

Celebrating a Century: America's National Parks

Dry Tortugas National Park

Day One - Arrival

"I hope you enjoy the Dry Tortugas!" There was clapping, and the sound of footsteps departing the Yankee Freedom, the boat that took us to the island, about 70 miles west of Key West, following the path of shipwreck salvagers from a bygone era. Once I stepped off, I took a look around; the bright golden sun shone in my eyes, crystal blue water as far as I could see. Fort Jefferson, towering above me took up a good half of the island. Fort Jefferson, once used as a federal prison during the Civil War, held captives and conspirators. The sea breeze blew through the abandoned fort, swirling sand into its recesses. It gave me chills thinking of the isolation the prisoners felt. It was recently designated a national park in 1992.

Day Two - Fishing

This was my first time fishing in the sea. I saw a shark slowly emerge from the shallows, and watched sea turtles lazily coast by. They return here to nest every year, hence the name Dry (because of the lack of springs) and Tortugas (meaning turtles but in Spanish). I was just east of the North Coaling Dock and had my eye on one particular fish. It was right there, swimming by my feet. I could hardly stand the nerves shooting through my legs. I had a choice. I could either stay right where I was, or I could ease the nerves by moving my legs, taking the chance of scaring the fish off and alerting the shark to my presence. I decided to stay still and endure.

Day Three - Snorkeling

"Ow!" dad exclaimed, as the Mangrove Snapper clenched its vampire like teeth into his thumb. I had battled the fish for ten minutes and finally landed it. Mangrove Snappers are valued

for their light and flaky flesh. I caught mine on frozen squid, which is a part of their diet including live/frozen squid, shrimp, or minnows.

“Isn’t that wonderful?” Dad said sarcastically as he held up the fish, blood running down his arm spotting the water. I felt bad for him, but his smile told me he couldn't have been any happier for me.

After lunch aboard the Yankee Freedom, I got up my nerve and decided to go snorkeling. I had always been afraid of sharks, and the shark I’d seen earlier was still in the back of my mind. I swallowed hard as my face touched the water. The world I entered wasn’t frightening at all.

It was beautiful; small, colorful fish swimming around huge rocks the size of dressers. I was so struck by the beauty of the ocean below the surface I forgot to be worried. Luckily, I didn’t see any sharks.

Day Four - Fort Jefferson and Farewell

After all of the experiences I had at the park, I didn’t want to leave. There was so much more to do that I had to narrow it down to one! A tour of Fort Jefferson. The wind and sand-scarred bricks rose high above my head. As I crossed the wooden bridge spanning the moat surrounding the fort, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. How many others had made this same trek only to never retrace their steps? I could almost feel their breath on my face as I entered the fort. Crumbled structures stood within the walls of the fort. A small graveyard rose to the right. No breeze passed within the walls. The heat was awful. Long gone was the clear blue water and white sand, replaced with black and blistered bricks and desolation in every direction.

“Any questions before we continue?” It was our tour guide.

“Why is this place a national park? It’s kind of scary and really hot,” I asked. The tour guide stopped and gave me a good “once over”, then he looked around the fort.

“What’s your name?” he asked. Before I could answer, he continued. “This place became a national park for everyone like you. It is here to remind us of where we came from, to experience the feelings of our predecessors. This is a place where our imaginations can roam, where history isn’t in a book or on the web, but real, tangible - Did you feel the exhale of the past when you walked in? Did the hair on your arms stand up? Did you see how blue the water was out there? The graves hold the bodies of men who took their last breath right here where you’re standing. This place honors all that is available for you, and everyone here, to visit because of them and others like them. That’s why this is a national park - that answer your question? Are we good?”

“Good...” I said, still trying to comprehend all of the information he just shoved in my brain. The rest of the tour I thought about what he said, while still taking in the spectacle of Fort Jefferson.

As I boarded the Yankee Freedom for the last time, my mom came up beside me and asked me if I was okay. I was just staring out the window watching the fort disappear in the distance. I responded with a yes, and kept watching the distance between the boat and fort grow.

I started thinking about what it would be like if this island wasn’t a national park. There would probably be no access to the island, no snorkeling or fishing. There is the fort and its scorched brick walls affording protection yet constituting a prison at the same time. I’ll never forget the Dry Tortugas and Fort Jefferson. I got to feel real history. I hope everyone gets to have the same chance to experience the Dry Tortugas. Just like the ocean that surrounds it, it’s full of life . . . beautiful, sometimes frightening, and deserving of our admiration and respect.