



Miami

No Way, Jose:

The Road to Oaxaca Leads to Key West

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DANA SHAVIN

It's noon at Hartsfield Airport, and it's our first tequila of the day. But for my husband, Daryl, and friends Frank and Carol, it isn't a celebration.

We've missed our flight to Oaxaca, Mexico, and there isn't another for two days. Our meticulously planned trip, during which we were to meet up with four friends already in Mexico to enjoy Day of the Dead, is, itself, dead. Now we're at a nondescript bar beside the terminal, drinking tequila and hashing out what to do.

People who know me know I'm a gloomy traveler. That I only like to leave home if assured I'll be back by sundown.

Italy with my husband was stressful. Paris made me ill. Barcelona made us fight. Still, I try to play along today and act like I, too, am disappointed we missed our flight.

Tequila in one hand, cell-phones in the other, we scan a list of possible countries to visit.

"Australia?! Barbados?! Belize?!" we shout, as a klatch of other drinkers looks on. Then we scan costs, and discover that flying to a foreign country

at a moment's notice is completely affordable — so long as you own either the airline or the country. If, however, you're an artist, a writer, a philosopher or a nurse practitioner, it is out of the question.

Upon discovering this, my mind throws a riotous party. It is already dialing the dog sitter to cancel her stay. It is already clambering back into the car, unopened suitcase in tow. It is already watching the sun go down outside my kitchen window.

But while a trip overseas is a no-go, my companions are undeterred. More tequila shots are ordered. Lists of American

cities are scanned. LA and Seattle are contenders, until we see their forecast is for rain and cold. We are packed for sun and heat.

Which brings us to Key West. Unlike a foreign country, there will be no currency to learn, no language to struggle with, no cultural norms to navigate. But there will be fish just plucked from the sea to eat, bloody Marys to drink in our bathing suits, hideous, overlarge henna tattoos to obtain and scooters to almost wreck. And at \$128 for a round-trip ticket, plus car rental split four ways, it's practically free.

Except of course, for one of us, who will pay out the nose in homesickness.

It is 166 miles from Miami to Key West. The drive takes about four hours, depending on how many of the 40 Keys you stop on to get coffee, use the restroom, eat lunch, stretch your legs, grab a snack and walk a bit of the oceanfront. It is my second foray on Highway 1 this year. The first, from Portland to Sausalito, wove through lush, dense forests, over craggy cliffs perched high above the ocean and alongside beachfronts with monumental rock sculptures erupting from the sand. Here on the Overseas Highway, threading through the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, the primary view is an expanse of blue water peppered with land and birds. It is a spectacular drive, even for the pointlessly heavy of heart, and by the time we get to the breathtaking Seven Mile Bridge, our link to the lowermost Keys, I am feeling embarrassed. After all, it is beauty and joy I cannot seem to embrace. Which is nothing new. Once, in fifth grade, I declined a party invitation, saying, "Parties just aren't my thing."

"What IS your thing?" the girl asked me.



Frank at the Wynwood Walls

"I don't know," I said, and I didn't. But I knew fun wasn't it.

But just as it's hard to stay mad for long at someone you love, or your dog, it's hard to stay unhappy in Key West. For one thing, there is the weather. It's almost unfailingly warm and sunny. I'm reminded of a years-ago trip to Palm Desert, California, during which I was endlessly entertained by the weatherman's apparent boredom.

"Another bea-U-tiful day," he would say every morning, practically rolling his eyes.

And for another thing, there's the food. Lots and lots of food. Not long after our arrival in Key West, suffering from a stomachache no doubt caused by the imminent threat of fun, I attempt to completely alter the biome of my belly in the space of one meal by ordering an absurdly large, violently spicy kimchee appetizer at Kojin Noodle Bar. I follow it with dessert at Better Than Sex. Chocolate-dipped wine glasses, caramel-rimmed pints of ale, deep, dark chocolate flourless cakes and other rich, devastatingly sweet treats titillate the senses with names like Tongue Bath Truffle, Man Candy, and Cookie Nookie Pie. Nothing beats back the flames of a kimchee appetizer like alternating slabs of pie crust, chocolate truffle, cookie and ice cream.



South Beach

And of course it wouldn't be Key West without the requisite half-naked guy in a tutu sharing our breakfast space one morning at La Grignote, a small authentic French bakery whose resident French Bulldog, Leah, adorns the sign.

