

## Florida Keys – 2008

This is NOT an “official” trip letter since I don’t write such things on domestic trips. But it is a way to let a few folks know about our recent outing to Florida. The reason for the trip was the annual Solar Physics Division meeting, in Fort Lauderdale this year, and since we’ve always wanted to see the Keys we decided to tack on that sort of an activity at the end of the meeting. Even though we knew it would be hot and humid and well into the low season (which begins around 5 May down there and we’re talking the end of May here).

Flew there, via Phoenix, on Monday. had meetings Tuesday through Friday; during which Dawna bummed around, primarily going to Consignment Shops / Junk Stores. Had some reasonable dinners including shrimp in our room (from Publix) the first night, pizza at a place recommended by our Chicago relatives, nice/fancy fish at a place they also recommended, and regular fish at a spot across from our motel. Also participated in the SPD dinner cruise and the food was better than usual for such events; perhaps because it included an open bar. Fun cruising the various waterways around Ft. Lauderdale as the sun went down, and chatting with lots of people.

On Saturday we headed down the Keys, hot and humid as it had been all *week*. Took the freeway until we got just below Miami and then a major city street (Hiway-1) to do a bit of sightseeing. Not too much traffic but did take awhile, but not nearly as long as it would have had we gone down on the ocean road I’m sure. Impressive rapid transit, Sabina, next to our road first up high and then later a dedicated bus road that ran parallel to our road. Took the scenic (roundabout) road into Key Largo where the scenery was swampland. Stopped at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park as it sounded interesting in the guidebook we were using (*Hidden Florida Keys & Everglades*). Nice visitor center and displays. A glass bottom boat was going to head out to the coral reef in 20 minutes so we signed on. Probably took 45 minutes to get out there, the first part being through the mangrove “forest”, spent an hour on the reef looking at coral and fish, and then did the return bit. No rain, lots of coral, quite a few fish including a fine eel, a few nurse sharks, and various other sights. The glass bottom is not nearly as good as the glass windows on the side of the ‘submarine’ we did in Fiji, however. Back down the road we went, stopping for everything and anything of interest. One stop was at the *Florida Keys Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center* where injured birds are treated and then returned to the wild when ready; got to see lots of neat birds up close. We happened to get there at feeding time and a worker was throwing fish out and the birds were really active. Dawna participated and one bird even took the fish right out of her hand. Had a late lunch (or early dinner) at a bar on the waterfront that was starting to rock pretty well. Good fish (again). Stayed in a rather regular motel with an ocean view. This was in a somewhat established town a bit off the main hiway and the next morning we enjoyed driving around the neighborhood looking at the houses and flora as well as some screech owls. Initially we thought the fancy looking places on water inlets were duplexes but we finally figured out the second driveway/garage was for the boat; i.e., the handout we took for one place that was for sale talks of a 4 car garage. The other interesting thing in the

neighborhood was how nearly all the driveways were done with pavers rather than cement; which looked quite nice.

On down the road we went, stopping at the Turtle Hospital for their 10AM tour but it was full because they had a couple of busloads of school kids going through. Nice gift store (and visitor center) and nice people, however, and M got some good (in my opinion) items. Stopped along the way for one or two short walks in the mangroves. Then did a longer (2 miles to an island) walk on the old Flager bridge. Flager initially built a railroad from Miami to Key West, it got wrecked in a hurricane, much of the roadway got reused when they built the hiway, but some of it runs parallel to the hiway and is being turned into a bike/hike path. This particular old bridge fits into the latter category. Was hot and humid but we survived, partially by the use of umbrellas for shade. Looking down into the water, as the folks at the Turtle Hospital had suggested, we saw a half dozen turtles a few sharks and one ray. Pretty rewarding. I will admit by the time we did our 4 miles we were plenty ready to get into the air-conditioned car, however, and once there we found a piece of shade, kept the engine/AC running, and had a nice cold beer. We had picked up one of those lousy Styrofoam cold chests back in Ft. L and it did the job. Stopped for another nature walk a bit later and then arrived at Key West in the mid afternoon. Checked into the first B&B we tried, as nothing seemed full it being both the off season and Sunday. The idea here was to be near the action so we could rest a bit, clean up, and then go exploring on foot. Which is exactly what we did beginning with a short walking tour (in the book) that pointed out architectural old mansions. Then into the active area of the old town where we hit Happy Hour for a couple of drinks each at an outside bar, followed by more wandering and then dinner at an Italian restaurant where my pasta was better than Dawna's. We then strolled around Mallory square where the street performers were doing their thing and the crowd was gathering to watch the sunset; a mandatory activity in Key West.

A good/long night's sleep as breakfast was not going to be served until 8:30 AM. It was an elaborate Continental event with many pastries, quiches, fruit, good coffee, etc. Definitely enjoyable. Then we walked over the to White House, so named because President Truman used it for two vacations each year and other presidents have visited it a time or two. It is furnished like it was for Harry and is basically a museum. You have a guided tour (5 of us), and are reminded of what a pivotal person he was. Quite enjoyable. Back (all these items were within a few blocks of our accommodation) to our spot, loaded the car and headed northward. Ate a little lunch in the A/C'd car under another piece of shade and then did the 1 PM tour at the Turtle Hospital; we being the only people on the tour (off season and Monday) this time. Nice guide and quite an education seeing the different turtles, learning of their medical problems, and how they are or aren't recovering, with the goal always being to get them back into the wild if possible. It was all started by a chap who was running a motel and put some turtles in tanks to add to the appeal of his motel by letting the guests watch them during feeding time. He got hooked on these reptiles and gave up the motel aspects of things. Onward with another nature walk or two and soon we were off the Keys heading towards the motel in Ft. L. This time we took a combination of tollway and freeways, the latter being crowded with the end of Rush Hour but not terrible. Back at the motel we unloaded our now-semi-full car, ate

dinner in the room to use up some of our supplies, packed “down” for the upcoming airplane flight home, and hit the hay (after printing out boarding passes in the lobby).

Up at 4:45 AM, on the road a bit after 5, only a couple miles to the airport, turned in the rental car (taking advantage of the yearly rate of \$3.25 per gallon that LM has with Avis), and caught our flight to Phoenix. It is on this flight that I’ve been writing this note. Again with my trustee GPS to see where we are at different times. For this trip I loaded up various topographical sections since they have so much more detail in them. Our route missed some but hit some, for example showing me when we flew near White Sands on the way down. Speaking of the GPS, it was fun to use it on our glass bottom boat trip to see the channel through the marsh that we took to get out to the open water. Plane change at Phoenix went fine, got to San Jose on time, and Eli picked us up immediately. Was home a bit after noon and I went to the lab for the remainder of the day while Dawna did the wash.

Next outing will be the Olympic Trials in Eugene near the end of the month; well actually I’ll do another trip to GSFC between now and then.