

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Make tracks to wanderlust on the auto train

Beyond Key West on Dry Tortugas, a magical fort and the solitude to savor it

By Lee De Cola

My 14' Eddyline sit-on-top kayak, Subaru Impreza, and I boarded the Amtrak Auto Train in Lorton, VA on April 7, 2019. We traveled 18 hours to Sanford FL, north of Orlando. I had been thinking of this plan for many years. In 2018 I phoned and emailed Amtrak about the possibility of doing it, but the answers were ambiguous. So in February I drove the boat on my vehicle to the station where the stationmaster held an 85" stick next to my 76" high rig and told me I was OK. I have a relatively low vehicle which may explain why I didn't see any other boats on the train.

The train trip was uneventful. I had adequate meals enlivened by chats, great views, and a restless night trying to sleep reclining. Even though I had both seats abreast in both directions, I was thankful for downloaded movies! As someone who hates driving even in the best of conditions, I think being foggy-headed the next day is a price worth paying to avoid driving 800 miles on I-95.

My goals were simple. I would visit the Tampa neighborhood where I used to spend summers as a kid, and I would camp on [Dry Tortugas](#), a tiny island 100 km beyond Key West. I would also wander about, camping, paddling, and visiting whatever I might encounter. In the back of my mind was the idea of someday migrating to Florida; I don't think that's going to happen though I might become a snowbird.



*The moat around Fort Jefferson on Dry Tortugas, 100km west of Key West.
Photos/Lee De Cola.*

Orlando and Tampa are sprawling metropolises; I enjoyed two nights in the district of Tampa known as Ybor City, famous for its charmingly seedy ambiance and excellent cigar shops. A Tampan with whom I had lunch cautioned me about the neighborhood, not the first time I encountered folks who were suspicious of what they called 'shady' districts, even though they may never have walked those streets.

After leaving Tampa I camped two nights at Collier-Seminole State Park in the western Everglades. I had an easy paddle down the Blackwater River (How many of this name are there?), where I disturbed a crocigator lazing at the wharf. The day was hot but dry and breezy, and I was reminded that one of the few downsides of a sit-on-top is that my legs were exposed to the sun. However, I was chilly at night in the Everglades in spring!

Before taking the ferry to Dry Tortugas I spent three nights in Key West. The first day I walked around the west end of the island; the second I biked around the east end (Every day I spend not driving gets me another million years in

paradise). I spent a lot of time exploring the three forts on Key West which whet my appetite for Fort Jefferson, 100 kilometers beyond the sunset.

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The catamaran ferry to Dry Tortuga is a fast 2 ½ hours. If you return the same day, you'll be on the island for about five hours, into which day-trippers must pack swimming, snorkeling, birdwatching, eating lunch and touring the fort. For me those five hours were barely time to get oriented, so I was glad I had booked two nights. I even asked the ferry captain if I might stay another night, but trips are booked months in advance, especially if you're carrying gear, let alone a boat.

The fort is vast, magnificent, desolate, and remarkably well-preserved. I was particularly struck by how generally useless it was in that it had never fired a shot in the 170 years it has been 'afloat.' Much like a nuclear aircraft carrier, it was a symbol and a great source of jobs, but perhaps not a great weapon for its time. It did, however, serve as an excellent prison! My favorite place was the cylindrical main magazine, a huge brick vault I had to myself several times, except for a little bird that was searching for insects, which are scarce in the dry climate.



The fort is magical, especially once the day trippers have gone and you have the run of the place. My favorite place was the cylindrical main magazine, below right. Above, a casemate. At top, Collier-Seminole State Park.

The fort is magical, especially if you camp there and have the run of the island when the boaters and day trippers are gone. I was reminded of the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico - receding arches, stark light, brick walls, empty towers. I spent hours just wandering around, sitting, meditating. You can go anywhere except the Park Service housing; there are no railings, not even 'STAY BACK' signs.

My campsite was beneath the limbs of a buttonwood tree but exposed enough to get the breeze, and because the other campsites weren't easily visible, I could imagine myself a lonesome explorer. Another advantage of camping is that

you have the [NPS](#) park rangers to yourself. They do enjoy talking about the fort, natural features of the island, and even their lives on this isolated posting. One ranger was a pony-tailed fellow I had met decades ago on the California Channel Islands where I had spent a day alone.

