

## MILE ZERO TO THE ORLANDO EYE

The final leg of our journey begins in Miami, and while we have been in Florida before, never has it been this far south. Since our home city of Napier in NZ claims to be "*The Art Deco Capital of the World*" I am interested to see the same architecture in Miami and maybe determine whether we can confidently claim that title.

The ship berths around 6am and Boarder Control Staff come on board soon after that. Our bags have already gone out the night before and will await us somewhere on shore. There is a conglomeration of passengers trying to get breakfast in one part of the ship and clearance for entry into the US in another.

Eventually we all make it ashore and we take up the offer of a *Hop On – Hop Off* bus tour of the city itself and also of South Beach. The city is vast and much of it around the sea. Tall buildings abound and eventually we find some art deco architecture evident among buildings, especially around South Beach. This is apparent only on odd buildings here and there and so I satisfy myself that Napier has a far more prominent feature and one that we can be proud of.

I understand that the predominant language here is Spanish with about two thirds of the population using it; in fact English is a first language in only about 25% of Miami homes! Cuba is of course only a long swim away, and a large Cuban population live in this part of Florida.

After our city tour we make our way to the Miami Airport so that we can link up with our rental car that will take us north to the city of Weston (near Fort Lauderdale) to stay with a Rotary friend. Aided by the trusty GPS, we reach our friend's home in a "gated village" and find that she, like so many people in this area, has a property backing onto a canal. Much of the housing is like this and I presume takes advantage of land which was reclaimed swamps.

Sightseeing in this area includes a day trip on the canals of Fort Lauderdale (palatial homes and big boats abound) and then a trip to one of the everglades where we ride an "air boat" around and over the islands looking for alligators. There are supposed to be plenty but we only see two or three small ones while out on the water and then a few more in cages back on land.

Having missed a planned stop at Key West on our cruise, we opted to take a drive down there to see what we had in fact missed. Our journey was over a weekend but traffic was still heavy. We cover perhaps a couple of hundred kilometres on a road with causeways and several bridges (the largest over 10km) that link up numerous islands and head as far south as we can get – on Highway 1, where we find we the most southern most point in the US and a sign also tells us we are at "Mile Zero." One of the oldest towns in Florida it has quite a unique history and we enjoyed exploring it in a little tourist train. At one point the train made its way to the highest point in the city with the driver warning us about "ear popping" for we were eight feet above sea level!

Back in Fort Lauderdale it is time to move on and this requires us to change rental cars. We make the changeover at the Fort Lauderdale airport, set the new GPS for the city of Lakeland and head off onto the freeway. Then we find that the guiding voice on this particular GPS has been disabled and try as I might, I cannot restore it. I turn around and make my way back to the rental car depot – which I now can't find and the GPS won't assist me!!

I follow the planes going overhead and eventually get there. Remonstrating with the rental car man, who also fails to fix the device, I get a new one and head off again. This time I have a voice to guide me and follow it carefully. After more than an hour we find we have travelled in a complete circle and eventually finish up in the street where we had started our journey! Fortunately a new "turn off" is then given and we head out into the country, strangely driving on a

minor road. We reach the home of our friend (another Rotarian) some three hours later than expected! My passenger is threatening to do something unmentionable to the GPS.

One of the tourist features in this area is a visit to the *Bok Tower Gardens*, in a nearby town of Lake Wales. The gardens are an amazing sight and were established by a Dutch man who reached Florida as a child and became a successful publisher and businessman. He built the gardens, a house for himself and then an astonishing Carillon – in pink marble! His grave is in front of the rather smart brass doorways into the bell tower – which plays tunes daily.

Never ones to stand still though, we move on further North to the city of Orlando, again baffled by the GPS instructions. We finally determine that it has been set “to avoid toll roads!” No wonder we took a long time to reach each destination. Previously in this area we have visited the most significant destination, namely Disney World but this time though, our friend (a retired police colleague who I attended university with in Boston many years ago) took us on another everglades tour, a wetland that boasted 10,000 alligators. Again we only saw three small ones and for all I know, it could have been the same ones I saw a week earlier further south!

Another amazing tourist destination (of many) in Orlando was the “*Orlando Eye*” – i.e. the ferris wheel which perhaps emulates those of similar name in London and Singapore, both of which we have ridden in earlier jounies. This one sure gave us a wonderful view of Orlando or at least some parts of it, for it is a very large and spread out city (or collection of cities). Also in the vicinity of the “Eye” is a “Madame Tussards” Wax museum and we found this a very interesting feature to visit. The models were so lifelike and a couple of times I excused myself for getting in the way of the odd passer-by, only to discover I was talking to the wax look-alike of some world figure!

Our final destination was to the outskirts of Orlando (well I think it is) but to be exact, to a place regaling under the name of *Howey-in-the-Hills*. There we caught up with some friends made through Rotary over 12 years ago, and we managed to do a superb ride through the numerous lakes and canals that surround pretty much all of the towns (or cities) in this area. In around four hours we covered three separate lakes through interconnecting canals, visited some friends living on a lake edge, had a coffee at Mount Dora (but did not see “the Explorer” of the same name!) and returned to the “boat club” base where we had begun.

The State of Florida never ceases to amaze me. With a population of, I think, nearly 20 million, there are motorways, trees and lakes everywhere. With all the traffic driving on the wrong side of the car and the wrong side of the road are difficult to say the least, but you fail at your peril! On the advice of locals, most of our daily activity takes place in the mornings for often by afternoons, there is thunder, lightening and then it pours with rain. Clearly the humid weather and plentiful water make growing trees (or anything for that matter) very easy. We see new subdivisions that are landscaped with fully grown palms, often propped up with wooden stays for their early life for roots don’t go very deep before hitting rock base. As well I believe there is nowhere in the state is more than a hundred metres above sea level.

All journeys must end though and ours does. In 11 flights we have visited several countries in South America, Central America, as well as California and Florida in the US. We have seen a couple of reputed “wonders of the modern world” in the *Itaipu Dam* in South America and the *Panama Canal* in Central America. We have made new friends and visited old ones in a journey by air, ship and road and covering many thousands of kilometres. We noted that there were three separate multiple shooting incidents in the US while we were there and statistically, there are 80 guns per 100 US citizens! Makes you think doesn’t it?

In some 32 hours we cover the long journey from Florida, across the US to LA and then home to NZ. Once again the length of this journey makes me feel safe here at home in NZ. At home, no one is carrying a gun and at night I can look to the sky and see stars. I am happy without the guns and I enjoy seeing the stars. We have missed that. It is good to be home again.



*Housing on the canal*



*Miami Art Deco*



*A bridge to West Key*



*End of the road*



*Got me a gator*



*The Orlando Eye*



*Getting aboard*



*Canal at Howey on the Hills*



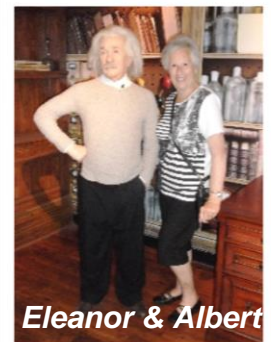
*The carillon at Bok Tower Gardens*



*Eleanor & Ophra*



*Obama's in Office*



*Eleanor & Albert*