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Wild Florida

A woman seeks what lies beyond childhood RV vacations

Sally Manikian



TURNING THE CORNER, I SAW CARRION BIRDS PERCHED IN THE DEAD and dying branches of a mangrove swamp. Their wings arched out, drying, their heads pointed in different directions. I slowed my bike and stopped breathing.

The birds must have been black vultures or cormorants or other seafaring birds. They stayed, still. The only movement was a flick of an eye or a twitch of a tail. When I returned past that swamp an hour later, they were gone. I had no camera, but this was no mere photo opportunity. This encounter marked the moment I picked my head up and began to see the ecosystem at motion in the Florida Keys.

I have lived most of my life in New Hampshire. For vacations, my family usually visited relatives in New Jersey and California. But every April, the six of us headed to Florida in a rented RV. Driving in an RV was the one adventure my mixed-ability family could manage: my parents, my sister, Rachel, me, and our developmentally disabled brother and sister, David and Caroline. My father drove through the night to a campground near Disney World. The week was full of rides, swimming pools, hot dogs, and golf carts.

Those trips exposed me—I thought—to superficiality: the built infrastructure of the highway that got us there, the paved paths we used to navigate the parks, the human-made water channels and lakes edged by green grass, and Disney's fabricated world. The only wildlife I remember were the red-faced ducks that waddled through the campground. Their bumpy faces disgusted me and my sister Rachel.

The origin story of the Manikian trips to Florida is unclear. Maybe my mother hatched the Florida idea, the Disney idea, in an attempt to find something we could do together, because my brother's disability usually manifested in a stark terror of airplanes. Maybe my father further developed it, motivated by cost savings, accepting the idea of Disney and deciding the only way we could do it was by motor home and taking all our own food. Maybe both of them remembered the year we visited California's Disneyland by motor home. Both of our parents are gone now, so without that origin story, I rely on memories: the RV's metal walls, the curiosity every year about what kind of design we would get and who would be sleeping where (a bed above the driver's seat? A flip-down bed in the kitchen? A full bed in the

A wanderer accustomed to the krummholz of the New Hampshire mountains encounters this: Florida's vegetation along the Jack Watson Nature Trail in the National Key Deer Refuge, in Big Pine Key, Florida. SALLY MANIKIAN

back?), the cabinets that flew open when the vehicle shifted lanes on the highway, my father's complaints while filling up at the gas pump (the one thing not cheap about motor homes). The glee of getting my own cubbyhole.

At our Disney campground, we cooked on the grill and drove a golf cart to the ferryboat or bus that would take us to Epcot. We pushed our way through people, everywhere—waiting for rides and bathrooms, in constant motion in the whirr of carts and the whistle of bikes. Thinking back on this, my emotions tangle me up, as I consider the simplicity of childhood amid the complexity of adulthood.

The last Manikian Florida trip was in 1996, and I'd thought I had no reason to go back with so many places to explore, like the American Southwest or Ireland, or places with long cultural histories, like Tuscany or Portugal. And yet, the winters go on for months in northern New Hampshire. The skies turn steel gray, and the ground freezes starting in November; by April nor'easters are still pummeling the mountains. Somewhere around early March one year, after a winter spent on the back of my dogsled, I found myself craving someplace warm. Maybe the easiest and most reliable source of warmth might be—Florida.

As I thought about going back to Florida, I knew I didn't want to see or hear or smell anything I'd encountered in those childhood trips. I wanted to find what Florida actually is.

FOR YEARS I WRESTLED WITH THE IDEA THAT IT WOULD BE WASTEFUL to follow what I understood as a middle-class New England habit. Should I travel to Florida looking for warmth during long, cold winters? Florida seemed absent of wildlife. Dolphins, turtles, and the singing mermaids of Weeki Wachee Springs lived only in parks, and parks were the only reason one went to Florida. Could I reconcile this deep, childlike-yet-newly authentic desire to go to the big ocean and warm air with my very real need for wild places?

It was worth a try. Flights are cheap. Places to stay are plentiful. The tipping point of my decision was when a respected friend told me she'd happily spent a week in Florida, fishing. I was extremely jealous of her trip. Maybe going to Florida for vacation wasn't such a bad idea after all.

