

Flamingo

While reading the article “Into The Heart Of The Glades” from the 2020 December/January issue of *Garden & Gun*, I thought of my many fishing excursions in that same area with Doug and Ed, my two fishing buddies. We fished Everglades City, Flamingo, White Water Bay, Florida Bay and Islamorada. However, I had earlier experiences.

My first trip to the Florida Keys and Key West was with my girlfriend in 1972. We were living in Atlanta at the time and made that trip down and back on my Harley Davidson Sportster. Another trip was with my parents in 1974. Before I moved to Mobile to build my parents house and while they were still in Birmingham, I was living in Riviera Beach, Florida. Knowing how much my father thought about Florida, I invited him and my mother to visit me.

Their trip down must have been enjoyable since everything past Pensacola was new to them. I showed them around the local life for two days and then thought about expanding their experience. Flamingo, in the Everglades National Park, was on the radar; it was a resurrected plume-hunters’ camp deep in the Everglades that had a restaurant and the Flamingo Lodge. I was extremely curious about this rustic location while my parents were just along for the ride. We headed south to Florida City where we then went west and into the park. I was amazed at the turtles and gators casually crossing the road, exotic birds, mangroves everywhere holding the southern Everglades together, and the overall natural environment of the Everglades—my parents, less so. Struggling with nothing to do, we ate supper and went to bed early. I made a mental note to come back, do some fishing, and explore this hidden gem; my mother asked, “How early can we leave tomorrow morning?” I would make it up to them the next day.

One of my father’s favorite movies was *Key Largo*, with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, so I thought it appropriate we visit Key Largo. Additionally, I knew but didn’t say anything about it to my parents, the *African Queen*—the actual boat that was in the movie *The African Queen*—was at the Holiday Inn in Key Largo. We would drive down to Key Largo, stay at the Holiday Inn, and there, I would surprise my dad with the *African Queen* attraction. The movie made the boat to be more than what reality had it to be; I didn’t think anyone was impressed. At least we had a mosquito free evening, delicious dinner, and slept well. We left the next day.

It wasn’t too long after they went back to Birmingham when I got a phone call from my father. He wanted me to fulfill a promise I made during “a few beers” on the backyard patio of his house in Birmingham: build him and my mother a retirement home on Mobile Bay. He had retired after 50 years of working for the GM&O Railroad. They were ready to move back to the area where my mother was from and my father fell in love with after visiting. While living and working in St. Louis, he made a couple of business trips to Mobile and later transferred there with a promotion. After marriage and three kids, the railroad transferred him again, with another promotion, to Birmingham.

As much as I loved living in southeast Florida, I wanted to be a part of establishing their retirement, so I moved to Mobile. It was there, while staying with my grandmother, I started the adventure of my life.

After finding two attached lots (one acre) of raw land with a white sandy beach on Mobile Bay, I suggested they come down from Birmingham to look at it. They liked the property and bought it.

My first effort was to cut the trees down, have a culvert installed, and add fill dirt. Then I laid out the locations for the septic system, well, and where the house would go. It was during this time, after the day's work, I drew the blueprints for their house. For convenience, my father purchased a mobile home where the three of us lived for the year it took to build their house. When completed, the lingering thoughts of all the hard work, problems, frustrations, and other typical problems during the build-out disappeared when I saw their faces the day they moved in. My parents paid for the materials, but I didn't charge them for my labor—it was my “thank you” for everything they did for me.

Broke and in desperate need to get a paying job, I did in Mobile. After a while, Mobile became home and I bought a house, but my heart was elsewhere. I transferred to Atlanta and lived in Buckhead where I started my adult life, but quickly realized you can never go home again, so I transferred to Jupiter in southeast Florida where my heart was and I did go home again.

Once back, I fully involved myself with enjoying my single lifestyle that included boating and fishing. I started out with a twin-engine 28-foot cabin cruiser, which, as I learned, was more for boating than fishing, but enjoyable just the same. Since it wasn't as versatile as what I needed for my different ambitions, I sold it. Afterwards, there would be other boats. Among them, my favorite for the ocean was my 22-foot Grady-White (Seafarer) and for the backwater was my 24-foot Pathfinder. I had these two boats at the same time to cover all bases.

