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# ★ ESCAPES TRAVEL & HOME

The architecture of Miami Beach is an attraction unto itself.

ISLAND ADVENTURE

## West of Key West

Exploring remote tropical paradise of Dry Tortugas National Park



By Susan L. Ebert

I peer over pilot Gary Bouchard's shoulder as the turbine engine surges smoothly to life and the nose propeller becomes a near-invisible blur. I'm wearing my swimsuit under my clothes and have stashed my rented snorkel gear in the cargo hold. Like the other seven passengers, I have a window seat and unobstructed view on the high-wing float-equipped plane as it taxis to the runway at Key West International Airport and, after a short take-off run, becomes airborne. Forty minutes from now, we will splash down 70 miles west in the azure Caribbean Sea, in the southernmost national park in



S.L.Ebert

**The 70-mile trip from Key West to Fort Jefferson takes 40 minutes by seaplane.**

the United States, Dry Tortugas National Park.

Among the nation's 407 national parks, only six others — three in Alaska, and one each in Michigan, Washington and the Territory of American Samoa — have fewer visitors than Dry Tortugas. Its reputation for spectacular birding and snorkeling,

Andy Newman / Florida Keys News Bureau

along with its intriguing history, has impelled me to devote a day of my Florida Keys excursion to exploring Garden Key, the largest of the seven Dry Tortugas islands and the site of the massive, loric-rich Fort Jefferson. Here, I'll pay homage to the 100th anniversary of the National Parks Service and work my way north to Key Largo before hightailing it to Miami for a flight home.

As we cruise toward our destination at an altitude of a mere 500 feet, scores of sea turtles seemingly float through the air, suspended in the crystalline waters beneath us, their undulating shadow-selves on the underwater sand dunes in pursuit. I count more than 100 before becoming

*Park continues on L4*

**Fort Jefferson takes up nearly all of Garden Key, one of the seven keys comprising the Dry Tortugas. Built in 1846 to protect the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico from foreign countries and pirates, it remains the largest masonry edifice in the Western Hemisphere.**

## Houston designer creates her dream home in the country



Brett Coomer / Houston Chronicle

Lauren Prestridge designed and decorated her family's modern farmhouse in Cleveland.

Farmhouse style mixes rustic details with modern touches

By Alyson Ward

On a two-lane road off Texas 105, Lauren Prestridge has built the house of her dreams.

The charcoal-gray two-story in Cleveland, which Prestridge designed inside and out, is full of contrasts. It's a modern-day farmhouse that offers a mix of industrial details and charming antiques, cozy corners and wide-open spaces.

"I had been dreaming about this place forever," says Prestridge, the principal

interior designer for Mark W. Todd Architects. She and her husband, Will Prestridge, a Houston firefighter, bought the property five or six years before they started building. While they rented a house with their two daughters, now 9 and 6, Prestridge drew the plans, adding in every detail she'd ever wanted a house to have.

"Because it was the country, I needed it to be a farmhouse," Prestridge says, but she also wanted modern touches and an "urban vibe" mixed in with the homey details.

That mix of new and old,

city and country can be spotted in every room. The kitchen sink is farmhouse style, but it's made of stainless steel. The kitchen backsplash and shower walls are covered with traditional white glass subway tile — but it's laid straight, not in brick formation, to look more contemporary.

The home has three bedrooms and 2,170 square feet of living space. "We wanted it to be comfortable but still small," she says. "We didn't want anything big that we couldn't take care of once the kids are gone."

She didn't waste space

*Farmhouse continues on L5*

HOME DESIGN

## ESCAPES

## Park is a gift to history buffs, birders, more

Park from page L1

distracted as the pilot directs our attention to the Quicksands, where treasure hunter Mel Fisher discovered the Nuestra Señora de Atocha and the Margarita — two shipwrecked Spanish galleons — and where it's rumored that more than \$500 million in gold, silver and jewels still remains strewn across an 8-mile area. The mast of Fisher's work vessel, the Arbutus, which also sank here, juts from the surface and serves as a signpost to the site.

Back to the turtles: In 1513, Ponce de León designated these seven coral atolls Las Tortugas (the turtles) in recognition of the plenitude of these charming creatures, thought by ancient sailors to be totems of hope and longevity. (My guess: Because turtles are reptiles that lay eggs on land, a sighting of many turtles meant land was near and gave sailors hope that they'd live another day.) Five species (loggerheads, green turtles, leatherbacks, hawksbills and Kemp's ridleys) reside within the park's nearly 100 square miles, fewer than 40 acres of which are land. "Dry" was added later to warn sailors of the lack of fresh water.

## Fort lore

Bouchard eases back on the throttle as we approach Garden Key, circling the island once so I catch a breathtaking aerial view of the monstrous, ancient Fort Jefferson — still the largest masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere. A hard-earned lesson from the War of 1812 taught the youthful United States that whomever controlled the Dry Tortugas controlled the entire Gulf of Mexico, as the only waters deep enough to be navigable through the mouth of the Gulf passed within cannon range of Garden Key.