"Grignote," I tell my husband while we wait for our waffles and slabs of toast the size of legal tablets and topped with freshly made

raspberry jam, "is French for 'dog.'" It's not. It's French for "nibble." (This was more excusable than the time I told him that "crevettes" was French for "carrots," which he ate, when in fact it is French for "shrimp," to which he is deathly allergic. That cost him a full day in Paris.)

To get around the island, we opt for scooters. My mind flashes to my childhood, when

my brother tried to teach me to ride a bike. Over and over I flung myself onto the banana seat, got myself rolling ... and rode straight into the side of the house. Nothing, it seemed, could alter my course.

But that was a long time ago, and there's no reason to think I can't ride a scooter. After a five-minute demonstration (here's how you turn it on, here's how you signal, here's how you turn it off) you simply exchange \$80 for 24 hours of your life, hop on your machine sans helmet (because the rental place doesn't have any) and shoot out into traffic.

A few minutes into our ride, I am feeling comfortable. Confident. Happy, almost. And then I accidentally wedge my sneaker into my tire (or some equally impossible to replicate scenario) and for a few brief, horrific moments, I am going down, while still propelling forward, into the traffic.

Somehow, before the worst plays out, I manage to extricate my foot, and I half-ride, half-run with the scooter until I can regain control. The traffic has stopped, and a traumatized woman, who has watched the whole thing, is yelling at me.

The almost-wreck is as close as I've come to a near-death experience, and it wakes me to the reality of my life. Which is that I am here, on a



Florida's seemingly endless waterways offer opportunities for kayakers of all skill levels.

stunningly beautiful island in eye-rollingly beautiful weather, with three people I truly adore. Yes, I miss my dogs, but they are safe at home. And yes, I could be home working, but work is not the bedrock of a life well lived. Living is the bedrock is a life well lived. And what is living but loving, and opening yourself to adventure, and allowing for changes of heart? The fact that I also sport an enormous, flaming-sun henna tattoo on my upper arm, the sight of which catches me by surprise in the shower every morning and makes me jump, is part of this living. It doesn't condemn work, or home, but it does embrace play, frivolousness, silliness, brazenness and the expectation that I have the right to be, in my travels and elsewhere, not gloomy.

By the time we head north to Miami for our last two nights, I am feeling more settled and less homesick than I've felt the whole trip. We check into the Winter Haven Hotel in South Beach. It's one of the many Art Deco hotels on the strip that, come sundown, is bathed in sorbet-colored lights. In the evenings we watch throngs of revelers marching the strip, carrying everything from Pomeranians to boa con-

strictors (but thankfully not both at once). By day we Uber to the exclusive, and mostly deserted, Art and Design District, with shops like Bvlgaria, Cartier, Gucci and Fendi. We feel underdressed even for window-shopping, necessitating a quick dip into a Target just to reset.

Lastly, we hoof it over to the Wynwood Walls, where the art of local, national and international street artists adorns the sides of warehouse buildings and courtyards with colorful graffiti, funky portraits and dizzying abstract designs.

Conceived in 2009, the Walls were the brainchild of businessman Tony Goldman. They breathed new life into the decaying Wynwood neighborhood, and at the same time brought the then-underappreciated genres of graffiti and street art to the public's attention. The Walls of Wynwood, like the Target of the Design District, are a touchstone, a reminder that where there is decay and decadence, there can also be beauty and comfort, if you know where — and how — to look.

It is imperative, when you

travel, to cast a forgiving eye. Nothing can possibly go exactly as planned, though much can go exactly awry.

Our last night at dinner, on a candlelit patio at a restaurant called Babylon, the four of us take stock of our trip. Have we had a good time, done all we wished, taken in what we wanted? Have we cast off the excesses and ordinariness of home, if just for a while? Around the table, we raise our glasses and toast the week that was. Already I am looking back, thinking of all I felt and fought against and all we saw and did and ate and talked about. We were four friends on a simple trip that was supposed to be something else and ended up being exactly right.

The waiter approaches our table and points to the remains of my blackened grouper.

"For good luck," he says, "you must suck out the eyes."

It is a familiar-sounding sentiment. "... Live deep and suck out all the marrow of life," Thoreau once said. It is an apt note on which to end our travels, and a reminder about how to go forward.

I lift the fish head to my mouth, close my eyes, and suck.



A hiking trail in Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park.

End of the Trail

Key Largo

