

### 31SHORT

Ten years ago I made travel plans to see the Atlantic and Gulf coastlines of our country in segments, staying mainly on offshore islands. Because of the mild climate, the first step was from Tampa, Florida, on down the Gulf Coast to the Everglades.

From Florida, I visited the Atlantic and Gulf coastlines on up to Cape Breton in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. No every port was included, but most of the principal ones were covered. The Florida Keys were skipped, however, to honor storm warnings issued in the Caribbean at the time. So when the Smithsonian Institution recently announced a writers' seminar at Key West, I had two excuses to see the islands.

Flight plans to Florida nowadays run into a lot of decisions. Miami International is all right for travelers who come south to practice wrestling alligators, or perhaps to try out for curbside shootouts. And Orlando, near Disney's Epcot Center, is a fine choice for people who don't mind riding in planes full of school kids chewing bubble gum, reading comic books and giving off strong odors of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

No Texans have been shot so far driving off in rental cars in Miami, but the way multi-lane 80 mile an hour traffic frightens a country fellow, a moped backfiring might start a stampede that would take a Florida cop a half-tank of gas and a new set of siren bushings to bring under control.

After hearing about the swarms of college students on the upper coast, the crowds around Orlando and a strange influx of sharks off the Atlantic side, DFW to Miami to Key West sounded like the safest bet in case of a forced landing.

Terminals aren't much different once the passenger learn to eat mild toxins, like hot dogs and cheese nachos, that airport paramedics can treat on the spot. American Airlines also preconditions digestive systems of coach class customers by serving a paper basket containing chicken lunchmeat sandwiches on thrift store buns. One hard, dark cookie and a sack of white corn chips complete the menu.

At 40,000 feet folded up in a coach class seat, the stomach trauma from the snack equals the drop-out point for the crew revulsions gulls get by eating plastic six-pack holders.

The hotel and car rental people in Key West assured me that spring break mobs avoided their places. True, college students weren't in the lobbies. A beer drinking street race was in progress, the winner to be the first lad to drink a beer in all 20 bars listed for the track. The sidewalks and streets were with young people and smelled stronger of beer than a huge German hall at closing time.

U. S. Highway 1 North was the only road out of town as Key West is the southern-most point in the country, closer to Cuba than to Miami. Students in various states of indisposition, wearing colorful bathing costumes, wove in and out of the traffic on rented mopeds in a beeping of horns similar to the sound effects of a Times Square New Year's celebration. Adults' faces reflected the stoicism defying even the broiling tropical sun.

The 29 miles to my room took an hour of steady driving. Glimpses of bays and spots of mangrove trees and plenty of boats made up the scene. The flashbacks I had of mopeds I classed as hallucinations.