I planned the escape slowly, softly, over the next few months and into the summer. I tracked the price of flights, researched the Everglades campgrounds, and asked friends who wintered in Key West about the Keys. On my porch in August, I quietly admitted to Rachel that I wanted to go to Florida.



Sally Manikian, left, with her family in the Fort Wilderness campground near Disney World, circa 1992. COURTESY OF SALLY MANIKIAN

In the past year, she and I had traveled to other countries. I had spent two weeks in Italy, and she was about to leave for South Africa. It seemed absurd to go to a land of white walls, subdivisions, relentless humidity, and perhaps an aseptic world. I was embarrassed admitting I wanted to go.

Then Rachel said, "I've always wanted to go to Key West."

And so we planned our trip, together, to the Keys.

I set aside a few days at the start and finish to be on my own. Searching around with no particular plan, I landed on a tiny cabin with an outdoor shower, surrounded by a wildlife refuge. It came with a rum cocktail. It was in Big Pine Key.

I flew into Miami late at night. I stayed one night in a Miami garage apartment. It was hot and disorienting on the dark, five-lane highway. I drove past a rollover accident in the midst of Miami's noise and weight. I pulled my large rental car into a few different driveways before I found the correct one. My host walked me through and advised, "If you are going to the Keys, you better get going early. Miami traffic is the worst."

I left right at sunrise. I just couldn't wait to get out of there.

AS I DROVE DOWN THE OVERSEAS HIGHWAY (THE NAME FOR ROUTE 1 through the Keys), the landmass shrank, the ocean took over, and something inside my chest shifted. I wanted to map this place in firsthand knowledge and thus took no map. In Islamorada, halfway to my destination, I intentionally ignored a drive-through Starbucks and pulled over to get Cuban coffee out of a window at a diner. Locals chattered in Spanish, and I drank the hot, strong coffee while standing at the counter.

Once I crossed the Seven Mile Bridge, the mythical and actual divide between the Upper Keys and the Lower Keys, I relaxed. Buildings and parking lots retreated from my mind. Mangroves and ocean filled my view. Big Pine Key is a dividing line. It's a little too far from Key West to get the spillover of people from there, and the long Seven Mile Bridge prevents the same spillover from Miami. There is a stark absence of entertainment, meaning things like constructed parks to tour. There are kayak rentals and the protected refuges of the National Key Deer Refuge and the Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge.

The cabin I had rented for two nights stood on a side road, surrounded by the Key Deer Refuge. The cabin nestled behind trees, including a poisonwood tree right by the path. My host showed me around, using phrases that were still new to me: pine rockland, fossilized reef, freshwater lens. The cabin was just big enough for the double bed and the teakettle. The shower was outside. The sun beat down. Located on my host's property, I felt also part of someone's normal life, as I heard them come and go.

I spent mornings trying to keep the friendly deer from climbing into my lap as I drank coffee. I listened to new sounds, I watched new flora and fauna. There was no grass, no lawn. Only the clatter of limestone as it rolled off scree walls that lined the paths and the wild curving nest of trees that defines that forest.

A friend suggested I visit Bahia Honda State Park. She lent me her binoculars for bird-watching. I hadn't been to an honest-to-goodness beach in a lifetime, not since running around the Jersey Shore, climbing over the rocky beaches in Rhode Island, and exploring Plum Island's grassy dunes. The ocean's edge offered wildness before I found the mountains.

The beach at Bahia Honda was long but shallow. It extended for more than a mile around Bahia Honda Key. A few short steps took me from the mangrove forest to the ocean. Families and groups stayed close to the parking lot. A half-mile more, and the human chatter silenced and the sounds of waves and wind took over.

The blue water stretched out in all directions. It felt impossibly paradisiacal. I walked out into the shallow sandbars and stared at the expanse of ocean, much as I stare at any and all expansive unencumbered wild landscapes. I opened my arms in welcome and release. My total heart greeted the newness of this place. I had waited for this moment of welcome vulnerability.

The ocean glows in stripes of green and blue in the key's shallow waters. I settled into the sand and watched. I felt so strong and powerful, until I laughed at my pale, sunscreen-smearred face in the mirror in the bathroom.

When I drove north, after two nights, to pick up my sister in Miami, my shoulders crept up to my ears as the buildings and people crowded my vision once more. I felt I was leaving something perfect. I knew I would have to return.

