

## Wednesday, April 25<sup>th</sup> – Day 4<sup>th</sup>

We got up early, **about 6 a.m.**, and finally we did not even manage coffee that Susie had written in her itinerary ☺. At **6:45 a.m.** we left our base for the dock. But we didn't care about early getting up, the morning was amazing ! The sun was already well on its way up but the temperature was still down enough to feel that delicious Caribbean morning scent. Everything was great !

We zigzagged down the lanes to the still almost unpeopled harbor, Susie bought tickets for the boat, the jet catamaran, 'The Yankee Cat' (<http://www.yankeefreedom.com>), in the office and we used our free time that left to our departure for a short tour of the dock, to enjoy that marvelous vacation atmosphere with boats, ships and yachts as well as with pelicans. Frankly speaking, Susie, Hana and me were relishing that special morning harbor feeling. Dan immediately disappeared somewhere to take pictures and still kept disappearing even when we were becoming nervous because of a quickly approaching time to board on the ship. Only a second before boarding Dan came back.



*„Dan, Dan ! It is Dan ... ! The passionate photographer who doesn't care about others! Irresponsible Dan ! It's time to go to get good places by window ... Dan, Dan ! You Dan, you! ”, Zuzanka complained.*

Fortunately we managed to fall in a line of people that was organized by peculiar 'Sea Dog' Jack in time. At **7:30** we already occupied fourth seats with a table by ship window and we right away joined the line for breakfast. And we had muffins and butter

and apricot jam and milk and coffee ... yum !

**08:00 a.m.** - during our breakfast the boat maneuvered out of the harbor and headed along Mallory Square for the open space of the Gulf of Mexico, toward south-west. And even before we had our meal eaten, the captain stepped on the accelerator, the catamaran reared a bit and zoomed at about 35 miles per hour with us all about 150 passengers on the waves of the Gulf.

In a short time we left Key West behind and it was quickly disappearing close to the horizon. Our vessel with a good appetite nibbled away at a portion of 70 miles that was before us to our that day's destination, a small island with the huge building of Fort Jefferson, which island is the only one of other ones that constitute the National Park Dry Tortugas. So we speeded and jumped on the waves, seagulls were our companions for a while and in about half an hour there was nothing but only our boat and the wide open ocean. We left alone in the middle of the deep blue and under the golden south sun. It was a miracle !!!

We went outside of a cabin onto a front board, that was split into two foredecks, either with a long slim keel. I stood at the very front of that right one, holding fast a metallic rail and relished speed and force of the boat with the wind running through my hairs ... You say you have seen it in a movie ? Whatever ! I had my first hand experience of it, I was going through that !

To that I also was watching for dolphins, that were supposed to be frequent companions of fast going vessels, but unfortunately they were lazy that day. But even without them it was the marvelous cruise !

Frankly speaking, when I wrote 'We went outside of a cabin', I was not quite right. From the fourth of us only us three, Zuzanka, Dan and me took heart to leave the

shelter of cabin. That boat jumping over waves was not so good for my sweet Hana. So ... when Dan saw that I was drunk with jumping on the waves and with that feeling of freedom, he returned to his seat to make a fellow and guard to Hana. (*Thanks to you, Dan, again !*) Susie and me shouted the roar of wind and engines down and took pictures by cameras : „Mirek, wasn't it wonderful ?! Yes, yes, it is like a fairytale ! It's something out of movie ! No ! It's better than the movie !". After some time even I had enough that experience and came back in the cabin to support my honey Hana in her mild mal de mer. Not, she did not feel sick. She only did not enjoy the cruise as we did. What a shame, it was so great !

Sometimes we could see small sandy islands that poked only a few feet out of water, with a rear vegetation. Anyway ... we could mainly see nothing but the blue waters, the beating down sun and the deep blue sky. Only our vessel and us and a vast water space. Dan and Susie remained with Hana and I set out again exploring. I climbed on the upper board where I had a beautiful look from above at a white churning wake formed by screws of the two powerful engines.

After about an hour and a half a more and more visible dot started coming into view on the south-west horizon. It was bigger and bigger until the dot became an a small island and in a next while it became the island with a huge building of the Fort Jefferson. The captain sailed around the island so we were able to get an idea how large the fortress was and then he guided the boat to a berth.

*Shortly after 10 a.m.* we already were getting out of ‚Yankee Cat‘ and went ashore. „Finally the firm land !”, Hana shouted with joy.