Determined to protect that narrow passage from both foreign countries and pirates, the U.S. government sent masons, slave laborers, oh, and about 16 million or so bricks over from the continental U.S. The imposing hexagonal structure has two thousand casemates (arched ports to hold cannons) arranged in three tiers, encircled by a moat to keep enemy ships from accessing the casemates. A drawbridge leads to the "sally port,"



S.L.Ebert photos

The never completed Fort Jefferson became a prison during the Civil War to house Union deserters. Dr. Samuel Mudd, convicted of conspiring in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, also was incarcerated here.



Chronicle

the heavily fortified entryway.

Begun in 1846, construction faltered at the outbreak of the Civil War, when building materials became increasingly scarce. At its peak, 1,729 troops once garrisoned here, plus the families of some officers; however, they never engaged in battle.

During the Civil War, Fort Jefferson became the prison of exile for the nation's most heinous criminals.

Undoubtedly, the most notorious of the prisoners incarcerated here was Dr. Samuel Mudd, a Maryland physician who was acquainted — to what extent is still hotly debated among scholars — with Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Booth sought aid for a broken leg incurred during the assassination from the 31-year-old doctor he'd met a handful of times; Mudd's setting of that leg earned him a life sentence for conspiracy and a one-way ticket to Fort Jefferson.

While there, a malaria outbreak struck Fort Jefferson, and Mudd toiled



To camp overnight at Dry Tortugas National Park, plan ahead: The park service allows three tents at a time and each for a maximum of three days.

around the clock to save lives of officers, soldiers and the 52 remaining prisoners. Through his tireless exertions, only 38 of the 270 stricken men died. Two hundred-ninety-nine officers and soldiers signed a petition initiated by Lt. Edmund Zalinski, who wrote, "He inspired the hopeless with courage, and by his constant presence in the midst of danger and infection, regardless of his own life, tranquilized the fearful and desponding. Many here who have experienced his kind and judicious treatment can never repay him."

Although his efforts at Fort Jefferson earned him a pardon from President Andrew Jackson in 1869, to this day, he's not been absolved of the original conspiracy charges, and his name is still, well ... Mudd.

The plane's floats slip into the glassy sea, and Bouchard eases the craft onto the beach, disgorg-

a bit ahead of that, and as luck has it, the narrow channel between Garden Key and Bush Key has sanded in, so I can walk over.

As I stroll barefoot down the shoreline, tight-packed schools of permit dart through the shallows, shattering the surface as they scatter to avoid streaking tarpon in hot pursuit. Brown pelicans dive into the schooling fish from above, lumbering off with beakfuls of wriggling fish. Elegant American avocets cut scythelike swashes through the shallows with their distinctive long upturned beaks, while ruddy turnstones and plovers peck among the dunes.

Although Long Key, the third atoll, is off limits year round, I perch atop a dune at the end on Bush Key and sit rapt, elbows on knees for stability and binoculars pressed to my face, glassing the sooty terns, roseate terns, brown noddies and magnificent frigatebirds that flit amongst the mangroves.

## Marine reverie

After exploring the fort — and even walking along the parapets crowning the edifice — I don mask and snorkel for a plunge in the aquamarine expanse behind the campground. As brilliantly toned as the myriad kaleidoscope-patterned reef fish appeared from above the surface, they're even more stunning when viewed underwater. Queen angelfish, empress angelfish, gray angelfish, butterflyfish, parrotfish,

## If you go

## GETTING THERE

Current nonstop airfares run less than \$200 round trip for either Southwest Airlines from Houston Hobby Airport to Fort Lauderdale or American Airlines from Bush Intercontinental to Miami International. You can fly into Key West, but you'll want a car anyway, so why not drive down and enjoy the scenery? Once in Key West, take the ferry (\$175; 2 hours and 15 minutes each way) or a seaplane (\$317; 40 minutes each way) to reach Dry Tortugas National Park.

## MORE INFO

**Yankee Freedom Dry Tortugas Ferry:** 305-294-7009; drytortugas.com  
**Key West Seaplane Charters:** 305-293-9300; keywestseaplanecharters.com

clownfish and neon-yellow smallmouth grunts — and those are only the ones I can identify among the seemingly endless species — dart among the corals, their neon arrays of light and dark serving as camouflage against the living corals shimmering in the refracted light. I float nearly weightless just beneath the surface, entranced by their seemingly endless variety of electric colors, vivid patterns and elegant shapes.

Surfacing, I see a fellow passenger waving a towel from the beach, motioning that Bouchard's ready for us to board the aircraft for the flight back to Key West.

As I dash for the plane, I cast an envious glance at the campers in their colorful tents. The park limits overnight camping to only three tents and just three consecutive nights — an experience worth weighing for my next visit. This time, I have a schedule to keep and more Key adventures planned, so I clamber aboard, sodden, sandy and satisfied.

