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An Ode to Florida's Summer – And a Time to Remember

By **Carla Poindexter**
UCF Forum columnist
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It is summer in Florida again, when I always think back to my first summers here and why I still love this time of year.

When I arrived in Orlando 13 years ago from Texas to teach at UCF, we unpacked all the stuff from the van into the new rented condo and headed straight for the beach. Along the way, traveling on the Bee Line Expressway, I saw palmettos in the thick roadside jungles alongside tall pine trees.

The long stretch of road to Cocoa Beach offered the sight of wild turkeys and little white egrets resting on cows. Each cow appeared to have his own bird and the cows seemed even more abundant than in Texas. I found out later cattle ranching is a bigger industry in Florida than in Texas. That was surprising to me.

We stopped halfway to Cocoa Beach at a place called the Lone Cabbage Fish Camp on the St. Johns River in hopes of sighting an alligator in the wild. We saw a log floating by with two nostrils and that was enough to get us to take an airboat ride.

Gliding fast over river grasses and making wide turns and bends along the way was a unique experience for me. Now and then the guide would slow the motor down when he sighted a gator. We saw several pairs resting on the muddy banks under the hot Florida sun, and up above sometimes we saw an eagle. The alligators seemed to be elegant in their stillness and when their bodies moved they were equally elegant in their swift glide into the dark waters. I was thrilled.

After eating the best basket of fried shrimp and french fries imaginable, we were back on the road. Along the way, billboards for Ron Jon Surf Shop punctuated the landscape of hammocks and cypress stands and wide fields of pale yellow grasses. Now and then a

large native palm stood alone on the prairie. In West Texas it would have been a pin oak tree.

Finally we arrived at the beach. We hauled the umbrella, beach chairs, blanket, towels, books, and cooler filled with snacks to a promising spot, and I sighed with the satisfaction that only a road warrior who has traveled 2,000 miles to reach her destination can feel: the east coast of Florida! I can still remember the excitement of 13 years ago when I arrived.

When we were kids, Dad and Mom drove us from Rochester, N.Y., to Miami Beach every January for vacation. My brother, Jack, and I sat in the back seat of our every-two-year-upgraded Chevy, annoying our poor parents with our constant bickering and refusing to sing along with their '50s harmonies.

We spent the nights in Myrtle Beach, S.C., then Daytona Beach and finally Miami Beach. We must have whizzed by Cocoa Beach along A1A. I don't remember anything about it except the old Thunderbird Motel.

Our annual week in Miami was mythical. Jack and I played in the sand and swam in the ocean outside our hotel every day. I remember one ride on the elevator when my Dad told us later that we were riding in the same car with the president's personal secretary. He was very pleased to tell us that.

So it is summer again in Florida – and all that that conjures up.

I just drove through a pelting rain, signaling the beginning of Florida's late-afternoon rainy season.

I'll have some time off soon and I'm going to make some art, swim in the ocean, read a book or two – and rest.

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