



Unhidden Treasure

By Robyn Linn Weinstein

For centuries, pirates and salvagers journeyed to Duck Key in search of lost treasure. As nearby reefs wrecked countless ships, goods spilled onto the sea before washing ashore on nearby islands. Wanderers would arrive in hopes of finding lost jewels. They had yet to find what modern-day visitors here have discovered: the treasure is the island itself.

Like the mariners of old, my boyfriend, Albert, and I were in a mood for a little adventure when one summer day we decided to hop on our 29-foot Boston Whaler and cruise to Duck Key. Over the years, Albert had heard much about the island, a favorite of seafarers and nature lovers, but we had never found the time to explore it ourselves. Today, of course, Duck Key – a magnificent combination of five small islands that elbow out of the Florida Keys just north of Marathon – is hardly deserted, with plenty of homes and a magnificent resort. But the island offers no less of a treasure.

Because of the rough, six-foot seas, the trip, which would normally take three hours, took about four hours from Miami's bay. After almost losing my map because of the wet, windy conditions,

we ended the ride by docking at the Hawk's Cay Resort & Marina, where we would stay three nights. Duck Key's five islands are connected by white Venetian bridges, which seem to get little automotive use, as cars are rarely seen running once on the island. From the moment we landed, we knew these islands, which have only 10 miles of paved road, must be explored using neither car nor yacht, but a different kind of vessel: the bicycle.

The bike rental center is next to the Indies Spa and tennis courts. I asked the attendant if we needed a map since we were going to explore the whole island, but he assured us there was no possibility of getting lost, given that the route was a small circle. The attendant laughed as he saw my nervousness at not having a map for our small excursion; Albert laughed as well, but then I



told him that, after his having a few beers, I would be the one who would have to find our way back. Albert had decided to purchase an ice-cold-beer at the resort's Truman's Bar. The mango margarita had sounded tempting, but I decided to pass on mixing alcohol and the Florida heat.

Getting on the bike took me back to Cape Cod, where I used to ride beach cruisers. I had nearly forgotten how the breaks worked, having to back-peddle to slow down or stop would have been quite amusing going down hill. Off we went in search of the island's residential neighborhoods.

The commercial sector, consisting mainly of the resort, is located on Indies Island, the northernmost of the five islets and the entry point for those traveling here by car. Over the years, the entrance to Duck Key has changed as bridges were built and roads widened. The height of Duck Key's development era began in 1953, when Coral Gables developer Bryan Newkirk purchased the islands during a round of golf at the Riviera Country Club. According to published reports, Ted Semple, then the city attorney in Coral Gables, kept telling Newkirk about the island, pressing him to buy it. Newkirk, wanting to end the discussion and finish the game, agreed to a price of \$47,000.

Apparently, he never regretted the hasty decision, as he quick-

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ly began turning it into a destination. He changed the original shape of the island, filling low spots, excavating four miles of canals, and forming the five small islands. A landscaped, stone entranceway was erected; buildings representing a West Indian architectural style were conceived; and marvelous bridges were built.

Those bridges are among the highlights of touring the islands, whether on foot or bike. To cross from Indies onto the other islands, you must first traverse the Truman Bridge, which links Indies Island to the residential sector. The bridge was named after Harry Truman, who visited in 1964. The then 80-year-old former president arrived with his daughter and her family, saying he would stay several weeks, or as long as his money held out.

We were feeling the same attachment to the island as we took in the breathtaking views and pedaled past spectacular homes. Seeing all of the beautiful tiki-huts and backyard barbeques made me hungry. Perhaps I should've packed a picnic; but there were no public parks or even places to sit. The only option was to continue riding. I didn't want to head back to the resort just yet because we were nearly halfway through our island adventure.

The entire bike-tour took less than two hours, but we took our time to admire the homes and landscapes, imagining ourselves living in one of the seascape residences. After picking our favorites, we headed toward the South-end of the island and noted the individuality of each home. We counted three lots for sale, but not a single home appeared to be on the market. That was the proof we needed that life on Duck Key must be truly fabulous; once you move here you never want to leave.

Most people who live on the island are lucky enough to travel by boat on weekends. Some stay here during the winter months, yet a few happen to be locals – fisherman and retired couples who inhabit the island year-round.

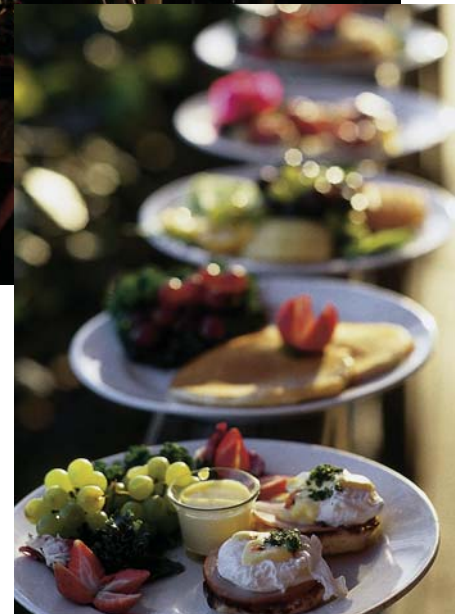
As we explored the island, it was easy at times to forget that we were pedaling beach cruisers on a summer afternoon in Florida. The wind teased my long black hair, and I could barely feel the sun warming my body as we road through the island's dirt paths. We felt alone on the trails even though there were homes and villas within a heartbeat. We had the whole island to ourselves, save for the pelicans and doves flying overhead.

The area's birds are an essential component of Duck Key's identity. In 1772, while publishing a guide for mariners, writer William Gerard de Brahm wrote of the birds known as the double-crested cormorants called "ducks." He also described the island as having an uncanny shape of a duck's head.

Duck Key, of course, is home to plenty of other wildlife. Among the favorite activities of visitors is the "the dolphin experience," where anyone can interact with the fun-loving creatures in the natural saltwater lagoon.

As we rode on, Albert reminded me that it was almost dinnertime; and I felt my hunger return. I started to ponder how well a little fish joint or fruit stand would do here. For now, one of Hawk's Cay's five restaurants would suffice.

We started heading back to the resort and reached our last bridge. The detail was so intense and very European. The white, angelic motifs added the perfect contrast to the newly built homes and nearby million-dollar yachts. As the sun grew closer to the west, we found ourselves on top of one of the Venetian bridges and paused to look around and take in the beauty. We were one with nature and at her mercy. Every hill was a tribulation of life's great adventure; and we were the stars. ■



Exploring Duck Key

Getting There: Duck Key is located in the Florida Keys, about 90 miles south of Miami and 8 miles north of Marathon Airport. By car, take U.S. 1 south to mile marker 61.

Where to Stay: Either dock your boat or enjoy a hotel room or cottage villa at Hawk's Cay Resort, 61 Hawk's Cay Blvd., 305-743-7000, www.hawkscay.com. Nightly rates during the low season (April 17 to Dec. 22) range from \$220 to \$350 a night (for rooms); \$380 to \$1,200 (for suites); and \$390 to \$1,300 (for villas). In addition, there are numerous hotels in nearby Marathon.

Bike Rentals: Bikes are rented hourly at the Tennis Garden from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Child, teen and adult-size bikes are available. Rates: \$6 per hour; \$12 for 3 hours; \$18 all day.

Food: Before hitting the bike path, fuel up with breakfast at the resort's Palm Terrace, which each morning features a gourmet breakfast buffet (\$14.95, shown inset). Or cool off at Truman's Bar (shown top), which offers an assortment of beverages.