

November 30, 2005 – Key West

We drove down to Key West today. This is the most famous Key, and is dotted with famous houses, monuments, and other landmarks. These include Ernest Hemingway's house, the Little White House which was Harry Truman's winter vacation home, numerous old hotels, a famous lighthouse, and various other sights. Key West, like all the other islands, and southern Florida itself, is flat and relies on the coral reefs offshore for protection from hurricanes. The down side of this is that these same reefs keep the waves down, waves which are needed to turn rocky beaches into sandy beaches. Hence much of the sand on the beaches of the Keys and southern Florida has been shipped in from elsewhere. All the beach sand in Key West was shipped in from the Bahamas. We took a trolley tour around the Key, and also walked around the town ourselves. Lunch was at a vegetarian restaurant. Throughout this area we notice a lot of stray cats roaming around. On the trolley tour, we were told that they were the descendants of the cats Ernest Hemingway brought here. As such they are all protected animals.

We drove out of Key West at ~ 7:00 PM. The traffic leaving Key West was much greater than that coming in. We believe this indicates that very few people actually live on Key West, and these being primarily wealthy retired people. All the hotels, gift shops, restaurants, and other tourist traps on the island are then manned by people living on the other Keys north of Key West. Hence the huge outflow of cars and people northwards at night after the shops have closed. From my pre-vacation web surfing, hotels in Key West were the most expensive of all the Keys.



From Miami all the way down to Key West, we noticed several things. First, there is widespread hurricane damage everywhere. Many of trees we saw were partially uprooted, blown over, or had damaged or bent branches. On every neighborhood we saw houses with boarded windows, roofs with tiles missing, walls with cracks in it, etc... Also, there was at least one, and usually several piles of garbage on every street awaiting removal. We notices these garbage piles often included chairs, tables, appliances, broken trees, and other items people do not throw away on a common basis. These were basically items that were damaged from the hurricanes. And yes, we saw the occasional yacht sitting in the middle of a park or road, or on somebody's rooftop. For a state that gets hurricanes every year, one would think the road system would be designed to handle excessive wind and water. We guess not. Roads everywhere were under repair.

Second, the relative make-up of Miami and southern Florida is majority Hispanic, followed by non-Hispanic whites, and then blacks of various descents. Within the Hispanic category, we saw very few Mexicans. Instead, they were predominantly Cubans, followed by people from other South and Central American countries such as Panama, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, etc... The Cubans came to Florida due to the rise of Fidel Castro. The other Hispanics came here throughout the 20th century for various reasons. The result is that we heard more Spanish than English in South Florida. This was true everywhere; restaurants, stores, banks, on the street, and at tourist sites.

The blacks in South Florida were either native African – Americans, or from one of the Caribbean nations, such as Haiti or the Dominican Republic. We could not tell the difference between the different Hispanic groups, but we could tell the difference between African – Americans and the Caribbean blacks. The latter usually dressed more formally, and spoke grammatically proper English but with strong accents, often sound like French people speaking English. The former spoke American slang, and tended to dress more casually, often in sports jerseys.

Last, the large presence of immigrants from tropical countries affected the local architecture. Many of the houses and small buildings closely resembled the wealthier neighborhoods in Newton birth country of Malaysia. Casy remarked that they also looked similar to what is found in my birth country of Indonesia.