

Exploring the Dry Tortugas

by Eric Miller

After nearly a full day of travel from Key West aboard my friend's schooner, the Trader, I had my Columbus moment, land on the western horizon. Powered by light wind and a rumbling onboard motor, we eased in at five knots toward the Dry Tortugas, a series of small keys that has been home to sooty terns, Civil War prisoners, tourists, and Cuban refugees. Named for the local turtles and lack of fresh water, the Dry Tortugas are perceptibly a land of contrasts. The naturally preserved Bush and Long Keys were connected by a narrow isthmus to Garden Key, home to the Civil War era Fort Jefferson.

The hexagonal fort fills the majority of Garden Key. The walls loom forty-five feet above the sand, punctured by two rows of artillery casements and capped by a dozen mound-like traverses once used to store gunpowder. Several walls are marked by craters where the outer layers of bricks have collapsed. Time, not cannonballs, was responsible for the damage, as the fort never saw a true armed conflict. A wall surrounds the fort, creating a moat filled with conch shells and nurse sharks, constructed to stop invasion from gun ships and erosive waves.

Guarded by the fort is a courtyard of bristly grass and ruins of barracks. The stark halls of the corridors drip with lime, creating stalactites. Informational signs highlight historical events; construction of the fort began in the 1840's to protect the shipping lane running from ports on the Mississippi out through the Gulf of Mexico. Though not entirely completed by the time of the Civil War, it was used by the Union army as a military prison. One of its most famous inmates was Doctor Samuel Mudd, who was convicted as a conspirator in the Lincoln assassination, having treated the broken leg of John Wilkes Booth unaware the injury was sustained while fleeing Ford's Theatre. Mudd spent four years at the fort, during which time he helped battle several outbreaks of Yellow Fever.

In contrast to the isolating walls of the fort, Bush and Long Keys tease the visitor. Encircled by a narrow band of white sand, the two keys are filled with lush green vegetation. A handful of palm trees rise from Bush Key into a cloud of winged wildlife. To protect the only significant mating area of the Sooty Tern, a rare bird, Bush and Long Keys are off limits to visitors.

We spent three days anchored in the waters, giving us plenty of time to explore Garden Key by dingy, flip-flops, and snorkels. Our neighbors included several other yachts, a pair a grouper that found shade under our hull, and a school a tarpon that surfaced gracefully like dolphin. It took only a minute to reach the shore by dingy. The beach was an enticing Corona ad, but offered little protection from the sun and scorching sand. Much of our time was spent in the water, probing the coral reefs lining the base of the sea wall and the remaining pillars of a decayed coal dock.

The key's only long term human residents are a small group of park rangers, who live in remodeled areas of the fort and still use the original cistern system for fresh water. Periodically, members of the Coast Guard were stationed as well. There were a few other yachts and fishing vessels that stayed overnight, but the majority of tourists stayed only for the day. Each morning, high speed catamarans would arrive from Key West, flooding the key with tourists who staked claims along the beach and under palm trees. From aboard the Trader, we could hear the tour guides broadcasting information to the tourists about the island's history and recreational attractions. It is unlikely that the tourists are ever told what we learned during early morning chats with the park rangers, about the boats of Cuban refugees that try to reach the shores of the Tortugas. We learned that on average two boats a week appear on the southern horizon, though three arrived in the three days we were there. If the Coast Guard can intercept the boats, the people are sent back to Cuba and the boats are left on the shore in an area known as the "bone yard." Refugees who successfully make landfall are able to claim political asylum, with the possibility of becoming U.S. citizens a year later.

Cuba was once one of the pillars of the Spanish colonial empire, rich in sugar, coffee, and tobacco. The United States helped Cuba win its independence from Spain in 1902, and remained a key trade partner until the communist revolution in 1959. The United States reversed its position and imposed a trade embargo in 1962, keeping the goods and people of Cuba out of the United States. Cuba then turned to the Soviet Union for support. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost its patron, and the island that was once a source of great wealth became one of the poorest countries in the world. In contrast, the islands of the Dry Tortugas have few natural resources of any value, but their value for the Cubans comes from the same quality that first attracted the United States; location. At a distance of less than a hundred miles from Cuba but away from the populated U.S. mainland, the Tortugas make a convenient landing point for the boats of Cuban refugees. The fort that never saw a military battle is a key point in the United States defense against Cuban immigration.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of the plight of the Cubans is the "bone yard". On the opposite side of Garden Key from the visitor center, half dozen boats lay scattered in the brush. Most were painted blue and green, perhaps as camouflage on the open sea, with sides built high to keep out the swells. I would estimate that six adults could sit comfortably in each boat, though I suspect many more were crowded in. In the center of the boats sat diesel engines, mechanical monstrosities that had seen better days, surrounded by the remains of shredded ropes and ragged t-shirts, but no other signs of provisions for travel.

As we sailed around the next several days, it was sometimes easy to forget about the boats and what they stood for. There were more adventures to pursue, more keys to explore. At Loggerhead Key, the only other key with a skeleton crew of park rangers, we had the beach to ourselves, which made it easy to ignore the world beyond us. Sometimes, other reminders would surface. While walking around the island, we found another set of abandoned boats, as if every key had its own bone yard. While relaxing on the beach, seeing a boat in the distance would make me wonder if the coast guard had made another capture.

After three days of snorkeling, no showers, chilling out, sun burns, shallow waters, and deep introspection, it was time to sail east back to Key West. As the fort walls and palm trees disappeared over the horizon, I did indeed see a land of contrasts. However, I no longer saw an island of birds and bricks; I saw a land that is at once a symbol of leisure and of the United State's lingering cold war with one of the world's few remaining communist countries.