

Leg 4 – Florida

Day 18 – Thursday 6 January 2000

Another early start for Fort Lauderdale in Florida since our plane is scheduled to leave New Orleans at 8:50am. We were surprised at the lack of people both in the queue at check-in at the airport as well as on the aircraft. Our first leg takes us to Tampa then on to Fort Lauderdale. The flight to Tampa and Fort Lauderdale was uneventful, however while on the ground at Tampa I went into the cockpit to have a chat with Captain Brooke, a young man with 3 years at Southwest and about 10 years commercial flying in total. Brooke said he would never build or fly an aircraft he built as he wouldn't trust himself.

We picked up 2 hours on our way and after using the courtesy phone at the airport we were picked up by the shuttle and taken to Inter American Car Rental to collect our *Chevrolet Cavalier* (TXI-51E). Part of the Bahamas Cruise package deal was a hire car at Fort Lauderdale and the person getting all our details, show us the main features of the car, check for any damage etc. was not very friendly at all. With Robyn as the navigator we headed off with the street map on our adventure to find the Ramada Hotel.

It didn't take long to get use to sitting on the wrong side of the car (well we are aussies), looking at the wrong spot for the rear vision mirror, looking for the automatic gear lever, turning the windscreen wiper on instead of the indicator and everything in miles and miles per hour instead of metric, no worries. We took a few wrong turns but hey that's part of the adventure giving us plenty of laughs as we say buildings and trucks twice as we went round in circles under/over spaghetti roads.

Fort Lauderdale was 70 Fahrenheit a bit different to Taos but finally we reached the 'Welcome Centre' at the Ramada where everything was explained to us about our stay in Fort Lauderdale, the cruise on the Dolphin IV and our stay in Orlando. After checking into our room we headed out to find a Laundromat so we could have some clean clothes to wear. The laundromat is setup with a charge card system to pay the \$1 for washing and about \$1 for drying. What an exciting evening and night we have ahead watching our clothes go round and round and round.

A visit to the shopping mall across the street was interesting. For example, having a chemist inside the mall (much like Woolworths), the rows of frozen food cabinets, beans that look like has beans, cucumbers that were over ripe and squishy tomatoes just to mention a few items. At least the checkout attendant was lively and cheerful and we had a great chat.

On our way back to the hotel we stopped off at KFC and can't get use to calling a bread roll a 'biscuit' while their biscuit is a 'scone'. Never mind that, what about the person taking our order, we hadn't heard of 'sides' so when we ordered the dinner meal and then asked if we could also have bread rolls and coleslaw, well weren't we put in our place but Robyn certainly gave it back to her saying well how are we to know what 'sides are'.

This afternoon was the first time we had seen rain on our trip but by late evening it had stopped and the stars were out. Hopefully we will have a nice day tomorrow as so much is packed into our package deal. Florida scenery and temperature is much like Brisbane only in the USA every time a

porter or hotel staff has to do something they want a tip. Well here is a tip, leave the USA for Australia where unions look after the worker and you don't have to demean yourself by begging just because you opened a door, or called a taxi, or wheeled your luggage into the hotel room.

There is an executive airport nearby and every now and again we see private jets landing and taking off.

Day 19 – Friday 7 January 2000

As our shuttle bus drove us to the time share presentation at the Radisson Palm Beach Shores Resort and Vacation Villas (part of our package deal) I couldn't get over how much alike it is with the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast. We found some common names like Gold Coast on buildings, schools, churches, the Sunshine Plaza shopping centre and the Sands Hotel. Even the types of trees remind us we are in a sub-tropical environment.

At the Radisson we were interviewed and shown around by Peggy, one of the staff handling the hundred or so people (suckers) who are there for the holiday package deal. Right from the outset I explained to Peggy we would not be buying into the timeshare opportunity as we didn't want to waste her precious time if she had other prospects (suckers) to chase and interview. She was very understanding and gracious and still gave us the full tour and information package which was very interesting but certainly not worth the outlay of \$27,000 USD.

Part of the timeshare involves access to a game fishing vessel with timeshare owners having to pay the running costs, but the boat and crew are available for 1 hour to 3 days at a time. They said the boat which is old and showing its age was worth \$1m USD and needs a complete refit. Back home it would only be worth around \$250,000 AUD given the stock at Sanctuary Cove on the Gold Coast.