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Remember Flamingo? Doug, Ed, and I were talking about “goin' fishin'” when I realized it was time to revisit that good-for-only-one-thing (fishing) Flamingo. This was before I bought the Pathfinder, so, overlooking much, we took the Grady. It proved to be too big. Moreover, with a deeper draft than the skinny waters allowed, we were confined to where most fish didn't hang out—the channels. We still managed to hook a few and enjoyed this (almost) perfect angler's paradise. The one thing that kept Flamingo from perfection was mosquitoes—big and plentiful. Two types of people fish Flamingo: those covered completely with mosquito suits (veterans) and those dressed for a typical fishing day in Florida (inexperienced mosquito bait). In the early morning and early evening hours, when anglers are most active, the mosquitoes reign; your skin is covered within seconds, the slower ones are satisfied with biting through the clothing.

After I bought my Pathfinder, I made some modifications to make it the perfect backwater fishing boat; it also proved to be a good ocean boat on calm days. As with every boat, buying it is only the beginning of money leaving your wallet as hundred-dollar bills flying out of an open bucket during a hurricane. I had an extraordinary amount of rod holders installed on the gunnels and center console, a jack plate for shallow water, and a GPS/fishfinder with a large display. Since I lived on the

water in Jupiter, it was convenient to take a quick trip to the Jupiter inlet for a test. Within an hour, I pulled in a jack, redfish, and over-sized snook. This boat will fish!

The final addition was a collapsible T-top for low bridges. I designed a sturdy T-top that was hinged on the two front and rear posts, secured by two easily removed bolts that would allow the post to separate and collapse forward. I took my design to Birdsall Marine where I asked if they could build it. They said the collapsible frame was different from anything they did before but they could build and install it. I went back 6 months after they built my folding T-top and was told, since then, they manufactured three more for other customers—I missed the patent on that, but they did give me some T-shirts.

We made several more trips to Flamingo with the Pathfinder, and, I, after the first trip, became a “veteran.” The Pathfinder proved to be the right boat for this area. We could go anywhere, and if we ran aground, we would just hop out and push it to water.

Doug wanted to bring his two boys along and camp on an island on one trip. My boat, loaded with fishing gear, camping equipment and five people, when leaving the Flamingo dock, looked like a nautical version of a wagon heading west in the 1800s. I forgot the name of the key we stayed on but it was well isolated and served its purpose: camping and fishing. After arriving, we set up camp and went exploring to discover how well this islet would accommodate us. We then did a little fishing while walking the beach perimeter with no luck. Early the next morning, we went fishing in the boat, came back for lunch, and then went back out. We returned for the evening during low tide, and in this area low tide meant the water disappeared. I anchored the boat one-half mile from the key and we walked in. When the water came back, Doug and one of his boys went out and brought the boat up to the beach. Racing to beat the disappearing water, we left the next morning.

During our trips to Flamingo, we explored as much as fished. We visited every key in the area, used the boatlift to get over the barrier that separated Florida Bay from the Everglades water, traveled the canal that connected Flamingo with Coot Bay and the next canal to Whitewater Bay, up the Joe River, through the inlet to Ponce de Leon Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. From there, we traveled south along Cape Sable, to Ingraham Lake and back to Flamingo—fishing the hot spots along the way.

Hurricane Wilma, in 2005, destroyed Flamingo and it was never rebuilt as it was. We discontinued our trips there by land but still fished the area by crossing Florida Bay from Islamorada, where Ed had a condo.

