

the florida digressions

Fock 5: Sundry South Florida Frolics

For most of two-and-a-half hour drive from Key West to Florida City, there is just that one road that you can take: US-1. Sure, there are side roads and such, but all of them just go out to the water, or branch into smaller roads that end at the water. Any through traffic just resigns itself to Route 1, and tolerates whatever might be encountered.



At Key Largo, the island closest to the mainland, though, there is a choice: the infamous 18-Mile Stretch, or the longer Card Sound Road. The 18-Mile Stretch is notorious for its high speeds, its very limited passing zones, and the accidents (and subsequent long delays) that those two factors conspire to cause. There are several fatalities on The Stretch each year.

Card Sound Road is a slightly extended route, is only two lanes wide (one each direction), and has a one-dollar toll bridge. If you're in a hurry, The Stretch tends to be what you take. If not, then Card Sound Road makes for a delightfully docile alternative. The traffic is light, so the drive is carefree, and Alabama Jack's lies along the route.

"Downtown Card Sound" is a laughable phrase to anyone who knows the place. The bar itself is the only building there, about 100 yards from the tollbooth, with nothing else within a half-mile. It is an isolated, open-air, waterfront, laid-back place that just massages your mind every time you wander in. The cooling breeze never fails, the water always glimmers amiably, Mike the



Barkeep is always jaunty, the beer is cold, and the burgers are cheap and tasty. The same country band -- The Card Sound Machine -- has played there every weekend since about 1982, and the clientele ranges from bikers to prominent politicians.

A gas stop halfway between Montgomery and Mobile broke my chain of Florida reveries for a while. So far on the trip, gas prices weren't as bad as I had feared. Figures of \$2.00 and more per gallon, so far, had been tossed about, but thankfully I wasn't seeing any of those. Still, Blue Man chugged down about thirty yummy gallons of Chevron Regular, at \$1.499 per. A small price to pay when there is gorgeous scenery being absorbed along the route, but when it's bland and ordinary, the cost seems a tad high.

With a bit more 'Bama to go, and Florida just a tabacky spit away, my thoughts went thither again as soon as we returned to the open and uneventful highway.

Alligator Alley -- Interstate-75, between Naples and Fort Lauderdale, just north of Everglades National Park -- is as flat and straight a road as you'll find anywhere. Some people can't stand it, but I think it's wicked nizza keen, as we used to say as eight-year-old Bostonians. Seventy-six miles of a whole lotta nothin' on either side.

Despite all that sameness and isolation -- in fact, *because* of it -- I like driving the Alley. Traffic is always sparse, and there is not the slightest variation in elevation or direction, making it a Cruise Control

heaven. No matter which way you look, the world is far away. It is free of stress: an hour's relief from the hassles of competitive motoring. You barely have to pay attention, and your mind can go adrift.

At nighttime, the stars are incredible. Far from any city – or town even – there are no lights to mitigate the stars' brilliance, making the inevitable roadside stop a double pleasure. And the crossing lasts just about as long as one Tangerine Dream CD. The Alley will never live up to my definition of "scenic", despite its green-dotted status in Rand McNally, but it has a kind of Kansas-esque appeal; it shows you a vast void, and reminds you what a little bug on the windshield you really are. And we all need that sometimes.

That void is marshlands and grasslands as far as the eye can see. Trees? Hmm. Maybe a few here or there. Gators? Yeah, probably a lot, though you won't see 'em. I did catch a look at one once, sunnin' his bad self along the embankment, the very first time I drove that road in the early-80's with my former buddy Doug T. The road was still being converted from a two-lane-suicide-stretch to a four-lane divided highway, and the fences at the edge of the wilderness were not necessarily the best. Wally Gator must have liked the hum of passing cars and trucks, and crawled up close to the road to listen to all of us drive by. He looked harmless enough, but so do a lot of things right before they kill you; it's all part of the plan.

The best part of that Boston-to-Lauderdale excursion, though, was where Doug and I stayed. We pulled onto A1A and drove the strip, scoping out the beaches and the beachers. With no hotel reservations, and pauper's funds, we needed a Plan A, and fast.

I pulled into the gated and attended parking lot of what was then the Holiday Inn, right across the street from the beckoning Atlantic Ocean. The shaggy-haired 18-year-old greeted our obvious party van with curiosity. "Hey, bud," I asked, "What's your name?"

"Mark."

"Hi Mark!!!" Dougie shouted cheerfully, drawing a good laugh in response.

"Hey, Mark," I continued, "we're not guests in this hotel, but if we give you \$20, can we park here for a long time?"

Feeling the burnout-to-burnout bond, and in his best I-could-give-a-shit voice, Mark replied (while pocketing the twenty), "Hey, guys, for \$20, you can park here as long as you want."

