

Port Orange/Daytona Beach, FL Summers 1987-

The most fitting start to a travel journal, being the place I travelled before I gave up a bottle. The roughly month long summer stay with Charlotte & Buddy became a much-anticipated fixture of my childhood & adolescence. I count myself as having dual citizenship on a much smaller scale. The smell of salty air from the top of an arch bridge over the river is as much a sign of "home" to me as anything in Brookhaven.

The earliest trips I can remember ~~are~~ were to the Crestview Apartment complex with the community pool in the back. The pool where I nearly drowned when I slipped out of my floaty ring. The yard where the metal stake from the tethered soccer ball destroyed my ankle. The apartment with the conspicuous fist-sized hole in the thin inner door from when Buddy got mad.

The concept of dates or years is essentially useless at this point. The memories blend into one continuous red, like a time-lapsed movie. Highlights include the planetarium (cat from outer space), science museum (giant sloth skeleton), Sugar Mill Gardens (dinosaur statues, sugar mill ruins), public library (home of the legendary Henry Heimlich first aid video & site of my plummet down the asphalt-lined stairs), and of course the beach.

Neighboring towns & attractions were visited briefly enough to warrant mentioning but not separate entries. Frequent spots included Flagler Beach - crushed

red rock beaches, prickly underfoot, with sharp
craggy outcrops + a strong underbow; Ponce Inlet -
the hidden gem beach, small dunes covered in
grass taller than they, + the eponymous red
brick lighthouse that I never did climb because
Liz chickened out half way up + I, being
the good boyfriend, walked her down.

Longer jaunts took us to local attractions Silver
Springs - commercialized wilderness with glass
bottom boats + faux old time cottages; and Blue
Springs, the legit cousin that was the site of
manatee migrations, a narrow diving cave, + the
always 72°F swimming water (always a favorite
of mine). Mount Dora was an occasional choice,
memorable to me for a railroad with a sight-
seeing tour we didn't take, + for a traditional
English tea room that offered Scottish egg.

Equally ubiquitous as the namesake cities for this
entry were the touristy peninsula towns that served
as one-night stops on the treks to + from. Destin,
Marianna, DeFuniak Springs, all an undifferentiated
swirl of Alvin's Islands + greenish Gulf of Mexico
waters. Their sameness + their haught never appealed.

The other major feature that will always remain
somewhere in a scent-linked region of my long term
memory is the food + the cuisine. Different
words on purpose, as the offerings were varied
enough to appeal to both desires, Booth's Bowery,
a Port Orange legend, might just be the happiest
place on earth. Fonky + irreverent decor with

vanity liceace plates on the wall + a strippers cage
out front were the perfect backdrop to the
pseudo family mix of toy grab up front, Trivial
Pursuit on the tables, + beer up to the ankles
throughout. The menu was standard bar fare
with a few extra pages of outliers pushed in.
Potato skins between escargo (never had the
stones to have it there) + alligator fritters (too far
from Louisiana for me to trust). By + large the
food was good but nothing you'd write home
about. But then there were the wings. To this
day, still quite possibly the best thing I've ever
eaten. My tastes + tolerance matured through the
years until I found perfection: ten hot garlic wings,
"wet" (extra sauce) with suicide on the side. Suicide
was exactly what it sounded like. Most hot
sauces are red liquids with short lists of ingredients,
but not suicide sauce. Suicide sauce was a
thick, chunky, mahogany brown paste with only 2
ingredients: habanero peppers + a food processor.
Perfect as a tiny dab on the tip of a drumstick,
right over the little oyster of meat that's the
perfect size to snap off in one bite.

The wing "experience" that Buddy + I went
through each trip was like some kind of ritual, moves
choreographed to the point that we needed only
glances + nods to stay in sync. Four wings each
went down in a matter of moments, hungry slurping
sounds interrupted only by the crack of joints as
we broke open the winglets to suck out the tender

morsel of clean white meat between. Then it was time for rest, as we reclined & let our stomachs relax, the familiar mixture of pleasure & pain creeping over our red-stained lips into contorted smiles grins. We could talk then, take drinks, nibble on the celery & blue cheese, & savor the remaining wings one at a time, growing increasingly immune to the searing burn as our brains flooded with endorphins in the chili high.

Other venues were numerous but less impressive against such a high bar. A slew of moderate to expensive restaurants offering all regional variants on haute cuisine came & went. The only memorable ones were the 2 Emeril themed restaurants & the Rain Forest café. The Emeril restaurants are discussed later, & the Rain Forest was more notable for its lack of parking than its escargo.

Port Orange/Daytona was where I earned my chops as a traveller & budding foodie, & I will always remember it fondly as the birthplace of a lifelong (I hope) hobby.