

Southeastern United States

January 2021



Bob and Molly Hillery

2021 started out as 2020 ended, with no international travel and many parts of the United States in some form of Covid restrictions. Nevertheless, we decided once again that we would be just as safe traveling domestically as we would staying at home in Mason. So, we planned a trip to the southeastern states of Florida, South Carolina and Georgia—or, at least, a few of its cities along the coast.

We repeated visits to St Augustine, Savannah and Charleston—cities that we have always enjoyed—and went to Tampa/St Petersburg for a second or third time. Fort Myers was next—and we think this was a first—and then we went to the southernmost point of the continental US at Key West, before returning via Fort Lauderdale to Orlando.

We enjoyed the ocean views, the history of some of America's oldest cities, and—of course—some excellent meals. The weather was less than stellar for the first week (40 to 50F) but warmed into the seventies for our second week. We thoroughly enjoyed the two weeks away from home.

Florida Road Trip, January 2020

Thursday January 7

We had stayed at the airport Marriott overnight and had breakfast there before taking the shuttle to catch our 11am flight to Orlando. The flight was a little bumpy, but we arrived on time shortly after 1pm.

We picked up a rental car and drove north via I-4, I-95, and Route 1 to St Augustine and arrived at the Courtyard, St Augustine Beach, shortly after 4pm. I took a two mile walk on the nearby beach and later we drove into St Augustine for dinner at Reserved, a large southern house. It was mild enough for us to sit outside and enjoy a very good meal.

Friday January 8

We were up soon after 8 and drove to a local diner for breakfast. We then drove into town and parked near the cathedral to take a walking tour of the old town area. We went inside the cathedral for the first time and then walked through the oldest section of town. Many of the buildings are on the National Historic Register and reflect the Spanish (twice) and British governance before this part of Florida became part of the United States.



The Governor's House and Constitution Plaza



*St Augustine
Cathedral*



Oldest Wooden School House in the USA and the Spanish Fort

We ended our tour at the old Spanish fort on the intra-coastal waterway and then returned to the hotel for the rest of the afternoon.



The Intra- coastal Waterway And the Ponce de Leon Bridge

Tonight, we ate at a nearby restaurant attached to a hotel. Despite our concerns about hotel restaurants, this was an excellent meal with a very pleasant ambiance.

Saturday January 9

We checked out about 8:30 and went for breakfast at the same diner we had enjoyed yesterday. Then we set off north to Charleston SC, driving along Route 1 and I-95 but getting off the expressways for long stretches where possible and using US 17. It was an almost 300-mile drive but generally quite pleasant, particularly off the main highways. There were glimpses of old plantations and many fine examples of old trees with lots of Spanish moss – true Old South. We arrived in Charleston about 3:30 and, after checking in and being shocked at the parking rate, I went for a walk of almost 3 miles – and found a local parking garage at a more reasonable rate.

We used Uber to get to Magnolia, a “Southern” restaurant in the historic district and had a very good meal.

Sunday January 10

We walked about ½ mile to breakfast at the Broken Egg and then I went for my 3-mile walk.

About 12:30 we left the hotel and walked to the Visitor Center where we began our almost 2-hour city tour. The driver/narrator was very interesting to listen to and we heard a lot about the history of Charleston (where the first shots of the Civil War were fired), its historical buildings (the downtown area is second only to Rome in the number – not age -of its listed buildings), the civil rights movement here and so much more. And, of course, were able to see much of the beautiful architecture dating back almost 400 years – albeit from the confines of the bus. It was a very enjoyable and educational ride.



Historic Charleston And The Citadel



Tonight we walked to a nearby Lebanese restaurant for dinner. It was very similar to Phoenician Taverna and we had an excellent meal and a good chat with a regular.

Monday January 11

We walked 1 ½ blocks for breakfast and then checked out. We had an easy drive to Savannah and a pleasant one-hour stop in Beaufort. After checking in at the Fairfield, I went for a three-mile walk to the river and back through at least six of the famous garden squares of this city.

Tonight, we went to Repeal 33, a restaurant right next door to the hotel where we had an excellent five-course tasting menu.



Tuesday January 12

We walked to the riverfront for breakfast and then got on the Old Town Trolley. This took us along the major historic streets of the downtown area, past the Roman Catholic Cathedral, the First African American Baptist Church, the second oldest Synagogue and many other noteworthy buildings. We also saw many of the beautiful tree-lined squares which are the hallmark of this city and learned a little of the history of Savannah and its rich past as the cotton capital of the world.



