

### **Trip #6 – Episode 4: And There it Was ... Gone.**

For several years, before Jim and I found each other, I would spend at least a month each winter in Fort Myers Beach, Florida. It's actually an island – Estero Island, and unlike much of Florida, there were no malls, very few huge condos or hotels, and many modest single homes on the very wide beachfront. It was very laid back. After Jim and I got together, we continued to go there for a while, until we decided to explore other winter getaways. Altogether, over about 8 years, I rented 5 different places there.

A few weeks ago, we decided to drive through Fort Myers Beach to see the impact of Hurricane Ian, which stormed through just under two years ago.

Wow! Four of the five places I'd rented were ... gone.

This used to be my friend Sheila's home, which I rented a few times. There was nothing worth saving. Fortunately for Sheila, she had sold the house about 6 months before Ian arrived. But the people who bought it were left with this. The orange fence at the back is where the pool was.



Driving up the main drag, and seeing all the damage was a jaw-dropping experience.





This was in the north part of the island where the larger hotels and condos used to be.



The Junkanoo was a favourite restaurant we went to many times.



This was The Wild Wave, a cute complex of little apartments on the beach where Jim and I stayed twice.



This used to be The Surf and Us, where I first met my friend Mary-Louise and her dog Pete.



What was shocking was how indiscriminate the damage was. Why some houses were destroyed and other remained intact seemed totally random.



And you have to wonder how some people have the confidence to rebuild a home that was blown away. But they do.



We wanted to stop and walk on what was such a beautiful beach. But although there were many empty lots, they were all private property that used to have homes, and of course we couldn't park there to get access to the beach. So, we went to Lovers Key State Park and at least got some beach time.



We had the place pretty much to ourselves. Just us and the fishers.



It was so sad to see so much destruction in this place that I'd enjoyed over the years. It's hard to imagine that it'll retain the wonderful, laid-back vibe it used to have.

Our next stop was Sanibel Island, known for its pristine beaches and millions of shells.



We'd heard that it had also been hit badly by Hurricane Ian, and it was evident right away - on the causeway and across the bridge, which took two months to rebuild enough for traffic to get across. The work was far from done.







It was shocking, here and in other places, to see how many trees had been ravaged by the hurricane.





Our first visit to a beach was a little dismal, mostly because of the weather. But also, as you can see, the trees looked thinned out.



But the shells were still there.



Our campground was quite pleasant – although we heard from some of the regulars that it had been hit badly. Something like 50% of the homes had to be torn down or significantly rebuilt, and apparently the water was 6 – 8 feet high! But things were in pretty good shape by this time and we enjoyed our stay.



They had a pond in the middle of the campground with a cast of interesting characters.





This was a surprise sighting, and kind of ironic, because I'm currently working on the development of a show that features two comedic cartoon iguanas. (Do you suppose I can write the trip off as "research"?)



It seems that fishing is a huge part of life in Florida, wherever we go. I couldn't help noticing that at our Sanibel campground, the women's restroom was beside the laundry room and beside the men's restroom...?



We were within walking distance of a beach, and it was a lovely walk.



There were, not surprisingly, some spectacular homes.





But, wherever we looked, we could see that homes and condos were still being rebuilt after Ian's destructive tear. Signs of construction and rebuilding were everywhere.



And I mean everywhere!



In the late afternoon, there was a constant stream of trucks and equipment leaving the island after a long day's work. Jim was, as always, very helpful in pointing out the escape route.



We were pleased to see, however, that many stores and restaurants were open and busy. We had a fun dinner at a colourful place called Mudbugs.



The food was good, and as the frog in the stained-glass window indicated, there was music.



The night we were there, the music was performed by a singer/guitarist. He was a great musician with a deep, Muddy Waters type sound, named Slim Gillian. If you look in the cage-like space above the TV, you'll see that Slim he was not. But his music was a great accompaniment to the meal.



We were happy to support some of the businesses on Sanibel, which are struggling to come back.

The song Slim was singing in that photo was "Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone", and I couldn't help thinking about all the things that were gone, both in Sanibel and Fort Myers Beach.