RACHEL AND I SPENT ALMOST A WEEK TOGETHER, MOST OF THAT TIME in Key Largo and then in Marathon, in the upper and middle Keys. While Key West was our initial draw, we spread out our trip because we found it hard to find cost-effective places to stay closer to Key West. The spots we stayed stretched along the entire breadth of the Keys, occupying each minute cultural ecosystem that the island necklace holds. We found exactly one tourist activity per day. We spent mornings drinking coffee on the deck, packed snacks for the beach, and in the evenings we drank wine in our house dresses. Each morning we designed the day together, seeking both the fabricated and the authentic. We reveled in the kitschy tourist experiences, like the Turtle Hospital and crowd-drawing snorkeling tours, but we also hiked through limestone quarries.

We separated in Key West. She headed back to New York City, and I stayed on for two more nights at the Truman Annex Naval Base, thanks to a retired Navy pilot who got me a pass.

For those days, I wandered through the crowds, watching the cruise ships that dock daily and the train tours tooting down every street. The second night I watched the sun set from the rocky beach at Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park, adjacent to the base. There, I felt isolated in the rocky wild. I couldn't see a single person. Other craggy mountaintop sunsets filled my head and heart.

THE NEXT TRIP, I FLEW DIRECTLY TO KEY WEST, CUTTING OUT THE unnecessary fuss of Miami and the crowd of people of the upper Keys. Wearing my trail runners and hooded shirt, I sat in the four-seat-wide plane

surrounded by raucous travelers—women in Cuban fedoras and men in khaki shorts, wearing sunglasses, calling their boat captains to confirm their put-in times.

Maps, books, even driving the entire length of the road the year before, had not prepared me for the spine of fossilized reef and collapsed limestone that makes up the Keys, a thin line amid bright green ocean.

We spiraled in to land, and I recognized the buildings and the landscape. I saw the Navy base and hotel, the beaches I had sat on, Fort Zachary Taylor where I had watched the sunset. I could see the path I took from the hotel to downtown, the individual panels on houses, and the street. But Key West is so small. The southernmost point, the end of the road and a mountain spine, lay surrounded by water. I now would figure out the connection between ocean and land that I had missed before.

For the entirety of those six days, I stayed in Big Pine and immersed myself in that tiny island. Key West is a beautiful place, the historic old town full of tall old porches and shady palms, the boardwalk on the western edge of Mallory Square with street performers and tourist groups, and my favorite place, the odd Hemingway House populated with the dozens of generations of multi-toed cats. However, Key West provided a place to fly in and out of, a place to wander through if rain kept me from the beach or the ocean, and it was not a long-term destination for someone seeking wildness.

That was why I returned to Big Pine. I rented a bicycle and rode it daily on the Torch Keys. I still made trips to Key West and Islamorada, mostly because it rained a lot, and I found myself pushed toward people instead of outside. It was not a trip designed to tour, designed to move around, it was immersive, it was time alone. It was the way I've gotten to know and love places and learn what they are. It was an extensive stay in some of the largest natural areas of the Keys, the place where conservation has been able to get ahead of the competition for residential development.

On my first stay in this same exact cabin, I'd had only two days to pick up the broad, blocky sweeps of my surroundings, adjusting to sunshine and tiny deer. Now I sought more—somehow, I would find how it all connected, the individual observations of smells and sights and sounds that knitted together the ecosystem. I noticed a hollow clatter of the rocks when the deer knocked them over, and a hollow clatter of rocks formed by ocean waves. So many birds moved through the trees: cardinals and red-winged blackbirds singing so closely that I watched their throats vibrate, white and snowy herons alighting from the still swamps, slow, deliberate ibis pecking at the edge of

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the ocean, and the diving pelicans and their hypnotic, gravity-induced dives. The rustle of silver palms kept me up at night. My brain short-circuited as it tried to distinguish between rainfall and wind. I paid attention to learn how uniquely nature had developed in this particular place, in this particular moment, at the edge of the ocean and the end of the road.

I stood on the limestone reef, and I was beginning to see how it expressed itself. A thin patch of organic matter clung to it as the ocean's wild unknown moved.