After a light breakfast and explanation of the financial details we were further interviewed (interrogated) by an extremely rude, pushy and obnoxious manager who didn't want to accept our reasons for not signing on the dotted line. Finally he gave up and released us out of the tiny apartment/office/interrogation room to wander around the resort by ourselves.

Palm Beach itself faces the Atlantic Ocean and the hotel is on Singer Island, however the sand is brown and coarse, no surf just small swells, not like the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast since I have been making similar comparisons.

Having spent the morning at the Radisson we were given tickets to board the 'Jungle Queen', a diesel powered cruise boat for a tour up the canals from Bahia Mar Yachting Centre leaving at 7pm. Our dinner cruise of "BBQ Ribs, Shrimp and Chicken" took us past millionaire's row of magnificent multi-million dollar mansions all decorated with lights. Parked outside of many of the mansions were huge yachts and motor cruises, certainly the rich end of town and outclasses the homes and boats along the canals on the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast. Some of the owners of the mansions include Al Capone, owners of Budweiser Beer, construction companies, movie stars and business tycoons.

As we passed through the narrow canals draw bridge operators stop the traffic and raise the bridge for us to pass under, although on our way back one bridge had an electric fault as we were held up for about three quarters of an hour while they fixed the electrical fault.

On arrival at the 'exotic Island' the staff quickly and efficiently came around to each table serving the food as many servings we could handle. After the meal lives entertainment by singers, comedians, jugglers and musicians kept us entertained. Finally it was back on board for our journey back to the wharf and a sing along to keep us entertained.

The number of boat building sheds and second hand yacht brokerages is unbelievable with most new boats around the \$1m plus bracket. Some boat storage sheds are undercover while others have moorings and mobile homes in trailer parks. I don't think I could live on the main river canal and have the tourists continually looking into my house and at night have spot lights shining on the house and listening to the commentary over the speakers on the boats.

Day 20 – Saturday 8 January 2000

The drive from our hotel in Fort Lauderdale to Cape Canaveral to join the SS Dolphin IV was very pleasant. Driving along the highway at 70mph (112.65kmph) along the I95, a 6 lane (3 each way) with rest stops every 50 miles or so is much better than our highways back home. The rest stops are huge, around 12 undercover sitting tables, clean toilets, vending machines and 24 hour on-site security and management. This is something Australia could learn from and build along our major highways.

On arrival at terminal 2 we dropped off our luggage, parked the car in the secure parking compound, filled out the customs declaration forms, collected our boarding passes which is also our onboard credit card to pay for drinks, tours and duty free purchases. Everyone had to attend the life boat drill to see where we had to assemble in case of the real thing at sea. Then it was time to assemble in the main entertainment room to hear about the tour in Freeport, meals and events that will be held onboard.

Due to our late departure the buffet lunch sort of rolled into early evening, however at around 5pm we finally cast off and set sail for Freeport in the Bahamas. Dinner was served at 7pm and we were allocated table 38 which we shared with 2 other couples from Texas and Canada. We couldn't eat very much as we were both still full from the big lunch served at 4pm.

While the Dolphin IV is an old ship, the crew and service is excellent (much better than back in the Navy). Back to our cabin to hang up clothing, coats and put other stuff away in draws to find our bed had been turned down and a chocolate on the pillow, ice buck and fresh water as well.

Robyn and I went for a walk around the deck stopping every now and again to view the Florida coastline with its lights and sky scrapers just peeping above the horizon. There are many fishing boats, large cargo ships and other cruise ships dotting the horizon while the temperature up on deck is mild but we did wear a jacket to warm us from the sea breeze. A sign on the upper deck informs you that 8 times around the deck is equal to 1 mile, maybe we will walk it tomorrow, or maybe not. It's the thought that counts or so they say.

As Freeport is around 12 miles from any established shopping centres or resorts, we have booked ourselves on the 'Highlights tour with beach' which will leave the ship at around 9:15am and takes 5 hours 30 minutes.

