

## I Know What I did Last Summer

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Ever have to do one of those back-to-school essays? You know the ones. They start out, "For my summer vacation, I ..."  
Well, I thought I'd share an especially cool one I took this past July.

I went down to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to check out the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium (ICRS), kind of like the Olympics but for coral reef scientists, conservationists, policymakers and educators. Every four years the ICRS is held somewhere new, and 2008 marked only the second time it had ever been held in the United States.

Florida is really the perfect place to hold such a gathering. Paralleling the Florida Keys for some 150 miles is the third longest barrier reef system in the world. Can you name numbers one and two? Answers will be provided at the end of this blog entry. The Florida reef system is also one of the most heavily influenced by human activities. Millions of people live within a short drive of some portion of this reef system.

I decided to tack on a couple of vacation days to the end of the business portion of my trip. I'd always wanted to drive the 113-mile Overseas Highway (with 42 bridges) from mainland Florida to Key West. And once in Key West, I planned on taking a high-speed commercial catamaran some two hours and nearly 70 miles to Dry Tortugas National Park.

Why Dry Tortugas? This national park is one of the most remote in all of the national park system. Remoteness often equates with more pristine conditions as well as fewer numbers of people. Dry Tortugas is 68 miles from road's end. The next most remote spot in the lower 48 is in the southeast corner of Yellowstone, 22 miles from the nearest road – pretty sad if you ask me. So for that fact alone, to be three times farther from the nearest road than the "most remote spot" in the U.S. would be pretty cool indeed.

Another reason: My wife, Lynne, usually has little interest in tagging along on most of my bare-bones road trips and such, but when I mentioned Key West — visions of tropical breezes, stunning Caribbean sunsets, Key lime pie, Ernest Hemmingway and Jimmy Buffet must have been evoked (I don't know about the last two) — she was on board.

The last reason I wanted to go to Dry Tortugas (tortugas is Spanish for turtles: Ponce de Leon discovered these islands in 1513, and the local population of sea turtles supplied his men with fresh meat) is that it is unlike any national park in America. It protects some of the most pristine reefs and sea grass beds left in the United States. Corals, reef fishes and marine invertebrates abound. There is also Fort Jefferson. Construction began in 1846 but was never completed. During the Civil War, the fort housed Confederate prisoners and Union troops. It saw the USS Maine stop by in 1898 on its way to Havana and infamy. It housed Lincoln Assassination Conspirator Dr. Samuel Mudd from 1861 to 1865. Forts fascinate me, and Fort Jeff is a colossus. Some 16 million bricks were used in its construction.

Lynne and I took the Fast Cat catamaran to Garden Key, which is a small sandy key that Ft. Jeff is situated on. We toured the fort and then spent the remainder of our afternoon snorkeling nearly one-half mile along the outer moat wall of the fort. We saw numerous fishes, and I saw one big, fast-moving fish – a barracuda perhaps – as I swam among the south coaling docks (the pylon-looking things as the tour boats come in to dock).

Between a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to attend the ICRS, the relaxed atmosphere of Key West, the great company and the amazing sea life and historic sites of Dry Tortugas – it was a trip to remember.

Answers: The Great Barrier Reef is the longest and the Belize Barrier Reef is second.

Enjoy the slide show of my trip to the Florida Keys.