We thanked him, and wheeled the van deep into the lot. That was on Monday. We pulled out on Friday. Actually, we pulled out once in mid-week to go to Miami, and Mark didn't have the sack to confront us. He did come walking by on Thursday while we were way-too-obviously drying off from our swim – I even had strung a clothesline between the van's open doors. He didn't have a friendly look on his face, probably because we were not even trying to hide the fact that we were squatters. So, when he got close, I held up another twenty and gave him a sly smile. He took the bill without a word, and without breaking stride, and casually walked right by.

But the crowning touch was the postcard. We grabbed a few Holiday Inn postcards on our final day. After all, we had been using their lobby restrooms all week. They had served us just fine for the daily shit and shave, though the showers had to be done at the sidewalk showerheads across the street. I got some great looks and some hoots and catcalls from passing co-eds as I shampooed my hair, or lathered up inside my shorts.

But the bathrooms were fine. If you act like you belong, then you're usually going to survive.

So, we wrote a few postcards home and had one left over. Doug came up with the idea. "Let's send one to Mark!" I laughed my approval, and Doug began writing, snickering as he penned the greeting. He finished, and proudly read his handiwork:

We can only assume that he received it.

<p><i>Dear Mark,</i></p> <p><i>Thanks so much for letting us park all week in your parking lot.</i></p> <p><i>Most guys would have charged us a lot of money, but you only charged us five dollars! Thanks again.</i></p> <p><i>Dick and Doug,</i> <i>in the Blue Van</i></p>	<p></p> <p><i>To:</i> <i>Mark, the Parking Lot Guy</i> <i>Holiday Inn</i> <i>Highway A1A</i> <i>Fort Lauderdale, FL xxxxx</i></p>
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Fort Lauderdale has revamped itself since those early-80's days. Once one of the hotbeds of Spring Break madness, the city apparently cooled to the idea of welcoming in thousands of loud, destructive, and vomiting collegians. I think they figured out that their hotel rooms would still be at least mostly full in March, and that restaurants selling 1000 dinners at \$15 each would bring more money into the city than sidewalk pizzerias and hotdoggeries peddling a several thousand snacks at two bucks apiece. Likewise, a modest run of \$4.00 cocktails would easily offset the flood 2-for-1 wells and buck-a-draught beers when it came to tallying tourism industry income. And, like everywhere else in the U.S. in the latter stages of the twentieth century, the words "liability" and "litigation" probably had a profound effect on that reasoning. Broken bottles on the beach, unsuccessful scooter stunts, and fist holes through motel walls were surely just some of the more mundane headaches attendant with collegiate revelry.

At any rate, Fort Lauderdale rid itself of all those shenanigans, and has become more like its southern cousin, Miami's South Beach, as a place to stroll, relax, enjoy, and be seen among a better class of people. I went there anyway.

The main attraction of all, the beach itself, is tremendous. Clean, smooth sand hugs your feet, and playful ocean waves abound. The last time I had been there, I spent over an hour just body surfing by myself. No doubt some of the people sitting on beach thought I was simple-minded loony. They should have been thinking of how to Bite Me.

If I ever lose the joy of body surfing, you can just put me in a box. Being lifted and carried along by the gush of water is too good. Riding a wave into shin-deep water, standing and stomping back out, busting through the incoming waves, or diving under them, then waiting at The Good Spot and scoping out the new waves, picking out the best swells where outgoing undercurrents create the optimal rise in the inbound flow. Marking time, looking over the shoulder as the chosen wave gathers steam in its approach, lifting off to meet it just right, and getting whoooooossssh away by the rudimentary physics of moving and shallowing water is a simple pleasure that deserves to be savored.

After adjourning to swanky Las Olas Boulevard for a meal and a few pints at O'Hara's, I found myself back out on the beach, lounging on the soft sand and watching the full moon as it rose slowly, grinning splendidly, over the softly rippling Atlantic. The night air was wonderfully warm and comfortably dry. A few feathery clouds glowed white in the lunar brilliance, and the breeze that poured across the beach was soul soothing. I sat and lay there for nearly an hour, thinking about next to nothing except how good it all felt and looked and sounded.

Blue Man was my bedroom that night, parked along the northern end of that beach, and when Nature's call stirred me awake, Fort Lauderdale treated me to a damn fine sunrise. After which, of course, I went back to the Belly o' th' Whale for some more z's.



And later that day, I found myself once again answering the Call of the Remotest Seat, this time at Miami's Pro Player Stadium. There was nothing special about the game, other than its well-chosen 6:00 p.m. starting time. You would think that a Saturday game at 6 p.m. would be a popular option: afternoon's over, night hasn't begun yet, let's take in a ball game! That, at least, was my reasoning, but only about 15,000 other fans showed up. Didn't bother me; at least that Remote Seat wouldn't have somebody else's fat ass plunked in it.

