

# Key West, the Living End

by Horace Sutton

**T**HE SUN goes down in a triumph of celebration here on the tail end of America. The ritual would be worthy of the birthday of the Dalai Lama, only in Key West it takes place every day. Crowds jostle for space on Mallory Dock, watching the changing colors in the sky. The descent of the ball into the sea is often accompanied by cheers as well as by ritualistic chants offered by clients of an order that sees some religious omen in so fiery an evidence of the close of a day.

For an even better view, one can board the Conch Plane of Air Tortugas a half hour before sunset, fly over the reef, the Gulf Stream, and across the lakes that were the hideaway of the rumrunners, and land in the harbor in front of the ritualists on Mallory Dock. The takeoff is into the

sunset, the plane turning to land at the airport as the lights are coming on in this outpost 120 miles at sea.

Meanwhile, back on the terrace of the new Pier Restaurant at the very end of Duval Street, less religious celebrants seated there can view the spectacle filtered through the rigging of the shrimp boats tied up along the side of Mallory Dock. Sailboats slither noiselessly past the railing of the terrace while the assembled guests are attended by waiters fetching draughts of piña colada and platters of shrimp that have been boiled in beer.

To Harry Truman, Tennessee Williams, Dwight Eisenhower, Ernest Hemingway, and David Wolkowsky, Key West was always the ultimate island. Truman visited here 11 times while he was President, staying in protected naval quarters but saunter-

ing out to take morning constitutentials. Tablets mark where he stopped for coffee.

Hemingway bought a fine garden house in 1931, lived in it for years with his second wife, Pauline, mother of Patrick and Gregory, and did some of his best work and best drinking and best fishing on this fingertip of land. Wolkowsky, who had emigrated from Key West, where he was born of Russian émigré parents, fashioned a career in urban restoration in Philadelphia. He returned here in 1965 and now operates the Pier House and its restaurant and functions as a sort of confrencier between visitors and the assorted artists in residence.

Those who were born in the keys are called conchs, after the mollusks that inhabit the characteristic pink shell found in these parts. A longtime resident who suffers the inescapable indignity of having been born off the keys might, after seven or eight years here, aspire to be called a "freshwater conch."

In Key West there is a Conch Train, a long linkup of sightseeing cars pulled by a propane-powered jeep masquerading as a miniature railway engine. A running commentary on the flora, fauna, and eminent figures flows in a glib recitation from the driver during the course of a winding tour. The Conch Train dabbles in history, courses past the rococo facades of Cuban clubs, chugs by the end of U.S. Route 1, slips past the southernmost point in the nation, and glides by the Key Wester Inn and the Key Ambassador, motels facing the Atlantic and thus handy to Smathers Beach, a stretch of public sand named after the former Florida senator who was a congressional sidekick of John Kennedy's.

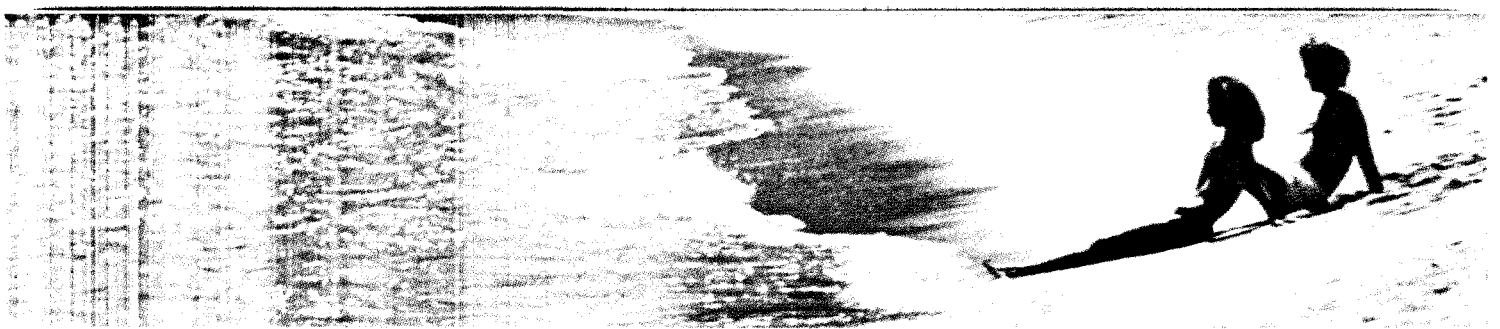
The Conch Plane that flies the daily sunset trips also makes excursions to the Dry Tortugas that stretch westward into the Gulf from the tip of Key West. On Fort Jefferson, desiccating in the sun, the government, which held these waters all through the Civil War, imprisoned Dr. Samuel Mudd, the physician who set the leg of John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin.

