

Florida's Key ingredient



SOME travellers swear by those hop-on/hop off tour buses as a way of acclimatising to a new place. For me it was a Noddy-style train which trundled its way through Key West that proved the best way of getting my bearings to this southernmost tip of America.

The driver of the Conch Train proved to be a most illuminating guide to the vibrant and quirky town which is the last of the long line of islands of the Florida archipelago.

A train full of tourists passing by his house would probably not have amused Ernest Hemingway, who lived here in the 1930s, but the islanders are immensely proud of the author who spent his time here writing, fishing for marlin and drinking (profusely).

His house, built in the Spanish colonial style, is now a fascinating museum with a tour that ends on an inspiring note in the studio where he produced *For Whom*

ADAM HELLIKER discovers why Ernest Hemingway, and dolphins, fell in love with an island off the Florida coast

The Bell Tolls and *The Snows Of Kilimanjaro*.

The house is home to 54 cats, which are descendants of Papa Hemingway's polydactyl (six-toed) cat, Snow White, which was given to the author by a local fisherman.

"Cats gave him a sense of peace when he was writing," explains the house manager Jacqui Sands.

Key West may be built on impenetrable rock but it did not deter Hemingway's second wife Pauline, who was determined to have the island's first swimming pool built in the garden – whatever the cost.

The pool was meant to be a surprise for Ernest, who was away covering the Spanish Civil War (and canoodling with the journalist Martha Gellhorn, who was to

become his next wife) but on his return he was furious at the astronomical bill. You can still see, embedded in cement by the pool, a coin which Hemingway had tossed on the ground, ranting that Pauline had "spent his last cent".

No wonder he preferred to slip away for more rum at one of his favourite watering holes, Sloppy Joe's, which is still doing a roaring trade, and was so named in the 1930s because the owner was taunted for running a "sloppy" place when the ice in his drinks kept melting in the heat.

The bar holds the annual Hemingway lookalike contest, when around 100 men sporting beards compete to see who most resembles the grizzled author.

Our road trip along US Highway

1 started in Miami, with two days at the Loews Hotel with the beach on one side and the city on the other.

Joined by my wife and our 12-year-old daughter, we had planned a demanding itinerary to see as much as possible of the Keys, starting with a visit to the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, where we clambered aboard a boat to snorkel among the mangrove swamps and reefs of what is billed as America's "first undersea park".

Captain Darrell certainly did his best to ensure we enjoyed a marvellous two hours dipping underwater to see angelfish, parrot fish and the occasional (and harmless) nurse shark.

That night we stayed in a simple

room at the Amara Cay Hotel, the perfect place to relax with a supper served on the beach of grilled jumbo shrimp and Key Lime Pie, followed by a drink around the fire pit, listening to tales of the ever-growing size of their catch by a group of New York bankers on a boys' fishing break.

The next day, after a stop just off the highway at Islamorada for a fulfilling breakfast of pancakes at the Green Turtle Inn, turned out to be one of the most delightful of our trip. It was spent at the Dolphin Research Center, where assistant Erica Wisniewski introduced us to her family of dolphins and sea lions, many of whom have been rescued from injury.

My daughter Marina was fascinated to watch the dolphins receiving their daily medical check-up and then even more delighted to have the chance to tickle the tummy of one playful individual, who turned out to be a descendant of Flipper, the star of the hit 1970s American TV series.

A visit to this non-profit centre was uplifting and it was easy to understand how battle-damaged

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



ALL ABOARD:
A train tour of Key West, left, Route 1 highway, top, the Dolphin Research Center, far left

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