All the outfield upper deck was closed, so the clear choice was directly behind home plate: Section 450, Row 30, Seat 1. I sat in several seats that game, and, quite frankly, I liked the Remotest Seat the best. The beer vendor even took the walk all the way up! What service! I tipped him a buck for his efforts.

That memory triggered another one, of course. It was baseball, and it was in Florida, but the similarities ended there.

I've stopped to catch bits of Little League games quite a few times on my various ramacks, but the most memorable was in a tiny town in central Florida called Pahokee. It is a dot in the middle of nowhere. Most of highway 441, which led me into it, was just your typical two-lane road, with some typical dead flat, dead straight stretches, hardly deserving of the appellation "highway," except that you could go 75 MPH on it without anybody giving a crud – until you got near one of the few towns that lay along the route. In the 77 miles from Yeehaw, where I had decided to eschew the Turnpike for the fret-free rural roads that went to and around Lake Okeechobee, to Pahokee, there had only been five villages, and each of those had been worth about a two-minute slow-down to 30 MPH.

Afternoon had given way to dusk when I reached Pahokee. I liked the name. It was your typical small town, with a cluster of short buildings at a junction of a few small roads, with small houses on small lots leading into and out of it. There were two roads to choose from to continue south, and I chose the thinner, lighter gray line



on the map, "highway" 715. It proved to be a good choice. The road was lined for two miles by tall, straight, towering palm trees: just a single line at the road's shoulder, almost like a high fence between the road and a large, empty field. Beyond the trees, there were bright lights on towers in the distance. Due for a rest stop anyway, I decided to check out whatever this lighted attraction was.

It turned out to be Little League baseball, or so I thought; it was really just an atrocity in the making.

The field was quite nice, with roofed, chain-link-fenced, dugouts, and well-groomed red clay infield, and a trimmed lawn of lush green grass for an outfield.



There was a small aluminum grandstand near each dugout, and all of the five or so rows on each side were filled to capacity. A few other people stood along the waist-high fence out by the outfield foul lines. This was clearly the biggest event in town tonight.

The home team was made up of eleven- or twelve-year-olds in ragged uniforms that looked like the burlap baggies that I would have worn in the early sixties. It looked like it said "Sample", whatever that meant, in big, iron-on letters across the front. It might have been a town, or a sponsor, or just a cheap way to get uniforms from a catalog: *Yupp, ah wannit jest lahk thet thar sample in the book.*

Their opponents, by all appearances some traveling State All-Star team, was a collection of tall, lean, and athletically precocious baseball studs in stylish double-knit duds. Same age, but the similarity ended there.

So, in strolls me, brain awash with an afternoon's worth of road-party, as well as a quick booster shot before stepping out of the van.

The game had just gotten underway. I sauntered up next to an empty metal trash barrel behind the backstop, preferring not to squeeze in among redneck strangers in either grandstand. Dressed in green, I guess I did not attract any attention, and I stood off center, so I was no bother to the pitcher either.

What I watched was a travesty. It was the worst mismatch I've ever seen. It was like watching Russia play Ghana in ice hockey.

The first batter I saw, a trim and fleet-looking lad, your consummate leadoff man, walked on four erratic pitches, glanced over his shoulder as he neared first, saw that the catcher still had the ball, gave a little *meep-meep* shift, and sprinted for second. The catcher just watched in useless puzzlement.



On the next pitch, the leadoff boy darted to third. I think he was there before the ball reached the catcher. And, you guessed it, he went for the steal of home on the very next pitch. The pitcher tried to pick him off, but the kid was already full guns for home. Didn't matter: the pickoff attempt sent the third baseman into a futile dive and the ball rolled to the fence. The catcher threw his glove down in disgust, the pitcher buried his face in his glove, and the Sample fans were sullen.

Meanwhile, laughter was pouring from the visitors' side. High-fives all-around for the leadoff man, and a few derisive catcalls could be heard from the grandstand.

The second batter dutifully took balls three and four, and trotted to first base. This time, the catcher was ready, but the runner took a glance and sped off for second anyway. The catcher heaved the ball well over the shortstop's head, and the runner took third. I don't think he had any intentions of sprinting for home, but the centerfielder must have thought the right play was to throw the ball to third base, and his teammates didn't seem to be anticipating that, so when the ball went bounding once again over by the fence, the runner jogged home, laughing out loud.

By now, the visiting grandstand was in hysterics. The home crowd was beginning to seethe. There were still mostly encouraging words spilling from the Samplers. Some mom drawled out loudly, "It's okay, Billie Bob, get the next one, baby." That seemed to elicit some weakly muffled mimicry from the opposing crowd.