The Lower Keys are foundationally different from the Upper Keys, the geological dividing line found around Big Pine Key. The Upper and Middle Keys are segments of a fossilized reef created by expanding glaciers 80,000 years ago, sucking up sea water and exposing and killing a reef that had previously been 400 feet underwater. These sections of the Keys are higher, larger, and composed entirely of fossilized reef, rising well above the current sea level. As the glaciers receded, the ocean rose again, and the Keys thinned and redefined themselves.

Meanwhile, at the lower end of this exposed reef, slowly but surely decomposing algae and other marine life began depositing lime, forming little eggs of stone called "ooids." Wave upon wave, the weight of the ocean eventually compressed those layers of ooids into rock, forming a dense layer of what is called oolite (specifically, Miami oolite in this case). Oolite gives rise to a much different ecosystem, and it allows more freshwater capture in "lenses."

I studied history in school. My entire understanding of interlocking natural systems comes from personal experience. I've watched krummholz bending under ice and wind, witnessed the life cycle of birds moving through in migration and singing to find mates, felt glacier-deposited rock crumble under my feet, heard the rush of melting snow.

No matter how many times I read about the geological chronology of the Keys, I struggled for a reason to pay attention to it. I was surrounded by

blinding civilization and theme parks. Every restaurant sold a T-shirt. Too much blocked the way. It would take multiple trips and a lot of time to learn to pay attention. It's hard to see the coral reef underfoot when the soil on top has been so heavily landscaped.

It rained. I watched the radar and the movement of the clouds. What was the relationship between the rain and thunder and the direction of the wind? What did it mean to have weather directly determined by ocean current and water temperatures, not by height of mountains?

After the rain lifted, the ocean calmed, the temperatures rose, my host Bruce called and asked if I wanted to go out on his boat.

"We're going backcountry," he announced.

Until this moment, my idea of "backcountry" had been rooted in trees and forests. I could see that I must loosen my tight grip on the land, and I could understand what Bruce meant. The open ocean was where the go-fast boats went. The backcountry of the Keys is a maze of tiny patches of ground indicative of what all of the Keys were before railroads and highways connected them. The map Bruce unfolded, the first nautical map I had gotten a good look at, delineated the paths among the freckled patch of reef and land; we would have to time our travel to avoid beaching the small boat when the tide changed. It was a truly wild place.

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Bruce took us to his favorite spots. First was the tiny, undeveloped, isolated key (I think Sawyer Key) where the birds hang out, clumping in the tree branches and floating overhead, where I saw the angular, prehistoric bent wing of the magnificent frigatebirds for the first time. Next was a place the water ran wide and shallow, where the locals held a midsummer party during which everyone stood in the water listening to live music on boats. We buzzed past the fancy resort that covers the entirety of Little Palm Island, where the wealthy fly in by helicopter. We ultimately landed on a quiet key, where he brought out the cooler of Coors Light.

Bruce embodied so many people I had known and met in my own world, back home in the North Country of New Hampshire. He had traveled far looking for a place to land, fallen in love with that place, and then figured out how to make ends meet. Sometime in the 1970s, he went to Key West one Christmas week and saw the kids on the beach. “I can make money off them,” he thought, by selling soy burgers. He returned by car from Los Angeles a few months later, and no one was there. Key West was only a party two weeks out of the year.

From that moment, he took the path of a die-hard locationist. His landmarks included seasonal work, carpentry, charter boats, wealthy people’s historic homes (which he renovated), and all the places that attract tourists he would guide. He bought low-priced land and later sold pieces to the wildlife refuge, ensuring his corner of wilderness. He built his cabin, one stick at a time.

His encyclopedic knowledge of shipping history echoed the similar knowledge I saw in so many White Mountain historians, whose passion for their landscape unearthed learning about what humans have traced on it. The Keys are populated with those kinds of folks, as I met the experiential educators, the relocated store managers, the bartenders, and the snowbirds who make up the residents of the Lower Keys. A fishing guide scrolled through his phone, showing me photos of fish eyes and the mesmerizing effect of multiple membranes framed by silvery scales underwater.

