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A CEDAR KEY JOURNEY

By Doc Lawrence

"Travis McGee's still in Cedar Key
That's what ol' John MacDonald said
My rendezvous's so long overdue
With all of the things I've sung and
I've read."

Jimmy Buffett, Incommunicado

CEDAR KEY, FL. The Big Bend on Florida's Gulf Coast overflows with priceless treasures from the sea, sporting rivers with fairyland names like Wakulla, Steinhatchee and Suwannee. This is Florida's Cracker nation. Cross Creek's Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote about the indigenous culture that harkens back to ancient Spain. My culinary evolution began here before I was old enough to vote: raw oysters, smoked mullet, fried grouper sandwiches and stone crabs.

Visiting the magnificent region combined fishing with food. My journey began just south of Tallahassee at Posey's Seafood in Crawfordville, with fried Gulf mullet, mullet roe and raw oysters, a warm-up for dinner at Clay Lovel's Spring Creek restaurant where fresh fruits from the Gulf like mullet, crab, flounder and oysters, are piled on the dinner table. Between meals, we did some Mullet seining and worked the oyster beds at Panacea.

There wasn't a trace of oil in the water, on the shore or in the food.

Dean Fowler's renowned Steinhatchee Landing Resort was the next stop that included seafood at Roy's restaurant followed by trout fishing expertly guided by Captain Charlie Norwood. Fiddler's, Chef Jim Hunt's acclaimed restaurant served a spectacular dinner, a cornucopia of local fish paired with exquisite wines, topped off by a virtuoso washtub bass performance by the ebullient Chef. Breakfast at Rachel's a romantic Cracker house offered biscuits with gravy and memorable conversation.

We traveled down to the community of Suwannee where the storied river empties into the Gulf. Salt Creek Restaurant was culinary headquarters. Lunch included a fried soft shell crab sandwich and oyster stew. The piece de resistance at dinner was baked grouper. An unforgettable wildlife cruise headed



Pictured above, Roy's is a popular restaurant in Steinhatchee serving local seafood.

continued

by Russ McCallister of Suwannee Guides included a visit to Dan May Island and photographing eagles, ospreys and even a few wild pigs.

Cedar Key, the heart and soul of genuine Florida, is known for clams, artists, writers and expatriates. John D. MacDonald wrote about Cedar Key detective Travis McGee, America's version of James Bond, who, on the author's pages, lived on a weathered boat named the "Busted Flush." The Cedar Key landmark Island Inn's courtyard featured a "Cracker Wine Tasting," hosted by Levy County's legendary tourism promoter, Carol McQueen. Florida wines from the Sunshine State's Dakotah Winery paired perfectly with Clams Athena and Hearts of Palm Salad.



Above: Clam farming in the Gulf waters of Cedar Key

Left: Cedar Key is a nostalgic connection to Florida's storied and romantic past.

Below: The King Neptune Lounge is a popular hangout at Cedar Key's landmark Island Hotel. Owner Stanley Bair shares the bar's legends.



Andy and Stanley Bair's acclaimed Island Hotel predates the Civil War. The hotel's, historic

Neptune Bar is where a guest might share a drink with a stranger or a celebrity like Jimmy Buffett. A mid-day dine around included award-winning Clam Chowder at Tony's Seafood Restaurant and clams with pasta at The Island Room at Cedar Cove.

Fully energized, I viewed clam harvesting in the Gulf and attended a "class" in Florida's clam aquaculture industry.

A Cedar Key sunset is nature's symphony a harmonious blending of air, water and a blood-orange sinking sun. Rusty Rim Pub provided a view plus platters plus raw oysters, stuffed clams and myriad cocktails. This was a prelude to a leisurely paced gourmet dinner at the Blue Desert Café, with menu items like Ravioli Florentine with pesto accompanied by impressive wines.

This is the precious part of Florida where gentle people go to fish, hike, meditate, eat and drink. Peace and tranquility honor omnipresent natural beauty. The water, land, air and resilient people form an indispensable critical mass, the Sunshine State's cultural bedrock. Here, the Gulf of Mexico remains unspoiled, still producing the finest and healthiest seafood on our planet. A visit promises spiritual renewal. Anywhere between St. Marks and Cedar Key, you can lose those cold weather blues.



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