Everglades City

The second southernmost city on the west coast of Florida, hidden from the Gulf by the Ten Thousand Islands, and within distance to view the lights in the horizon sky of Marco Island and Naples each night is Everglades City. Just outside of Everglades City and before the maze of the islands you see a poor excuse for a bay called Chokoloskee Bay; this is the waterway to Chokoloskee, Florida, the southernmost city on the west coast of Florida. It qualifying for a bay is questionable because sometimes there isn't enough water to float anything that doesn't resemble a

fishing cork. Beware! If you get out of the narrow channel, deep water is measured in inches. We found out the hard way—but that was OK because it kept us from being a news report and possibly responsible for us being intact today.

There was a saying among WWII bomber crews: “Never fly with a pilot who is braver than you.” Neither Doug nor Ed applied that logic to the captain of a boat, or we were equally brave. On the Barron River, leaving Everglades City for a day of fishing, I suggested we cut southeast toward Chokoloskee and enter the Everglades Wilderness Waterway—yep, let’s go, was the reply. We could follow this—sometimes big, sometimes little, sometimes tight and sometimes get out and push your boat—waterway that starts in Chokoloskee and ends in Flamingo. We would leave it in Whitewater Bay, exit to the Gulf and head north back to Everglades City with a large catch and some wilderness experience. If it got too tight before Whitewater Bay, we would turn back. One rule we ignored for the waterway was the maximum size boat allowed was eighteen feet—my pathfinder was twenty-four. However, we never made it to Chokoloskee.

Halfway to Chokoloskee, while cruising at a moderate speed and in the channel, so I thought, we ran hard aground—the channel markers were narrow, vertical sticks without signage every one hundred yards or so. I still think we were in the channel; we just ran out of water, which happens a lot down there. It was low tide, which was part of my plan because while we would be in the Everglades, the tide would be rising, keeping us out of trouble.

I knew the tide just turned and would be floating us again, so we sat and waited—and waited. An hour later Doug jumped into the water saying, “We are losing fishing time,” and started pushing the boat. Ed and I knew Doug, being the impatient one, would want action fast and his jump came as no surprise to us. We helped him the best we could by changing positions and equally distributing the weight. He pushed for thirty minutes before we found water. He jumped in, I lowered the motor and we were off to the channel that would take us through the islands. The Everglades Wilderness Waterway became a distant memory.

Fishing the islands was different for us, so we never knew what to fish for. However, after dipping our lines and pulling out some interesting and undersized fish we headed out to the Gulf and cruised south along the coast. Along the way we would cruise until some structure, inlet or small key caught our attention and we would fish it. We navigated the tight inlet to First Bay and fished Lostman’s River far into the Everglades where we had a revelation: with the water resembling puddles in some places, we never could have made it this far on the Everglades Wilderness Waterway. At times, the growth was so thick and touching the boat on both sides, we were expecting monkeys to jump in. In the bay, we apparently came across a nurse shark hangout—we caught three. Once one is hooked, there isn’t much you can do except play this seemingly floating log and cut the line when you are through; nurse sharks and manta rays will pull your boat.

We cruised and fished as far south as Shark River (Whitewater Bay) and along the way saw a coastline that was untouched since the beginning of time. Outside of the rare recreational fishing boat and boats harvesting stone crab claws, closer to Everglades City, you are alone and dependent on your own resources—and nature.

On our trips to Everglades City, we always stayed at the hundred-plus-year-old Rod and Gun Club. It was a large property on the Barron River with a boat ramp and trailer storage. Once the boat was in the water, we left it tied to the dock along the boardwalk for the duration of our stay. The sleeping accommodations were outbuildings from the lodge. Inside the lodge was history with the original floors, doors, walls, check-in counter, and restaurant—the mounts on the walls attested to the many successful hunts and fishing trips. The restaurant served delicious food with an unexpected and extensive menu, but before dinner, there were cocktails on the large screened-in porch overlooking the grounds and river. Before turning in, there were more cocktails and a pool table in a separate room off the lobby.

Islamorada

After the hurricane destroyed Flamingo and Everglades City became too remote, we started fishing Islamorada. It just made sense: Ed had a condo on the ocean side and we had the convenience of civilization. We would leave Jupiter (Doug would drive to Ed's who lived three blocks from me), get on the turnpike and ride it to the end at Florida City. Then we would ride the slow, two-lane road to Key Largo; once we crossed the Jew Fish Bridge we became different people—we were in the Keys.