A singular relic in Key West is the conch



Angelo Donghia's restored conch house—"A quaint weave of architectural threads."

Angelo Donghia



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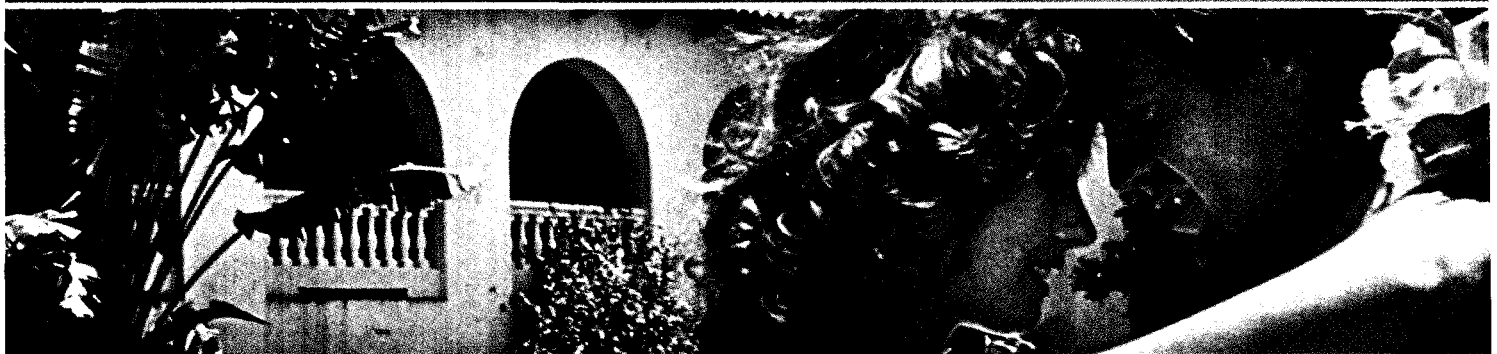
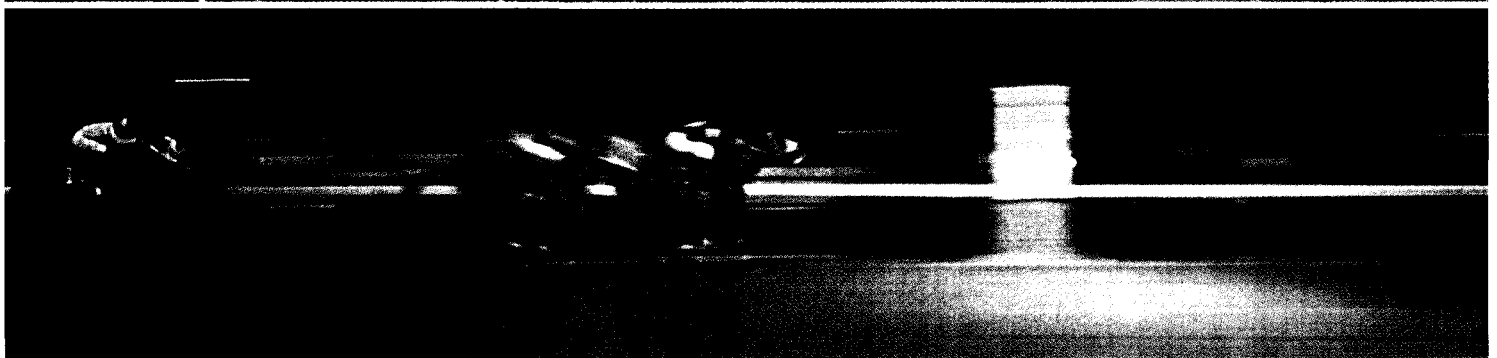
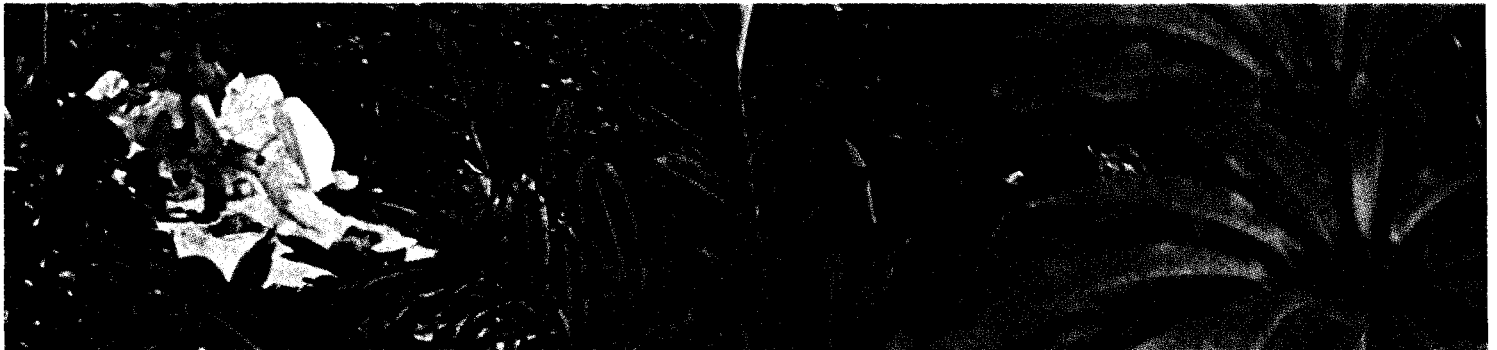
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house, a quaint weave of architectural threads that can be traced variously to the Bahamas, to Spain, to New England, or to Victorian England. Girt with balustrades, festooned with the gingerbread of wooden bunting, crowned with widows' walks, conch houses were built of resinous pine by ships' master carpenters. As it hardens with age, the pine resists the gnawings of termites. Fastened with wooden pegs, equipped with square rooftop hatches called scuppers and with steeply pitched roofs, conch houses can resist insect borings, they can hold steady in a hurricane, promise relief from the tropical sun, and deliver rainwater into cisterns. It was not until World War II that fresh water was piped from the mainland.