*„Located on one of those islands, Garden Key, is historic Fort Jefferson. Built in the mid-1800's, with over 16 million bricks, this is America's largest coastal fort. Originally constructed to protect the important Gulf of Mexico shipping lanes, Fort Jefferson was used as a military prison during the Civil War.*

*The Islands were first discovered by Spaniard Ponce De Leon in 1513. First named Las Tortugas (The Turtles) due to the abundance of sea turtles. The word 'Dry' was soon added to mariners' charts to warn of the lack of fresh water. Since the days of Spanish exploration, the reefs and shoals of the Dry Tortugas have been a serious hazard to navigation and the site of hundreds of shipwrecks. U.S. military attention was drawn to the keys in the early 1800's due to their strategic location in the Florida Straits. The first construction on Garden Key, in 1825, was a lighthouse to warn sailors of rocky shoals. Construction of Fort Jefferson began in 1846 but the fort was never completed. The United States knew it could control navigation to the Gulf of Mexico and protect Atlantic bound Mississippi River trade by fortifying the Tortugas. Construction continued for over 30 years but the Fort, which covers 11 of the key's 16 acres, was never finished. During the Civil War the fort was a military prison for captured deserters. It also held the 4 men convicted of complicity in President Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865, the most famous being Dr. Samuel Mudd. The Fort was plagued with construction problems and Yellow Fever epidemics. The invention of the rifled cannon made the Fort obsolete, as it's thick walls could now be penetrated. The Army finally abandoned Fort Jefferson in 1874. In 1908 the area became a wildlife refuge to protect nesting birds from egg collectors. In 1935 Fort Jefferson was proclaimed as a National Monument but it was not until 1992 that Dry Tortugas reached it's current status as a National Park to protect both the historical and natural features.’*, we could read on a board with information.

Then we took a tour of the fort. We went along inner, from bricks vaulted corridors with embrasures for heavy cast iron cannons. We also could see down into huge, built of bricks water tanks for drinking water. Actually they never served their purpose

because they did not manage to be leakproof to a salt water. And we continued our tour along big arched open windows from which we could see the open wide space as well as unbelievably thick walls supported with iron beams. Somewhere they were weakened from hits by cannon balls. In those places there were deep and big bowl like holes and we realized that we stood on only thin, not very stable floor. „Zuzanka, look down !” ☺

On the opposite side, across the corridor, we could see an immense courtyard, that time with a poor tropical vegetation even with palm trees and cacti. It was a really strange look at that large number of red bricks, at the tropical greenery and the deep blue sky. We almost could not believe that and it seemed to us almost like a dream as well as that whole trip beyond bounds of our imagination. We had never been so far to the South before ...

We climbed up a stairway in the one corner on the very top of the fort, where there was a wide sidewalk that ran around the whole its pentagonal perimeter, and we relished views of *„The Yankee Cat*’, two yellow hydroplanes, a small island with thousands of birds and of beautiful white beaches all around the island with palm trees and bushes. And we have again the wind running through our hairs and that feeling of freedom and happiness. „*That’s amazing !*”. Yes, for that time even Hana enjoyed that feeling ...

Then we used another staircase descend down, said farewell to the old fort and came back to the boat for lunch. It means sandwiches, melons, strawberry, ice cream and Cola, had a not long rest and headed for the most beautiful beach. „*Wow ! Finally swimming !*”, Hana and me were enthusiastic and shortly after coming to the beach



we dipped our bodies into shallow, sky-blue water. We frolicked and splashed like children and Susie looked at us from her bath towel in the shore like a mom. She remained on the sea bank with her favorite activity, reading book. Dan jumped into the water with us but he was limited by his injured fingers and he had to be careful. But Hana and me took advantage of the opportunity! I put my swim glasses on and without any snorkel just with my lungs I was diving and relishing the undersea colorful world with huge shoals of incredibly colored fish. They were yellow-black, zebra like, another were neon like with carmine dots and other and other varieties of colors. It was so spectacular ! And I was diving and diving deep and deep until to nine feet. Hana also tried it but only in not so deep water as well as Dan with his hand wrapped into a polyethylene bag.

Ah, those two hours that we had for our water whoopee was over almost in no time ... We took the last look around and then back on the board of *„The Yankee Cat*’.

[Shortly after 3 p.m.](#) we headed back to Key West.

For that time we stationed ourselves in seats in one of the front rows with a nice view, but also with big ascents and descents, because our fast going boat was jumping over more than six feet high waves. Nothing for Hana ! So Dan went to the middle of the cabin to ask two fellows for exchanging seats because there was a relatively calm area in the middle of the vessel. But they refused that, they were satisfied with their seats however they offered to Dan that Hana and I could go to them and have free seats by them. So we left our friends and set out toward our new fellows. But that movement, it was something ! I moved holding on with my left hand to an overhead rail, with my right hand holding Hana and we both tried to do not fall down during crazy boat’s jumps. Yes, we were an interesting performance for other passengers. ☺ However we managed it to the new seats safe and sound, said hello to our new companions and settled in to continue our voyage. And it was the true, there was really not so much swings there and Hana was all right in a short time.