Entertainment onboard tonight includes a comedian, a live band, the casino and bingo however we chose to bypass all of these and have a quiet night and catch up on some sleep given our hectic

program so far. Tonight they having a Mexican feast on the back deck at 11:30pm for those who still need (want) more to eat but we certainly can't fit another bit in, we can wait for the 7am call for breakfast. Good night, sleep tight and let the gentle movement of the ship help put us to sleep.

Day 21 – Sunday 9 January 2000

Sunrise over the Atlantic Ocean on calm seas was breathtaking as our ship the Dolphin IV gently glided through the waters down past the islands and mainland toward Freeport on Grand Bahama of the northwest Bahamas Island only 70 miles off the coast of Florida. We had breakfast on the back deck and watched the tug boat push the ship into her berth then it was time to get ready for the 'Freeport Highlights with Beach' excursion leaving at 9am.

We were picked up at the gangway by a bus as Freeport is a pleasure and commercial shipping port with container ships, phosphate, crude oil, roll-on roll-off ships filling every available space in the deep water harbour.

As today is Sunday, many of the shops on the island are closed including the International Bazaar so we headed off on the 'left-side' of the road as the Bahamas was a British Colony except all the vehicles come from the USA and have left-hand drive, crazy but they know what they are doing but would feel funny if you hired a vehicle to go site seeing.

First stop on the 96 mile long by 17 mile wide island was the Botanical Gardens for a gentle stroll looking at all the types of plants we have at home including the bottle brush trees.

At Port Lucaya Marina and resort we walked around the duty free shops where the prices are the same for the locals as the international tourists as no one in the Bahamas pay tax. Here in the marina one can see medium sized motor and sailing craft, a time share haven as well as people building their own homes.

Lunch was at Taino Beach followed by a swim in the Atlantic Ocean and while the water was rather cool I couldn't pass up the opportunity. This beach has nets all around to stop the kelp from washing in and spoiling the beautiful white sand beach and crystal clear water. After a relax in the hammock under the coconut palm tree it was time to shower and get dressed for the return trip back to the ship.

It was great to get back onboard to have a snooze in the cabin before setting sail at 4:30pm for Cape Canaveral. The setting sun, smooth sea and clear sky was a fitting end to what was a memorable day. Tonight we met the Captain at his cocktail party before dinner where all the customs details were explained in preparation for our return to USA waters at 8:00am. Also, breakfast tomorrow will be at 6:30am.

Dinner tonight was semi-formal and we were given an envelope to complete the gratitude's payment for certain staff on the ship as per the schedule:

- Dining room waiter \$6 per person, per cruise;
- Busboy \$3 per person, per cruise;
- Cabin steward \$7 per person, per cruise;
- Section *maitre d'* \$3 per person, per cruise.

Dinner tonight with pizza at 11:30pm shows, dancing, casino and lost more was on offer but we decided to head for our cabin as we didn't feel like staying up to around 2:00am since tomorrow will be another long day.

To expedite customs we will put our main suitcase outside our cabin door before 3:00am with the appropriate gold sticker, complete all the forms tonight and since we are non-USA residents, we have to meet customs agents at 8:00am for checking of our personal items. Never mind, the cruise was worth every bit of it, next time we go on a cruise it will be for much longer as one gets rather spoiled on board. One last peep out of the portal, draw the curtain and turn off the light.

Day 22 – Monday 10 January 2000

Up and at it, breakfast at 6:30am so we are ready to meet customs at 8:00am and cleared before docking at 8:30am. By 7:30am we have packed, checked out of our cabin and made our way to the 'non-USA' residents section to retrieve our passports ready for customs clearance. This whole process went smoothly and by 9:00am we were out at our car and heading for the Kennedy Space Centre.

The Kennedy Space Centre was built in an environmental park with alligators, eagles, wild animals and waterways everywhere and are looked after while people must take care at all times. We purchased a 'Standard Access Badge' and although they say to allow about 3 hours, we arrived at 9:45am and didn't leave until 4:30pm it was so interesting.