*The Squares
of
Savannah*





Savannah Riverfront with container port in the distance



Today, the center of town is basically for the tourist, but the port here is the fourth largest in the country – despite being more than twenty miles upriver from the ocean.

It was a very chilly day so we cut our walking short and returned to the hotel before 3pm – after which I went for a 3-mile walk before dinner. Tonight, we ate at Alligator Soul, a subterranean restaurant that specializes in..... alligator! We both had it as an appetizer (good) before a seafood entrée. Excellent meal in unusual and interesting surroundings.

Wednesday January 13

We checked out of the hotel, drove about 30 minutes to a Denny's for breakfast and then continued on the 350-mile drive to St Petersburg. It was mostly expressway and fast highways, but we were still on the road over six hours. It was especially slow in the Tampa, Clearwater area and the fact that it started to rain didn't help.

I still had time for a short walk before we drove closer to the center of St Petersburg for dinner at a seafood restaurant. The meal wasn't the best we have had, and the waiter seemed quite disinterested, but we had some good drinks – eventually.

Thursday January 14

We had breakfast at a nearby Waffle House and then checked out. It was a pleasantly warm morning and, for the first time in a week, we had some clear skies and sunshine.

We drove all the way to Fort Myers on US Route 41 or nearby Florida roads which ran essentially on the Gulf Coast. We rarely saw the water, however, as the best houses and resorts were blocking our view. We had a Starbucks stop in Sarasota and really enjoyed the leisurely 120-miles drive. It was a pleasant change from the 70MPH expressways of yesterday.

We arrived at our hotel in Fort Myers and I went for a 3 ¼ mile walk before we got ready to drive a little west for dinner. The restaurant was a small, rather crowded Italian (not unlike many in Rome, for example) and the meal was equally authentic and good – complete with wine, limoncello and grappa.

Friday January 15

We had breakfast at a local Waffle House and then drove across the water to Sanibel Island. This is a 12-mile-long strip which is very nicely landscaped and has many high-end homes and resorts. Unfortunately, there are few places to park (except if for an hour or more) so we didn't get out to find the beaches. We drove the length and then returned to the mainland and drove

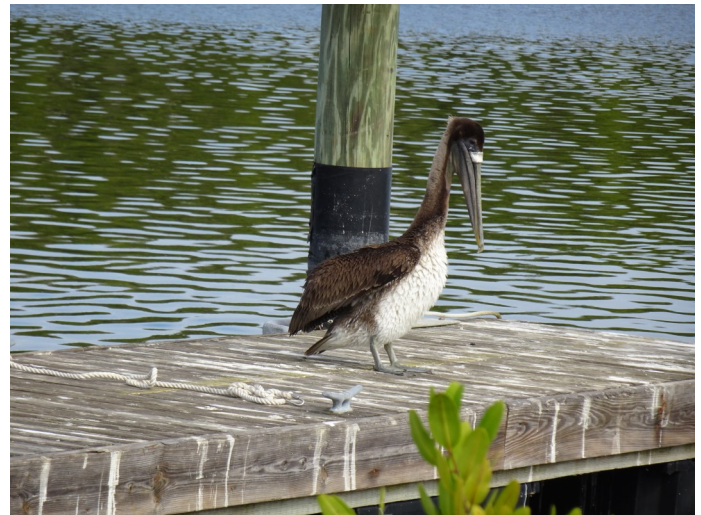


Sanibel Island

south on US41 via Naples and into the northern end of the Everglades National Park. We went as far as Everglades City, driving through swampland but, at least in this area, it was very heavily forested with palms and other trees.

We returned to Fort Myers via a slightly different route and I-75.

On our route today we saw road signs warning of bears, Gopher Turtles and Florida Panther – although we didn't see any! We did see lots of birds, including the huge pelican.



Tonight, we went to Harold's for dinner, in the same part of town as the Italian we had enjoyed last night. It was a very small café with a very attentive staff and we enjoyed another good meal.

Saturday January 16

We checked out and went to Mel's Diner (yes, the same one as in Sacramento) and then started our journey to Key West. We started on I-75 but left that at Naples and followed Route 41 south and east from there through the Everglades. It was a very pleasant and easy drive – palms, forest areas, swamp – and a good road. We had been told of a loop road that detoured part of Route 41, but which often had good views of alligators. Unfortunately, we missed the turning but, when we got to the point where it re-joined 41, we decided to double back for at least a little while. It turned out that we soon saw alligators, sunning themselves at the roadside or quietly resting in the nearby water. The drive was also quite scenic, so we ended up doing the entire loop (about 16 miles of which were unpaved) and adding about 40 miles to our 300-mile trip for the day.



