

## Where on earth am I?

First a few clues. I've driven down an interminably long causeway over forty-two bridges.... I've passed signs to Marathon and Matecumbe....I've marvelled at the dozens of predatory pelicans, each one regally perched atop its own dock post along the Seven Mile Bridge....I've finally arrived at a Caribbean enclave tacked on to the southern tip of a northern continent. So where am I? Key West of course, my undisputed favourite place in the entire US of A.

Its idiosyncratic bohemian ambience and laid back lifestyle is utterly captivating. The word 'key' comes from the Spanish word 'cayo' meaning a small island. There are hundreds of Florida Keys extending from about fifteen miles south of Miami in a gentle arc for over a hundred miles. They have names ranging from the downright prosaic to the beguilingly poetic....Little Duck, Big Pine, Raccoon, Loggerhead, Knockemdown, Sugarloaf, Biscayne, Largo, Bahia Honda, Boca Chica and Islamadora.

Key West is the southernmost point in the continental US and is closer to Havana than Miami. I have special memories of my three mid-winter breaks in a sub-tropical paradise. I can conjure up a vivid kaleidoscope of the sights, sounds and smells of this magical place.

Swimming in the Gulf of Mexico in an impenetrably milky sea as warm as a jacuzzi.

Sipping a Mojito or three on the aptly named Sunset Pier as our planet's star slipped below the watery horizon.

Sitting on a bar stool in Sloppy Joe's listening to raucous rock bands belting out their stuff.

Marvelling at the exodus from gargantuan cruise ships of hordes of equally gargantuan people, most of them in capacious shorts the size of bell tents.

Returning down Duval Street to our inn by pedicab, the ubiquitous bicycle powered rickshaws, after a bibulous dinner. Cleaving through the balmy air suffused with the scents of exotic vegetation and pulsating with the music pouring from every bar.

Resisting the blandishments of the many Drag Queens to grace their particular establishments.

Browsing and tasting in our favourite emporium, 'Peppers of Key West,' with its bewildering array of hot sauces.

Chortling at the many amusing signs on shop doors. My favourite is this:

## **Business Hours**

### **We're Open**

Most days about 9 or 10

Occasionally as early as 7

But some days as late as 12 or 1

### **We're Closed**

About 5.30 or 6

Occasionally about 4 or 5

But sometimes as late as 11 or 12

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Some days or afternoons we aren't here at all and lately I've been here just about all the time

We were there in 2002 and experienced the most unusual of condolences. An American couple at the next table in a restaurant hearing our British accents leant over and with sad faces said, "We're so sorry for your loss." Registering our startled expressions they continued, "We heard about Princess Margaret's passing and it must have been a shock for you." We didn't have the heart to tell them that as lifelong republicans her demise hadn't really hit us very hard.

500 Words