

West of Key West

What comes to mind when you think of Key West? Deep-sea fishing? Cruises? The Spanish and Caribbean heritage? Of course Key West is well known for all these things, but our Expert Traveler, Gig Gwin, takes us almost 70 miles west of the southernmost island of the Florida Keys — and back in time.



Open sea can trick the eye. As our catamaran neared the Dry Tortugas Islands, the silhouette of Fort Jefferson seemed to be floating. We were equally enthralled by the sharp contrast of red brick walls and turquoise water. It was not until our boat, filled with day-trippers, slowed in the shallow waters that we began to grasp the full scope of this 19th century fortification. Construction started in 1846, took 30 years to complete and all 16 million bricks had to be transported from Pensacola, Florida by schooner. When completed, Fort Jefferson marked the largest masonry structure in the Western world.

Fort Jefferson is located in Dry Tortugas National Park, an isolated cluster of seven unoccupied islands that lie in open waters 68 miles to the west of Key West, Florida. To find this little known outpost requires a boat excursion departing in the early morning from Key West seaport. For about \$129, visitors can take a

full-day excursion to the Fort via catamaran. The double-hulled, high-speed boats are well equipped and feature breakfast and commentary prior to entering the national park waters. (Another option is the seaplane adventure for about \$189; the flight is a

short 40 minutes each way and features low-altitude sight-seeing before a water landing near the fort's front entrance.)

It is a short walk from the dock to the Fort crossing a drawbridge that seems frozen in time. A deep moat rings the entire fortress and the open interior is flanked on all sides by well-ordered, red brick arches. While gathering information on the Caribbean for an upcoming book, I have been exploring forts of the West Indies.





So after visiting numerous locations, I could readily identify Fort Jefferson's officers' quarters and magazine area used to store explosives. But what I really needed was a storyteller. I found that person in Mike Ryan, stationed at Fort Jefferson.

My first question to Mike: what is the purpose of a moat around a fort surrounded by water? He started to explain and soon his intriguing narration made the history of the fort come alive. He told me that Fort Jefferson was one of 51 installations that comprised the third system of permanent



American forts built between 1817 and 1865 from the coast of Maine to Texas. This was a direct result of the nation's near disaster in the war

of 1812. As Mike and I circled the Fort, he added more to the heritage of this secluded outpost including its long list of military milestones.

Today when you visit, you can wander through the Fort or spend time on the beach. The pristine water abounds with sea life and migratory birds. Snorkelers can see colorful fish dart in and out of huge coral. Twelve-hundred pound sea turtles swim between long blades of sea grass. You may also find hummingbirds, Canadian Geese and great flamingo all on the same open beach.

You are sure to enjoy a visit to Fort Jefferson. The Fort's role may have changed from that of military installation to national park, but its important to our nation as a fortified bridge into America's past lives on.



P.S. In case you're wondering, Mike Ryan did eventually solve the mystery of the moat. It was constructed to prevent enemy forces from raising ladders and scaling the walls of the Fort. And, he added, beaming with a boyish look of pride, it is World's longest moat wall completely surrounded by water. ▶