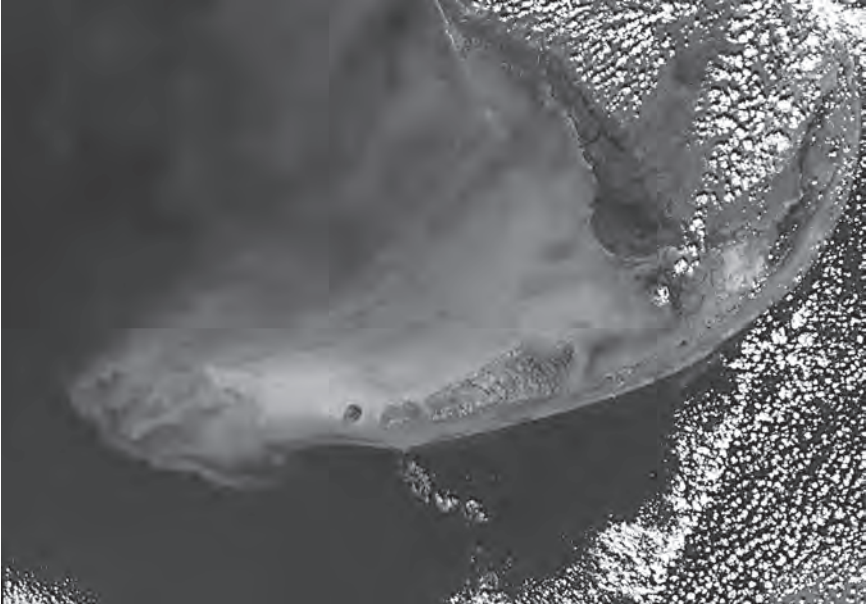
“What defines the Keys?” I asked Bruce.

“The Keys are a place for dreams,” he said. We were standing over a deep channel cut in that remote island, where someone at one point tried, and failed, to grow shrimp.

I watched movies at night. The third night in, I finally watched *Pirates of the Caribbean*—my first time. The action scenes, lighting, camera angles, cadence of the words—all matched moment for moment my family’s favorite Disney ride.

For how many years had my definition of Florida been that mechanical and contrived ride? That no longer was true.

I RETURNED TO THE KEYS A THIRD TIME. I SHAVED AWAY ALL OTHER plans and confined myself to the wild ruggedness of Big Pine. I never drove more than 10 miles. I went an entire day without speaking to a single person, simply watching the birds crash into the ocean from a secret beach in the wildlife refuge.



The southern tip of Florida with its fragile string of the Keys. NASA

Before I returned for that third trip, Hurricane Irma ravaged the Keys. It hit on Big Pine Key. Watching from home, I couldn't picture the devastation, but I also couldn't picture the level of resilience, how and what would happen as everything bent under the weight of the wind and the rising ocean. When I landed in Key West and told a shopkeeper where I was heading, he asked, "Is Big Pine ready?"

As I drove from Key West toward Big Pine, I saw I was traveling into the epicenter of Hurricane Irma. The trees bent over, and salt water had turned the mangroves brown. I cried out. Until that moment, the image in my head of hurricanes was destroyed buildings and livelihoods, danger to vulnerable human populations and their things. I had not spent much time thinking about the other lives affected by storm surges.

Now I barely noticed the destruction to buildings. I only saw the trees.

The tears came. I felt every change in the landscape, every turn that was rendered unrecognizable, the elimination of Bahia Honda, in my chest.

The place I loved was hurting. The real place, underneath the asphalt and the golf courses. I could find it and love what Florida was, and not what humans have tried to turn it into.

The responses I get from people about my trips to, and my love for, the Florida Keys run the whole spectrum. I get raised eyebrows, I get a laughing joke from fans of Carl Hiaasen's madcap novels of Florida nutcases, and I get the sigh of someone who just loves warm weather. I find it very hard to explain what the "what" is, because it took a few years for me to explain to myself, and truly understand, what the "what" was. The beauty of that wild ecosystem, rare plants, and tiny deer amid the turning and changing ocean. It is a wild place, and it is a warm place. It is both a middle-class dream and a place of rawness.

I seek wilderness. I seek undulating rivers with personality. I seek wildflower meadows spread over rolling hills. I seek places where wind does not compete with human noise.

Believe it or not, I find wildness in Florida.

SALLY MANIKIAN of Shelburne, New Hampshire, has published many essays about standing with one foot in the wilds and one foot in civilization. She is the Vermont and New Hampshire representative for The Conservation Fund and the News and Notes editor of this journal.