It has lately become stylish to buy and restore conch houses. A superchichi showpiece is the late-Victorian house on Eaton Street that has been redone by New York designer Angelo Donghia. A hippie flop-house when he found it, Donghia sanded it, stripped it, then redid it in a welter of wicker, ceiling fans, zebra rugs, straw, and bamboo. Planted only a year and a half ago, the garden that leads to the pool is already a contained jungle of papyrus, pomegranate, cactus, pandanus, and palm.

The first artist to put up in Key West was James Audubon, who arrived in 1832 to make sketches for *Birds of America*. The Audubon House is, so goes a testimonial from Tennessee Williams, who himself occupies a modest cottage, "not like a museum or a movie set, but as true and authentic as Keats's house by the Spanish Steps in Rome."

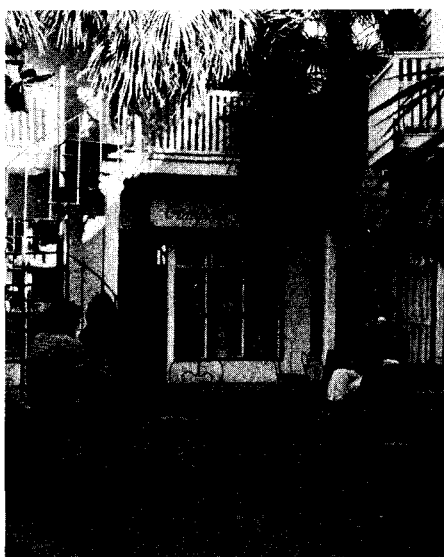
Nearly a century later, Dos Passos hitchhiked through the keys, taking the railroad that had been built by Henry Morrison Flagler, the financier who had earlier struck it rich with John D. Rockefeller and then had sunk \$50 million in Florida hotels. The roadbed was not yet complete between all the keys and Dos Passos wrote that Key West "really was an island." It was linked by car ferries to Havana. Wrote Dos Passos:

There was shipping in the harbor. The air smelt of the Gulf Stream .... Cigar factories had attracted a part-Cuban part-Spanish population. ... The English-speaking population was made up of railroad men, old Florida settlers, a few descendants of New Englanders from the days when it was a whaling port, and fishermen from ... the Bahamas.

That was enough to attract Hemingway, who arrived by way of La Rochelle, France, and Havana, and soon, as Carlos

Baker has written, "fell ... into a work-and-fishing schedule precisely suited to his temperament...." The house that he eventually bought and kept until his death is now on public view. The 42 cats in residence descend from those who shared the house with Ernest and Pauline. A swimming pool, the centerpiece of the garden, was built by Pauline at a cost of \$20,000, when Ernest was off covering the Spanish civil war. Embedded in the concrete decking is the penny Ernest allegedly fished from his pocket after he heard the price, the writer saying, "Here, you might as well have my last cent."

It is only a walk to Sloppy Joe's, a favorite Hemingway saloon in the days, says Baker, "when the bars along Duval Street roared each night with rumba music and



Palmy patio—After Hemingway, the deluge.

the fistfights of merchant sailors." Parachute silk covers the ceiling nowadays, and tile covers the floor. Burnished conchs with beards and long hair tied in ponytails sip beer served in cans that—to avoid chilling the customers' fingers—are placed in canisters of woven pandanus. Ordering a glass is considered a gaffe worthy of day trippers.

Cubans first came to Key West during the struggle for independence from Spain, and it was here that José Martí, the Cuban patriot, grouped his adherents to plan the revolution that would eventually separate Cuba from Spain and that would result in the Spanish-American War. The battleship *Maine* sailed from Key West harbor only to be blown up in Havana. Her dead are buried in the Key West cemetery.

The island was the beneficiary, for a time, of a large Cuban cigar industry, much of which, after a devastating fire, moved to

Tampa. One lone cigar roller, now eighty-four, sits in a small shop, fashioning panatelas (50 cents each) and El Hemingways (65 cents), using tobacco grown in Latin America by Cubans from Cuban seed.