***Florida Everglades
Loop Road off
Route 41***

We joined US Route 1 south of Miami and were on that road for over 120 miles along the length of the Florida Keys. The first half was quite built-up with endless shops, hotels and cafes and very few glimpses of the ocean. The speed limit was generally no more than 40 MPH and often we were in stop and go traffic. Fortunately, the final 60 miles were much more open, and the speed limit was a much better 55MPH. We also were in sight of the water on both sides most of the time, especially on the very long bridges and causeways connecting the many keys. This part of the drive was much more pleasant.

We arrived in Key West after 7 hours of driving at 5pm, giving me enough time for a 3-mile walk before dinner. The area we were in at the north end of the 4-mile-long island was away from the older, more historic district and, frankly, not much to write home about. However, we got a glimpse of the old Key West when we went to dinner (via Uber) in an old house converted to a very nice restaurant. We could see that the buildings in this part of town were much older and not unlike areas of Savannah or Charleston. In addition, we had an excellent meal.

Sunday January 17

We had breakfast at a local Ihop (very busy) and then drove to the southernmost point in the Continental USA. From there it was a short drive to the waterfront harbor and old town where we parked for a walk around. We walked to the waterfront,



sat watching the boats on the water for a while and then decided to take the “train” tour of the city. It was a 70-minute ride through all the downtown streets, and we learned a lot about the history of the town and the three boom and bust eras – cigars, shipwreck salvage, and sponge. The first left (for Tampa when the owners got a better deal), the second lost to improved navigation round the outer reef and the third ended when a blight wiped out the sponge.

There are dozens of huge mansions throughout the town, built as a result of one or more of these boom times and the whole of the historic area is a lot like the plantation towns of Georgia and South Carolina – a much more beautiful place than we had first imagined and well worth the visit. There are now several streets filled with bars and cafes as tourism (and Hemingway) have brought a modern-day boom.



The city was President Truman’s “Little White House” and has been home to a US Navy installation since 1833.



Hemingway Home and the Man Himself



***The end of US Route 1, the first Cuban Bank
.... And the ubiquitous Cuban Chicken***



KEY

WEST

Tonight, we walked about ¼ mile to dinner at the Tavern 'n' Town. It is part of the Marriott Hotel, although not in the main building. Despite our reticence about eating in hotels, we had a good meal in very pleasant surroundings.

Monday January 18

After breakfast (ihop again) we started the drive from Key West back to the mainland and two days in Fort Lauderdale. The drive back across the Keys was a lot easier than the drive out and, after one stop for Starbucks, we skirted Miami to the west. We arrived in Fort Lauderdale about 3pm and I had time for a 3-mile walk before we went into the center of town for dinner. It was an excellent Italian meal (waiter from Capri) sitting right at the waterfront (four feet away) – not the ocean, but the series of canals which crisscross the city.

Tuesday January 19

We had breakfast at a local IHop and then drove to the waterfront in Fort Lauderdale. We parked and took a walk along the waterfront and then stopped for a drink at one of the many bars overlooking the ocean – we were on the strip of land beyond the intracoastal waterway. It was pleasantly warm (low seventies) and a nice way to spend a few hours.



Fort Lauderdale

Tonight, we ate at Shooters, a seafood restaurant on the water in downtown. Another very good meal, outside by the water.

Wednesday January 20

We had breakfast at iHop again and then drove into town to pick up A1A North along the coast. From Fort Lauderdale to West Palm Beach, it was ritzy homes and resorts, either on the oceanside or facing inland across the Intracoastal Waterway. Unlike the area further north (near Cocoa Beach), here we were able to see both waters much of the time, so it was an extremely pleasant drive.

When we were almost in Palm Beach, the traffic stopped for no apparent reason. While we were waiting, I Googled Mar A Largo and found that we were only ½ mile away! It turns out that President Trump was on his way from the airport to his new home and we were just a little short of the motorcade route. Once traffic started again, we had to turn off A1A and so we were driving along the road he had just passed on – but hundreds of his supporters were still lining the route. It was an interesting little episode, and the detour took us to a local Starbucks.

The route north of Palm Beach was less attractive, and it was getting a little late, so we got on the Florida Turnpike for the final 120 miles into Orlando and our hotel near the airport. We ate downtown at The Capital Grille – a great way to end a very pleasant trip.

Thursday January 21

We had a lazy morning before our early afternoon flight home. This arrived on time but, unfortunately, our car wouldn't start when we arrived back at the Marriott. AAA got us going, so we were only delayed about an hour, arriving home in time for dinner at Phoenician Taverna.