Then the initial polite conversation between us two and both of the oldish Americans followed. They told us they had been old friends, schoolmates and Key West residents: „*We graduated 50 years ago !*” and Hana : „*And I’m fifty this year ! ... No, we don’t believe, you can not be fifty, you look fifteen like !*” They were good jokers.

We learned that the one had the Bavarian-Native Americans ancestral origin and the other the Dutch-Irish-Welsh ancestral origin. The jolly good fellows in their seventies... Then ‚Sea Dog‘ Jack, that great guy of a crew that took care of an entertainment on the ship and told jokes through a vessel radio, appeared in the cabin and hand around questionnaires to all people on a board to fill it out. There were question that description : *„How do you like the cruise ? How have you learned about that ? Where are you from ?“* and so on and so on. We completed them and I wrote into my one, that it was the excellent trip, that I enjoyed everything including the voyage, sightseeing, food and swimming my best and I had never been on a trip like that before. Afterward we gave them back to Jack and got it out of our heads. But here you are ! In a while I could hear my name from speakers !!! *„Miroslav Stehno from the Czech Republic !“* I uncomprehendingly turned my head to Zuzanka and Dan. They smiled and waved at me to come. *„Mirek, you won the first prize ! You can go to Fort Jefferson with this company once again !“*.

Thus I headed upstairs to a captain bridge. I went among other passengers who were smiling at me and applauding me like a movie star ! And I played my play well, smiling and waving at them back. In the captain cabin I enthusiastically thanked to Jack and took from him the prize, the voucher of the same trip by ‚The Yankee Cat‘ for two persons that we could take until April 25<sup>th</sup> 2008. Then I came back with applause and ovation again.

Susie was right in her itinerary, we really were very popular people on the boat ! I had even a dim suspicion that she and Dan could be the stage directors of that first-prize show. ☺


Yes, of course there was another explanation for my good fortune ... ‚Sea Dog‘ Jack knew how far was our homeland and that there is a low probability we could take advantage of the voucher. ☺

However the voucher was a very nice souvenir and Susie and Dan were in ecstasy about it too ... so maybe I was wrong on their managing that play ...

The back journey thanks to that event was over in a short time and [shortly after 4 p.m.](#) our vessel passed by Mallory Square and [before half past 5 p.m.](#) we were waving to the boat from the pier. *„Farewell Dry Tortugas, farewell ‚The Yankee Cat‘ !“*.

We warmly and warmly thanked our friends for that fantastic and exotic gift. It was so, so, so special to us. *„Thanks once again, our dear buddies !“*.

From the dock we took our way home along shop streets. After getting back we had an siesta and coffee in our porch.

And there was another experience in the porch. Dan and me uncovered a hot tub, Dan set it up and at about [half past 6 p.m.](#) us two men were lounging in  Jacuzzi, inside bubbles that were massaging our purring bodies. Wouldn't be a great look at us, girls, would be ? ☺ The two satisfied boys with Coronas in their hands ! *„Hurray to our vacation ! That's great !“*. And we also were a bit philosophizing about the world, why some people were so mean, why they needed to fight and so on and we agreed that it was always only a small group of people who wanted that. We normal people would like to live in peace and to make friends with others. And we agreed on a basic rule : *„Do not do to others as you would not have done to you“*.

Meanwhile our girls fixed dinner and it was delicious again ! Croquettes of crab, Susie's baked-in small sandwiches, salad, olives and white wine. Yum, yum !!! And of course there was a lot of friendly talking and joking. And Hana and me surprised our friends with another gift : *„Zuzanka can you remember the roosters on the roofs during our common 2006 Czech Republic vacation ? And then your Christmas gift to us ? That shaking rooster ? So ... here you are ! We brought this wooden rooster along to both of you to guard your house against the fire !“* and we gave them a small, from wood carved rooster on wheels. Wow ! There was so much pleasure and joy ! And smiles !



And then ! Our girls in Jacuzzi !!! Of course they also enjoyed it immensely as Dan and me did ...

Well. It was really the great, successful day with ten stars ! We all were sorry that that fantastic day was quickly running to its end and that next day we would have to leave that unforgettable Caribbean heaven. But what can be done, another nice destinations were waiting for us, so there was not any reason to cry. Just to look ahead and look forward to another days and to another places. Talking that we chased away our mild sorrow, went upstairs to our rooms and did preparations for our next day departure.

Then us two took showers, [about half past 9 p.m.](#) we went to bed and before long we were asleep dreaming of the day's adventures and the vacation ahead.