First stop on the Kennedy Space Centre tour was the launch complex 39 observation gantry, a 4 story structure where we saw the preparations underway for the next space shuttle launch scheduled for 31 January 2000. It takes 4 weeks to prepare the shuttle and booster rockets for launch once it has left the VAB (Vertical Assembly Building) and make its way the 6 miles to the launch pad at a speed of 1mph. The VAB itself is used to mate the shuttle and the booster rocket and the 52 story building takes up 8 acres and is the 2nd largest building in volume in the world, very impressive.

The shuttle bus system runs continually so visitors can hop-on hop-off, stay as long as you like at each location in the centre. The next stop was the Apollo/Saturn V Centre where the actual fire room (mission control) has been kept and computerised to simulate the procedures for a launch even with the shaking of the glass etc during lift-off.

After the audio/visual display of a simulated launch had completed we walked out into the most spectacular display ever where a whole Saturn V rocket and Apollo capsule is mounted horizontal above the floor Huge. Displays of various space suites and historical items used for each Apollo mission kept us interested as well as a moon rock, moon transporter vehicle used for training the astronauts was awesome and brings out the goose bumps, wow imagine what the astronauts went through and how they felt before, during and after each mission .

From there we went to the 'International Space Centre' where 5 nations are working together to construct the modules for the International space station, a living and working science and research platform. We could walk through mock-up modules in the observation deck to get a feel for the size, instrumentation and types of experiments that will take place in outer space. Can I please get a job on the International Space Station?

Back at the Visitors Complex we went to the IMAX theatre to see 'The Dream is Alive' in honour of the 3 astronauts killed in the fire onboard the Apollo space craft while on the launch pad.

The rest of the time was taken up walking through the many displays of a space shuttle, various types of rockets, tracking equipment, shops and restaurants but time was running out as we were still some 45 miles from Orlando and hadn't yet checked in.

We thought we were going to stay at the 'Splendid China' but from here we were given directions to the Ramada Hotel on the other side of the city next to Shoney's Restaurant. After the traditional dinner of pot roast, carrots, corn, baked potatoes and gravy (first decent meal in a while, it was back to our room to settle back and relax with schedules controlling our every movement, not that I mind. But I must say it would be good just to have a relaxing day off once in a while.

Day 23 – Tuesday 11 January 2000

We finally got up around 8:30am and made our way across the complex to Stoney's for breakfast and while the air was cool, the sun was shining and we had just watched the weather news where Chicago is 35 Fahrenheit and realised that was our last day for a while in the warm weather of Florida.

The previous night I had tried to contact Steve at American Affordable Aircraft at 210 Cessna Blvd. In Daytona Beach but the number I had was diverted to a 1800 number and the operator reported they were having problems with the telephones all day. The 'Vision' 2 seater composite fibre ultralight is one aircraft I would have really liked to see and fly, however this is not to be as we didn't know if we would be able to meet him if we drove all the way out to Daytona Beach.

Into the car for the 27 mile drive into Orlando to cash more traveller's cheques, post some letters back home and mix in a little site seeing along the way. The highway system with 3 or 4 lanes each way is well sign posted with plenty of warning ahead of when and where to turn. Are you listening Australia? Road construction is going on everywhere, however be prepared to toll's at regular intervals on their main freeways with amounts ranging from \$1.50 down to 50 cents. The local maps show you alternative routes that are more congested but of course you don't have to pay a toll.

Orlando is a very beautiful city with its tree lined streets with air ferns hanging from the limbs and in some of the streets they are paved with bricks. It doesn't appear they have major shopping complexes downtown, these can be found out in the smaller centres all around this huge city.

We wanted to visit Disney Epcot Centre however after paying the \$6 parking fee we found it was another \$48 per adult to get inside so we took the mono rail around the Disney complex before heading back to the hotel. There is a 5 day excursion pass one can purchase which would be worthwhile as it includes the Disney Complex and other theme and fun parks.

We got back to the hotel and went straight to Shoney's for dinner as they are one of the best eating places around. For entertainment this evening we will visit the laundromat to catch up on our washing before heading to Chicago.

As we had only taken one large suite case abroad the Dolphin I for our cruise we had to repack and are now starting to realise we need another suite case so we can fit everything in even though we

haven't really bought many items along the way. With everything sorted out its time for bed and the next leg on our journey to visit Chicago.