The floatplane plows through the water and becomes airborne. Bouchard dips the left wing, and the craft banks to the northeast. My nose pressed to the glass, I watch this singularly idyllic treasure of a national park slowly recede from sight, then vanish into the seamless horizon of azure sea and sky.

*Houston-based Susan L. Ebert is the author of "The Field to Table Cookbook," published by Rizzoli in April.*

## GUIDE

## Hopping the Florida Keys

To visit remote Dry Tortugas National Park, visitors go through Key West. And for those who make the road trip from Miami, there is plenty to see and do along the way.

## Key Largo

**WHERE TO STAY:** Tucked into a coconut grove on Tavernier Key, the 18-room Coconut Inn (coconutpalminn.com) radiates the barefoot elegance of a well-tended, multigenerational family beach house with a hip eco-conscious flair. Smack-dab between Islamorada and Key Largo, it's replete with a marina, pool, gardens, 400-foot beach and Hatteras-style hammocks.

**WHERE TO EAT:** Whether you choose smoked, jerked, blackened or Matecumbe-style with Spanish onion, capers, shallots, tomato and lemon, the catch of the day at the Fish House really was caught that day. Or, go straight to the source, seafood purveyor Key Largo Fisheries, and chomp down on a Key Largo spiny lobster BLT in the backyard café.

**WHAT TO DO:** Key Largo ranks as the No. 1 dive spot in the Keys. The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and the adjacent John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park encompass more than 3,000 nautical

square miles of coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangrove swamps in which you can scuba dive, snorkel, kayak and tour by glass-bottomed boat. More than 6,000 species of marine life have been catalogued in the sanctuary, which also protects shipwrecks and other archeologically significant sites.

## Islamorada

**WHERE TO STAY:** Cheeca Lodge (cheeca.com), a favorite of President George H.W. Bush, Jack Parr and Paul Newman, celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. The new main lodge sports four first-rate eateries (seafood, Italian, sushi and poolside tiki). Tropical gardens, a 525-foot fishing pier, 1,100-foot palm-lined private beach, six tennis courts, Jack Nicklaus-designed nine-hole golf course, spa, two heated swimming pools and a saltwater lagoon add to the place's allure.

**WHERE TO EAT:** Dine on one of the Keys' only natural beaches at Marker 88 Restaurant; chef Bobby Stoky helped make the Keys' seafood cuisine legendary. Or hop over to the **Green Turtle Inn**, a local icon for nearly 70 years. If you fish out of Bud N Mary's Marina, carry your prize next door to Lazy Days, where chef Lupe Ledesma



S.L.Ebert

Ernest Hemingway's home in Key West displays the typewriter on which "The Old Man and the Sea" was brought to life.

will deftly grill, fry, blacken or broil it to perfection.  
**WHAT TO DO:** Fishing is the name of the game in Islamorada, which long ago earned its chops as the sport-fishing capital of the world. Fish the Florida Bay to the west. Fish the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Fish in the mangrove tunnels and backcountry flats that divide them. Fish out of Bud N Mary's Marina, the oldest and largest recreational fishing fleet in the Keys with more than 40 first-class fishing captains and guides. I fished with Native Conch Charters' Timmy Arce with resounding success, catching mangrove snapper, Spanish mackerel, snook, redfish, wahoo and hogfish.

## Key West

**WHERE TO STAY:** The Chelsea House Hotel is one of a half-dozen charming boutique hotels in the Old Town area and just a short stroll from the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum. Any one of these historic inns (historickeywestinns.com) is within walking distance of at least 100 restaurants. A 20-minute walk gets you to Mallory Square to watch the sunset, after which you can toss a coin in the giant grouper's mouth outside Captain Tony's (site of the original Sloppy Joe's, Papa's favorite watering hole.)  
**WHERE TO EAT:** I could eat breakfast every day in Blue Heaven's outdoor courtyard,

shaded by tropical foliage and funky décor. Stroll down to the seaport for lunch or dinner, where Conch Republic Seafood Co.'s been serving fresh-caught seafood since the 1890s, in a casual atmosphere with live music most nights. For elegant dining, ferry over to Latitudes at Sunset Key for chef Todd Holender's exquisite classical takes on local seafood and tropical fruits, served on a patio with Key West shimmering across the water. At Stock Island marina, Hogfish Bar and Grill's killer hogfish sandwich features flaky, delicate fresh-spread hogfish on Cuban bread, smothered in Swiss cheese, onions and mushrooms.

**WHAT TO DO:** Touring Hemingway's stately, well-kept grounds and mansion ranks as a Key West must-do — don't miss feeding supplied treats to the six-toed cats lounging poolside. Among my favorites of the countless shops in Mallory Square are the Shell Warehouse in Asa Tift's 19th-century icehouse and the Key West Sponge Market (OK, and Kermit's Key Lime Shop; you can burn off the pie's calories with the 88-step climb to the top of the Key West lighthouse later). To catch the famous Key West sunset, Danger Charters' fun staffer ably crew a historic schooner on a Wind & Wine cruise while dishing out wine, craft beer and hors d'oeuvres.

*Susan L. Ebert*