Our first stop was to put a hundred gallons of gasoline in the boat; the second stop was at Lorelei or another restaurant, which is no longer with us—across from Bud N' Mary's—for lunch and a cold one. Lorelei was popular, and much smaller, when my girlfriend and I stopped there during our trip in 1972 for food and beer. After filling the boat's gas tank and our stomachs, it was time for action. We would head a little down the road to Indian Key to launch the boat. Ed would drive the SUV and trailer to his condo, a few miles farther, and open it up. Doug and I would take the boat to Ed's and tie up to the permanent anchor buoy a hundred feet from shore. Once there, we would wade to the wharf, walk down it to the property and move in. Sometimes we would just fish the water there or take a short cruise, but always have another beer.

During one trip, after we followed the routine, we went out for dinner and came back for an early evening. Doug and I would sleep in the guest bedroom and Ed had the master on the other side of the unit. Minutes after we got in bed, Ed's friends Bud and Bill came over making their presence known by loudly banging on the door. They wanted to invite us to see the band, Big Dick and the Extenders. We got out of bed wondering what was going on; however, Ed knew who it was and what they wanted. Since the lights were out, we thought if we didn't answer the door they would think we were in bed and leave. They didn't get the hint and continued to bang until we opened the door. Bud and Bill were ready to go, but Doug, Ed and I (in our underwear) were ready for bed. Doug and I declined and went back to our bedroom, they left and Ed went back to bed. Five minutes later, there was loud banging again on the front door. Doug and I agreed it was Bud and Bill coming back asking a second time, but we definitely were not going to answer the door no matter what—let Ed deal with it. The banging got louder and persisted, but we, even though we were unable to sleep, were determined not to answer the door. Finally, the banging stopped and we could now sleep. Five minutes later Ed came into the living room yelling, "Why the hell didn't you open the door?" We learned Ed did not go to bed but walked Bud and Bill out and said goodbye to them from his balcony—still without shoes, shirt and just in his underwear—when the front door shut, locking him out. He started to bang on his own door trying to get our attention to let him in.

After realizing we were not going to open the door, he banged on his neighbor's door awaking him and his wife. When they came to the door, Ed, dressed in his unusual attire, asked for his spare key so he could get into his unit. Finally, everything calmed down; we went to sleep and got up bright and early the next morning to fish.

We always had coffee, a quick breakfast and made sandwiches for lunch before leaving for a day on the water. Our first stop, after leaving in the boat, was always Caloosa Cove Marina where we would get live shrimp, ice and other last minute items. Then off, a little west until the bridge, north under the bridge and then we were in the intricate Florida Bay.

Florida Bay has as many descriptions as people that fish it. It is triangular, stretching from Cape Sable to Key Largo with the bottom point around Long Key. There are many features that are constant and some that aren't. The constant ones are the many, large and small, islands dotting the sea grass covered shallow-water basins, channel markers left for interpretation, sunken and abandoned boats, and propeller trails carved through the sea grass on the bottom where, at low tide, no one wanted to get off their plane.

What isn't a constant feature is water. The large bay has different tide levels: one part could be close to high and another part close to low. Many times, we crossed the bay starting in good water and ending in shallow water, and then again, with the water high, leaving that area, it would be shallow when we got back to where we started. The GPS filled the screen with one and two-foot levels, we never trusted the areas displayed with deeper water. In some areas, at low tide, staying on plane would mean the difference between moving on or being stranded waiting for the tide. We saw abandoned boats in areas where the water was at the highest tide of the year when the captain unknowingly entered, and when that tide went out—it didn't come back. Knowledge is crucial when navigating Florida Bay.

During another trip, after the 2005 hurricane, we crossed the bay with the intention of fishing some old holes and seeing what damage the hurricane did to Flamingo. It was devastating. Everything was destroyed. We shared the same thought—they would never rebuild it.

