

# Our Favorite Memories

## Florida Everglades & Key West

By Vivien C. Arguelles, Tour Leader

**How** can one bring travelers to Miami and not expose them to a bit of Cuban culture? Our first evening together, we went to Lario's, a typical Cuban restaurant in South Miami. Everyone was inquisitive about the food so I ordered a "sampler dish" and was rewarded with "ooohs and aaahs" as they were introduced to Cuban cuisine.

The next day we made our first visit to the Everglades, a beautiful and utterly unique landscape called "The River of Grass." The largest remaining subtropical wilderness in the U.S., the Everglades are home to a veritable zoo of endangered, rare, and exotic species. The Everglades' simple, uncluttered vistas highlighted by wildlife's presence, is a sight to see. Ripples in the saw grass signaled the movement of alligators, by nature a shy animal. The travelers were surprised to know Everglades National Park is the third largest park in the United States outside Alaska.

We next visited one of the most lush gardens in the world—the 83 acre Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden opened in 1938.

There you can walk garden paths surrounded by the wonders and beauty of nature, talk to experts in horticulture, conservation and science, view impressive art, see butterflies and birds at every turn and take classes on everything from photography to grafting. We saw beautiful and colorful glass sculptures by the famous glass blower Chihuly, and marvelous giant flowers, psychedelic in style and massive in size, designed by the prominent Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama.



Some of the Everglades' abundant wildlife.



Vivian getting "hands-on" with Florida wildlife.

Photo courtesy of WTT Traveler Linda Atkinson. Thanks!

Over the next two days, we further explored Florida's interior land, rivers, fauna and flora. We took a traditional Florida airboat ride and watched a reptile show which included some snake handling which was a bit too "hands-on" for some of travelers including me!

Next, we headed south to Key West where as Jimmy Buffett puts it "Changes in latitude, Changes in attitude!" If you are a type "A" personality and want to relax, I can guarantee you that after three days in the Keys, you come out being a type "Z" personality! Time seemed to slow down as we drove from island to island across long bridge spans. Stopping for lunch at the Lazy Days Restaurant in Islamorada, we knew we had arrived in the Keys. The restaurant was "classic" Key West style, built on stilts with a tin roof. We lunched on the wrap around deck where the view of the ocean was totally magnificent.

Three days in the Keys isn't enough time to do everything there is to do. You can select any water sport you want, from snorkeling to boating, to diving. Some of the ladies chose to take a day trip Dry Tortugas where in addition to touring historic Fort Jefferson you can lay on the beach or snorkel the reefs. Some stayed on the mainland visiting the art stores, boutiques, museums or just relaxing in the beautiful interior garden of our

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## Everglades, cont'd.

hotel The Almond Tree. One day after a very interesting tour of the Hemingway House, we had an amazing experience at the Butterfly Conservatory, an enclosed butterfly garden with the most brilliant and dramatic colorful butterflies I have seen. A Key West highlight is watching the sunset in Mallory's Square. We were truly blessed and experienced a spectacular sunset!

We dined in style at Kelly's, savoring the wonderful variety of fish and shellfish in an indoor garden under the stars. We also enjoyed a marvelous breakfast at the Blue Heaven Café shaded by tropical trees and entertained by the roosters and cats roaming around, characteristic of this restaurant and Key West. After three laid back days, we drove back to Miami stopping along the way at the Island Grill for one more lazy lunch hour featuring an assortment of delectable seafood.

Our farewell dinner location in Miami was a surprise—the Fontana Restaurant in the Biltmore Hotel. Located in the exclusive suburb of Coral Gables, the Biltmore was built in 1924 and sits in a dreamlike setting complete with exquisite, hand-painted frescos on barrel-vaulted ceilings, brilliant travertine floors, fine marble columns, intricate leaded glass fixtures, carved mahogany furnishings and lavish gardens. The food was amazing, the service excellent and the setting impressive—it was fabulous end to an unforgettable trip! ❖



Some inhabitants of the Butterfly Conservatory.



Picture perfect sunset in the Florida Keys.



Lunch at the Island Grill.