

For this writer, Key West is all about Hemingway

By Sherri Gardner Howell

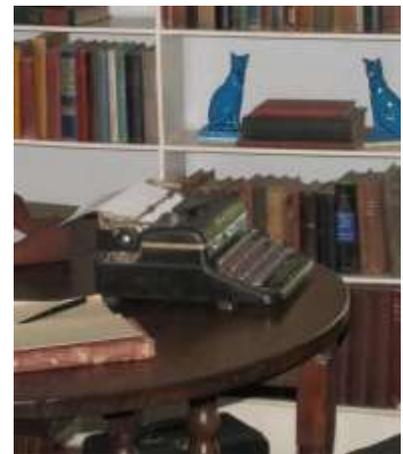
The only part of me that didn't like Key West was my hair. A recent "shake off winter" trip for my husband and me took us to the Keys with older son, Trey, and daughter-in-law, Kinsey. My hair turned into a mound of straw that frizzed and refused to do anything that looked remotely attractive. The good thing is that, in Key West, I would have had to look a lot stranger for anyone to notice.

The rest of me – my creative soul, fun-loving spirit and love-of-knowledge mind – had a blast in Key West. We were total tourists – with the carnivores eating cheeseburgers at Margaritaville and sloppy joes at Sloppy Joes, all drinking fruity drinks in bars where the tip bell rang so often that I had visions of bartenders living in Key West mansions. We rented scooters and two-seater electric cars, waved hello and goodbye to the cruise ships, watched the sunset at Mallory Square, which also offered a smorgasbord of street performers who did everything from twirl flaming hoops to escape from Houdini straight-jackets to weave baskets from coconut leaves.

Sometimes I felt like I was in another country instead of the far, far end of Florida. I caught myself explaining to someone on the phone who was complaining about the poor service that I was "out of the country."

Each of us had our favorite part of the trip. And, while I know that here is where you expect me to slip into pure mommy-mode and talk about how great it was to be with family, how terrific grown up children can be, etc., etc., here's your surprise: The highlight for me was Ernest Hemingway's house.

Were Hemingway alive, I would be a groupie. How can a writer not love a man who quips, "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed." And a man who writes, in "The Old Man and the Sea," "The clouds were building up now for the trade wind and he looked ahead and saw a flight of wild ducks etching themselves against the sky over the water, then blurring, then etching again and he knew no man was ever alone on the sea."



Hemingway's typewriter at his Key West home

So it was Hemingway's house that held the most fascination for me, and it did not disappoint. The tour guides filled our curious coffers with stories of Hemingway's time in Key West, dispelling rumors and putting a historical and personal timeline to the 11 years he and his second wife, Pauline, lived in Key West, eight of them in this house. Our guide said he only returned to Key West twice after he left for Cuba, although he retained the title to the home until he died, and members of his family lived there until it was sold after his death.

The six- and seven-toed cats are there, although there is only one seven-toed one on the property currently. In all, 45 cats live on the estate, with roughly half being six-toed and the rest, five. They say they are all descended from Snowball, the original Hemingway six-toed cat given to him by a sea captain. The museum carefully maintains the breeding program for the cats, with most being spayed and neutered, the guide said. “We want the line to continue, but not get out-of-hand.”

Hemingway was in his 30s when he lived in Key West, not yet the white-bearded man of most of his photographs. He wrote “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” at the house on Whitehead Street, and “To Have and Have Not.” “For Whom the Bell Tolls” was published in 1940, so it’s very possible he wrote some of it in his office above the garage as well.

My favorite story from the tour is the story of the swimming pool. The house was bought for \$8,000 in 1931. The pool was built in 1937-38 at a cost of \$20,000. Our tour guide said Pauline built the pool while Ernest was away, working as a war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War and visiting his mistress. When he returned home and heard the cost of the pool, he took a penny out of his pocket, threw it to Pauline and said, “You’ve spent all but my last penny, Pauline, so you might as well have that!”

Pauline had the penny set in concrete at poolside, where visitors can still see it today.