Little Rabbit Key was one of those islands dotting the bay and not far from the condo; it was a convenient stop on the way in that guaranteed fish. The only problem was accessing it. This island is surrounded by a shallow basin with only one twenty-foot wide entrance channel. Once you find that channel and approach the island, you find a deep-water waterway circling half the island loaded with snapper. The idea, once in this waterway, was to tie a chum bag from a mangrove limb so it would dangle in the water, back off and anchor, give it a few minutes to work and start pulling in supper.

Thinking about pulling snappers in, we headed toward Little Rabbit Key. I misjudged my approach and realized I was approaching it from the wrong angle. I immediately heard two different opinions as what to do. I found the channel but not from the correct entrance so we ran aground thirty feet from the channel. Ed got out to push the boat, we didn't move. Doug got out, and we still didn't move. I was reluctant to get out and leave no one in the boat but I had no choice. Once I joined in, we made headway to the channel and when the boat was floating, we jumped in. By this time, we were out of breath and soaking wet.

Putting that small adventure behind us, we were ready to find a spot and fish. After setting up and getting our lines in the water, Ed took his clothes off and laid them out along the gunwale and T-top to dry. Doug and I looked at each other and decided to follow his lead. We were now pulling in fish dressed the same way as when we came into this world. Ten minutes later another boat cruised by to fish the same area. This waterway was tight so we had to pull our lines in to let it pass, and then we gave the two anglers a polite wave, as boaters do. When they passed, we put our lines back in the water and continued fishing. I used to wonder how their version of that story went.

My wife and I had many trips down to the keys with other friends, and the Pathfinder always followed. Not everyone cared about fishing so boating was on the agenda for those trips; however, I could always find some time to wet a line.

During one trip, from the ocean side in Key Largo, we cruised through the small but well marked channel into Largo Sound, which was the way to the west side of Key Largo after going through the coquina-walled channel and under U.S. 1. That last channel was narrow and cut through solid coquina leaving two vertical walls of ancient coquina exposed. The people that live on the canal above the water cut stairs into the coquina wall going down to the water for access. Once past the Overseas Highway we were in Blackwater Sound headed north to Jewfish Creek. Before the Jewfish Creek Bridge, there were two resorts with marinas, one on each side of the waterway, that offered a relaxing and scenic stop. Leaving the resort, we would continue under the U.S. 1 bridge to Jewfish Creek and then cross Barns Sound to the Card Sound Bridge. At the bridge we would head up the narrow waterway that goes along Card Sound Road to Alabama Jacks, a popular bar and restaurant in the middle of nowhere. Going up farther, a mile or so, fishing or cruising, was an interesting nature ride; stopping at Alabama Jacks was almost mandatory. The return was the same route in the opposite direction, but not before riding by the Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge hoping to see some crocodiles.

We took another trip to Islamorada with some friends and stayed at a resort on the ocean side close to Holiday Isle (which is no longer there). The resorts we stayed in had marinas because the Pathfinder always accompanied us. Holiday Isle had a history: it had been there for years—long enough for older adults to remember coming as underage drinkers— there was a small motel, huge bar, marina, and a swimming pool so packed with people that just standing in it (with a drink) was the activity. It had a reputation for guaranteeing three things: getting sunburned, getting drunk, and getting laid. Getting there by car was easy, but getting there by boat was interesting.

You passed a very long sandbar off the channel going to Holiday Isle. This sandbar had so much activity that if you anchored, drink a couple of beers, and just watched, you could enjoy an hour or so. Some of the activities were parasailing, snorkeling, ultralights flying and landing, beach games, and some people were just walking up and down the sandbar after deciding to leave their clothes in the boat. Once you managed to pass the bar and tie up at Holiday Isle, there was a different bar with just as much excitement.

The Florida Keys provide a unique landscape and experience, and with one road in and one road out, it is hard to miss any of them. Viewing the keys from the car while driving on the most scenic road in America is unwinding—from the water is nirvana.

Cedar Key, Apalachicola and Mobile Bay