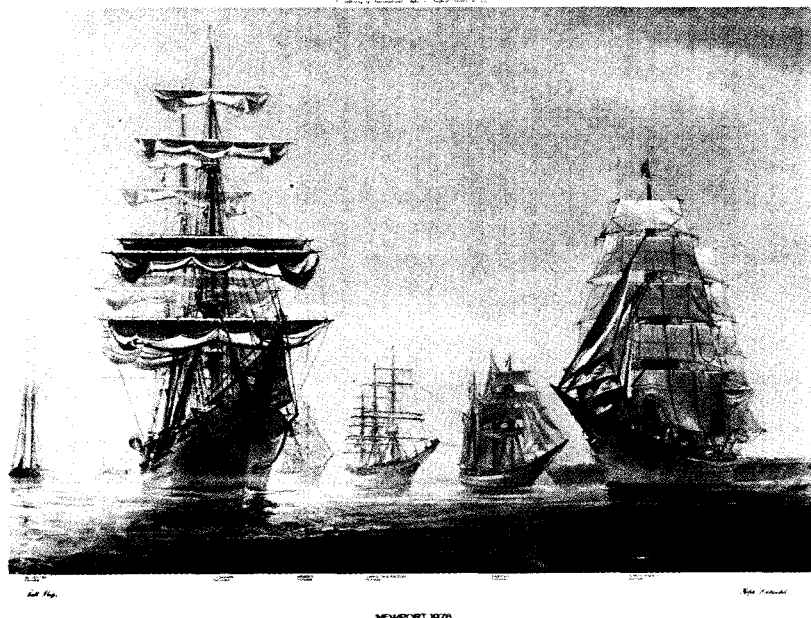
The small Spanish restaurants survive, too. El Cacique, neat, fluorescently lighted, and paved in Formica, may not look elegant, but it provides agreeable *picadillo*, black beans and yellow rice, fried plantains and green plantains, and milk shakes that come in such flavors as mango, coco, zapote, and piña. A dish of *moro*, *puerco*, and *yuca*, that is, beans, pork, and a type of cactus vegetable, costs a modest \$2.95. Dinner for two recently, without so luxurious a dish, was under \$6.

The raucous bars of Duval Street have been replaced by the likes of El Cacique and by such agreeable places as The Deli, Mother Nature's, The Fudge Factory, and Tutti & Frutti's—tourist dells, all. One dines in style at Number 1 Duval Street, a nineteenth-century shipping office that has become the handsome Pier Restaurant. No dinners for two under \$6 here, but the whole yellowtail sautéed in black butter is a Florida masterpiece, and as much goes for the Pier's key lime pie, which comes with a snowdrift of meringue on its roof.

The Overseas Highway, stretching over 120 miles of islands and causeway, is a fascinating trip in some parts and a bottleneck of construction in others. Air Sunshine, which uses reupholstered DC-3s—that's right, DC-3s—threads its way from Key West to as far north as the Kissimmee Airport, serving Orlando. If ever there is a relaxation of tension between Washington and Havana, a political circumstance that hangs on Castro's overseas adventures, there may be service from Key West to Cuba. That is the ultimate gambit for a number of airlines that have filed for additional service into Key West. There is nothing really new about *that* linkup. In October 1927, 50 years ago last fall, a young adventurer named Juan Trippe, only recently out of Yale, sent the first flight of Pan American Airways winging out of Key West, bound for Havana.

Casa Marina, a hotel of those times, long dormant, is said to have caught the interest of the Marriott Corporation and may come to life again, too. Two new hotels seem certain to be planted on this small atoll, one to be built on the Gulf in front of the A. & B. Lobster House, a popular feeding station for visitors down to catch fish and eat them and to inhale the seedy tropicality of this last stepping-stone of continental America. ●