I was able to kayak around the fort and out near the booby nesting sites though landing is forbidden. Unfortunately, I had somehow acquired a very sore shoulder that kept me from paddling the 5 km out to Loggerhead Key (next time!). I swam, snorkeled, explored, smoked a few contemplative cigars, and was sorry to leave Dry Tortugas.

Back on the main Keys, I spent two nights at a midcentury modern motel in Marathon, the highlight of which was an afternoon at Crane Point Nature Center. The center preserves about 60 acres of what the Keys may once have looked like. At least it's big enough to get you away from the distracting hiss of the Overseas Highway.

One of the rangers had suggested I get away from the coast on my return to Orlando/Sanford, straight up US 27 to Sebring, so I did. It felt like a mini-vacation from the manic interstates and crowded beach towns.

Ironically, the trip's best paddling, in spite of my sore shoulder, was a few miles along Arbuckle Creek through a cypress swamp. By that time, I was experienced enough not to mind sharing the water with allodiles. The day was crystalline and peaceful, except for the roar of an occasional airboat. I also saw a swallow-tailed kite, which my wife's bird guide lists as 'uncommon' - lucky me!

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I drove 1200 miles in 16 days, may not be much for the typical Florida visitor but more mileage than I like. If I do it again I will spend at least three weeks in Florida, three days on Dry Tortugas, camp more, paddle more, and explore Lake Okeechobee as well as a few more out-of-the way locations. ♦



A campsite tucked beneath the limbs of a buttonwood tree offered a sense of privacy without loss of the breeze. One good thing about remote National Park Service sites: having the rangers practically to yourself. At right, one of the best paddles was through a cypress swamp on Arbutle Creek. Photos/Lee De Cola

Suggested Reading

Ferguson, Jason. (2015) *Moon Florida* road trip. Berkeley, CA, Avalon Travel.

Landrum, L. Wayne. (2008) *Fort Jefferson and the Dry Tortugas National Park*. Big Pine Key, FL, L.W. Landrum.

Ripple, Jeff and Bill Keogh (1995) *The Florida Keys: the natural wonders of an island paradise*. Stillwater, MN, U.S.A., Voyageur Press.



If your boat + vehicle measures 8.5" or fewer in height, you may be in luck for the Auto Train.

What's in your PFD?

By Ralph Heimlich

I polled a sample CPA paddlers at Gear Day on June 2 and asked them what they carry in their PFD. The results are tallied in the [chart on the next page](#), sorted by the number of respondents who carried an item and the number of items carried by each respondent. So, what should you carry in your PFD? The Coast Guard requires you to carry a sound-making device (whistle or horn) and a white light to show to avoid collision (signal light). Our poll indicates that you should carry some food items for energy, a knife, and a VHF radio. Everything else seems optional. If you paddle on the Potomac near DC, you should have proof that you've passed the boater safety course, or you can be ticketed. Another great idea is to put your name on your PFD with indelible ink and have some kind of ID card (helps to ship the body). A lot of other emergency gear can be carried in your boat (versus on your person). Many people recommend having a "bailout bag" in your cockpit in a dry bag that you can grab if

you are separated from your boat. Because most of the bay is civilized, a cell phone in a dry bag, a credit card, and your car key might be a better choice than fire-making stuff, a bear trap or a Viking battle axe. Check through your own PFD before you wish you had. ♦

Since the demise of Sea Kayaker Magazine several years ago, there has been a dearth of paddle-written magazine articles for the more typical paddler. *Atlantic Coastal Kayaker*, edited by Dave Eden and his wife Tamsin Venn, is one of the few holdouts in this genre. Now it has gone online-only, making it more accessible to paddlers in a variety of ways. Check them out at <https://www.atlanticcoastalkayaker.com/index.htm> where you can see a free issue. Several CPA paddlers, including Rich Stevens and I, have had articles in ACK, and there is a wealth of information from many authors ranging from the Canadian Maritime to the Caribbean islands, but focused on the Mid-Atlantic. ACK also has free classified ads, so you might find that boat you've been looking for, or find a buyer for yours. ~ Ralph Heimlich