to use my final opportunity to do the crossing. What a unique experience, I mused, how memorable it will be!

BAH! What a debacle! Memorable, my ass! Oh, I'll never forget it, but this was *not* what I had had in mind.

Of course, as usual, I was my own worst enemy. Since the previous night/morning was to be my final taste of Key West, I had done the town right, starting early with a fast five Rolling Rocks at the Parrot, and following that with several more Rocks and four hours of dancing to the Critters at Barefoot's. It was Spring Break week for Boston College, and I showed the drunken Eagles that this BC alum could still swill.

And that was after running my Smathers 4-Miler as hard as I could. It was my most common running course, starting at the bathhouse, following the wide sidewalk along the top of the beach and seawall for two headwinded miles, then turning around at a specific point on Houseboat Row – the succession of a dozen or so floating homes that anchored along the island's eastern wall-- and riding the tailwind back. My turnaround spot was the pink houseboat, with the sign hanging out front that read "A Chance To Dance In France" – I always pronounced them as "chahnce", "dahnce", and "Frahnce", just because. I ran that stretch a few times a week, and I kept a detailed running log that winter, so I knew what my times were.

With one final go at it, the record had to fall tonight. Once I cleared the last of the dark and uneven spots, and got into the final streetlit stretch, I galloped like a thoroughbred down that long sidewalk, terrifying the few unsuspecting pedestrians on their leisurely evening strolls as I came charging up behind them, breathing hard and loud, and barreling like a runaway train. The record fell hard, by nearly three minutes, and my legs were wrung out like sponges. Didn't stop me from dancin' like Zanson a few hours later, though it probably should have.

Sleeping a little later than planned – duhhh, why? – I somehow felt the need to leave Key West by a certain hour. Hence, I did not get any breakfast, nor stop for any provisions. My usual can of Coke Classic would be fine, thanks. Besides, I wouldn't want a full stomach for my Bridge Run, would I?

I got to Seven Mile Bridge around noon. Perfect time to run, huh? I drove across



and locked my bike to the guardrail just past the east end, came back and parked Max in the little dirt lot next to the west end, then set out for an enjoyable run.

It never crossed my mind that all the ingredients for disaster were in place: legs trashed from the all-out run, head rolling from all those Rocks, stomach squirming from the unmitigated Coke, no calories in the gas tank, unbroken sunshine above on a cloudless afternoon, and a seven-mile stretch of unshaded white concrete ahead. Everything was primed for a total and utter collapse; all that was needed was the right catalyst to make all those factors gel.

First mile in 6:36. Bingo! Here's the catalyst you ordered, sir. Would you like some CPR with that, or will you just pass out and die on the pavement?

Oh, lordy, those miles got longer and longer. The only indication of progress on that never changing, flat, straight bridge was the s-l-o-w approach of the next little green mile marker. They could be seen from a long way, and they always turned out to be farther away than they seemed. There were no reference points whatsoever in the landscape (seascape, actually), and the speed of the passing cars just made my own pace seem even more snailish. The pavement soaked up the midday heat – well over 80° -- and reflected it back up. The humidity was even higher than normal, given that I was surrounded by sun-heated water.

Then there was the hump. The middle half-mile of the bridge is arched significantly to accommodate tall boats, and it loomed as the promise of the halfway point, and as the threat of a large hill. It's not mountainous, rising probably fifty feet in elevation from the rest of the road (which stands



maybe thirty feet above the sea), but after several months of dead-flat courses on Key West, that fifty feet was daunting. Any extra effort, at this point, was daunting.

The hump got closer at an agonizingly (no exaggeration there) slow rate. My quads openly rebelled, cramping before I even reached the top. Once over the crest, I had to stop for a rest. The Mile 44 marker also had a "No Littering" (or something) sign above it, which cast just enough of a shadow for me to hide my overheated head and back in. I rested for about five minutes, making a brave show of it, and feigning easy comfort. I waved to a couple of passing boaters, and nodded at a few bewildered motorists, keeping up a *hey there, nice view,*

huh? demeanor. A stingray gave me a good excuse for stalling; I watched it swim around lazily for a few minutes in the shallow water before it disappeared under the bridge.

It was only when I stopped that I realized how strong that tailwind had been. I was thankful for it, I guess, but I also lamented the return bike ride with seven miles of unrelenting headwind.

Oh, well, no turning back now; might as well get the damn thing over with. Pressing on, it was as if I had never even rested. Every battered and weary muscle was now as stiff as wood. I moved like the rusty Tin Man. I knew that there was a wind supposedly helping me along, but I couldn't feel it. Without a cooling breeze in my face to evaporate the sweat, I grew hotter and hotter. And my overheating was exacerbated by the shortage of liquid to cool me off. I craved water, but none was imminent. The ocean taunted me with its endless, wet, and unattainable presence. It was difficult to think positive thoughts.

Nearing delirium, I envisioned the tailwind as an invisible demon, about four feet tall, hanging by his hands from my shoulders, blowing his hot breath all over my back, and cackling sinisterly as he devilishly dragged his heavy, sneakered feet along the pavement.

Then, finally, after an interminable amount of being "almost there", I reached Marathon Key, which was aptly named for how I felt. I trudged to a stop, and slumped heavily on the guard rail. I felt bludgeoned. But it was still not over: I still had to get back to old Maxie.

Now, had I remembered to put water in my bike's water bottle? **NO**. Had I left a shirt so I could keep the tropical sun off my scorched back? **NO**. Ugh. What an odious ride. But, cramped and dehydrated, I made it. Max sat there like a big white St. Bernard, waiting with a full cooler, comfy cushions, and imminent A/C.

Ah, well, chalk it all up as another good concept spoiled by poor execution.