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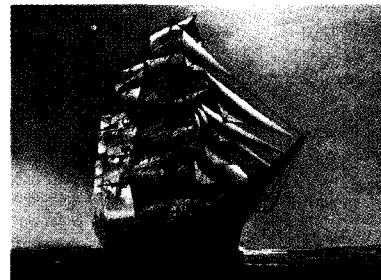
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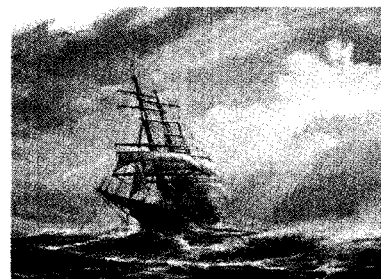
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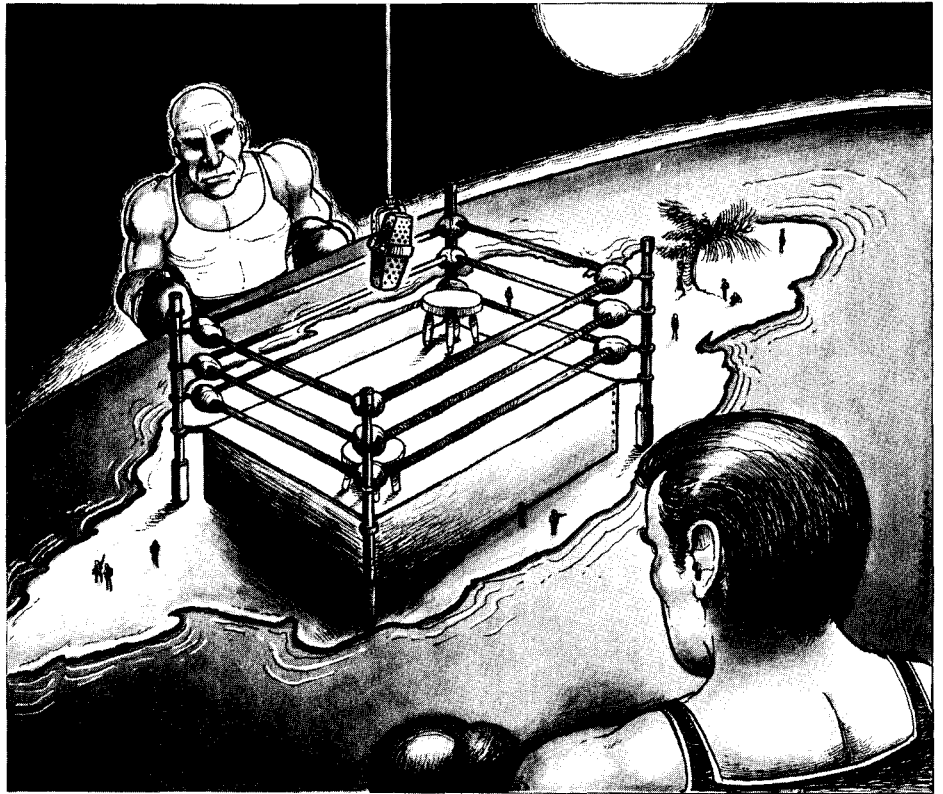
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# Islands of Contention

by Stanley Karnow



**I**SLANDS may be ideal vacation spots, but they are also often political arenas. It could be that their insularity breeds tensions. Or it could be that they are the objects of contention for rival mainland powers. But whatever the reason, Cuba, Jamaica, Corsica, Cyprus, Diego Garcia, Taiwan, and other islands are chronic news makers, and as such, they are to be visited with notebook in hand.

Americans have been especially transfixed by Cuba ever since Fidel Castro created a Communist regime a mere 90 miles from the Florida coast. Within recent months, President Carter has been trying to establish a new link with Cuba, but progress has been uneven.

Carter made it plain when he entered office that a fresh look at Cuba would be high on his agenda. In February, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance described the United States boycott of Cuba as "ineffective," adding that "we ought to seek ways to remove impediments to normal relations." These statements of intention were translated into small but significant steps, such

as the dropping of restrictions on travel to Cuba by Americans—which led to visits by congressmen, businessmen, some South Dakota basketball teams, and several cruise ships.

Lately, though, the developing connection has been strained by the role of Cuban troops and military advisers in Africa, where they are apparently acting as Soviet surrogates. An estimated 20,000 Cubans are based in Angola, and increasing numbers of them are said to be moving into other parts of the continent, notably Ethiopia. So it seems that Castro has chosen to pursue his revolutionary vocation, even at the risk of jeopardizing his incipient ties with the United States, and this promises to set back the prospects of a deal with Carter. It may be a long time, therefore, before Americans can count Cuba among the Caribbean islands on which they can bask in the sun.

Last summer, when Andrew Young, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, toured the Caribbean, a key purpose of his journey was to counter the spread of Cuban influence in the region by reassuring