The coach came back from the mound, probably telling Billie Bob that it was OK, and that he should go get the next one.

The inning continued, and things did not get a whole lot better. Billie Bob began to get the ball near the plate, and the bored batters began to swing at his offerings. Unfortunately, they tended to hit the snot out of his offerings too. Fielders made classic miscues and bad throws, and runners circled bases with dizzying frequency. The catcher totally gave up even throwing the ball, so every single or walk just led to uncontested steals of second and third.

It was awful.

There must have been a merciful Ten Runs Per Inning Rule in effect, because I can't recall any outs being made, when the All-Star team took the field. Their pitcher was a lanky boy with a whip of an arm, and a funky half-sidearm motion that had the Sample batters bailing out for fear of their lives. The boy had good control though, and he mowed them down. One called third strike, one baffled swinging strikeout, one feeble roller to the first baseman, and the All-Stars came back in to bat.

As bad as the game was, the crowd was worse. The All-Stars' parents were obnoxious. I don't know if this was some form of challenge match based on some personal issue or what, but there was some serious taunting and insulting going on. The players were laughing and totally dissing their opponents, but kids will do that. I think I probably did it sometimes when I was kid too.

But the parents were getting real bad. Though most of them began just cheering their own success and patting themselves on the back for having such talented children, soon that became unfulfilling, and they began vocal suggestions to the Sample players to "give up the game", or "maybe you guys should practice once in a while", or "we'll bring the girls team next time", or "what do you expect from such a hick town?"

Well, the Sample parents reached their limit too, and began to vocalize back, calling the All-Stars' coach various things, uttering direct responses to their counterparts' taunts, and even insulting the players for being so conceited.

It was getting downright ugly, all right.

By the third inning, neither team had any interest in playing any more, and both grandstands were giving off really hateful vibes for each other.

I wasn't even watching the game anymore. The debacle was so out of hand – it was, by my count, 26 to 0 in the top of the third inning, with no sign of a home team rally. I was soaking in the whole scene, watching the grandstands with far more interest than the action on the field.

Then, suddenly, as if on a signal that I had missed, everybody in the Sample crowd turned and looked right at me. Stunned, I quickly glanced behind me to see what they were looking at, and I noticed that the visitors' grandstand was all gawking right at me as well. So was the umpire, and the pitcher, and the catcher, who was now on his feet. In a split second, I had gone from being invisible to being the center of everybody's attention.

Panic gripped me. This was like some twisted horror movie, when in a flash, a whole town turned insane and slaughtered the strange intruder as a sacrifice to the baseball gods.

They all looked at me for about a second or maybe two. What had I done? Had I inadvertently yelled out something obscene? Had I farted really really loud without noticing it? It was all so quick...

CLANG!!! rang out right next to me! **"SHIT!"** I blurted out. For a split-second I thought somebody had shot at me. My outburst stunned the whole crowd. Then, it all clicked. The Sample batter, still in the batter's box, had popped up a fastball from Lankyboy, and it had gone high and straight back. The catcher and umpire, being only a few feet away, knew it was over the backstop, and they looked at me, no doubt expecting me to make some clever one-handed catch or something. They, along with everybody else, probably then began to wonder if I was going to get hit on the head, since I obviously had no clue that the ball was zooming my way.

So when the foul pop slammed dead center into the empty metal trash barrel I was standing next to (*aha, see the foreshadowing two pages ago??*), it produced that startling clamor that nearly made me crap my pants.

OK, now came the hard part: trying to look nonchalant about getting the ball and tossing it back. I leaned into the barrel, and grabbed the ball. I stood up and examined it briefly, as if to say "why the fuck did you go and do that to me?" Then, with a smirk, I flipped it casually over the backstop to the catcher. Fortunately, it made it over the fence and saved me the shame of multiple attempts.

Everybody was still giving me an odd look – or at least, so it seemed – so maybe my presence there served a sort of a unifying purpose. They could now all unite against the weird passer-through, and stop hating one another.

So, with a glance at my wrist where my watch shoulda been, I deduced it was time to depart. I waited until the next pitch was thrown, just to let people's attention go back to the field – which only partially worked, there were still many eyes on me – and then I turned to walk away. The whole thing suddenly struck me funny, and I couldn't help laughing. I kept picturing myself and what I must have looked like when that ball came down. I was probably only about five strides away from the backstop when I began to laugh out loud. I took a quick peek over my shoulder, and, sure enough, most eyes were on me again. But this time, I just kept laughing.

I hope there was no big brawl after I left. And I also hope that I missed the greatest comeback in baseball history that night.

Somehow, I doubt the latter, but not the former.