

KEY WEST KICKS

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Secret vaults of gold? Street-smart chickens? Conch Republic flags? Senior editor Susan Friedman delves into Key West's past, revealing what's fact and what's fiction in this kooky piece of paradise.



Coconut water from Ana's Cuban Cafe. Opposite: Mopeds are the preferred mode of transportation in Key West.

I find myself in a carefree state

of mind when I visit **Key West** — the southernmost point in the continental United States — and it always kicks in right about where mile marker zero and nirvana come together.

Those singalong island tunes of Jimmy Buffett's are an *earworm* I can't shake — you know, a song you can't get out of your head. So, with "Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes" blasting from my iPod, I travel from U.S. Highway 1 to famed Duval Street, where I make a right turn and arrive in paradise. I check in to the **Pier House Resort and Caribbean Spa**, a property once dubbed a "resort motel" and heralded for its innovative concrete-block construction by New York's Museum of Modern Art. The resort's developer, David Wolkowsky, first went about acquiring the land around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. He eventually turned what was the ticket office for the P&O Steamship Company into the resort's restaurant. Its days of selling ferry passages to Cuba were long gone.

While time has not stood still, since its 1968 arrival, the Pier House remains a striking figure at One Duval Street, where it meets the Gulf of Mexico harbor. The resort still evokes chic earthiness in its pairing of a muted palette with lush tropical landscaping. A blissful spot, it will be my home for the next few days. It's especially fitting since I'm on a mission to uncover the magnetism of Key West via its people, places and things — all of which have contributed to the notoriety of the Conch Republic (a moniker that comes from an unexpected historical turn, complete with its own cast of characters).

Jimmy Buffett sang at the Pier House's **Chart Room** bar long before we all knew his name. It's said that the tune "A Pirate Looks at 40" was inspired by Phil, a former bartender there. Besides appealing to guests, the Chart Room is still a favorite hole-in-the-wall hangout among locals. If only the rough-hewn walls of the darkly lit room that once had sandy floors could talk, this landmark would have tales to tell about fledgling shaggy-haired musicians, lawmen, smugglers and hush-hush barroom deals of the late '70s and early '80s. I promise myself I'll have a tequila in the Chart Room and toast its storied past.

Looking at the clock, I ask the concierge for the best place to watch the sunset, and he replies "Next door." Since sunset waits for no one, I continue posthaste to neighboring **Mallory Square**, which has the largest gathering of visitors. There are so many people snapping photos along the Sunset Pier, it's hard to get through the crowd. The bar at the **Ocean Key Resort** is hopping. People are four deep waiting on frozen piña colodas. A couple of Japanese tourists wearing John Lennon-esque sunglasses ask me to take their photo with an iPhone. One of them positions her hands so it looks as if she's holding the sun between her fingers. She tweets it immediately.

HIGH-WIRE SUNSETS Finally stepping onto the brick of Mallory Square — a social hub for Key West's historic waterfront that was once a haven for pirates who docked in the harbor — I've reached the granddaddy of all sunset celebrations. It's been a Key West must for more than 30 years, and it's in full swing. People gather en masse. The colorful street theater and the looming cruise ship, *Majesty of the Seas*, in the Gulf add to the imagery. I wonder about the origins of this one-of-a-kind sunset phenomenon. I've been told that the juggling tightrope walker Will Soto is one of its legendary founders; I can't wait to catch his act.

As the sun descends, I stop to listen to Mustafa, a balladeer. His voice is reminiscent of Harry Belafonte; his performance is more spoken word than song. The wiry islander has a gathering of fans, including three couples from Ontario. One of the ladies plops down five bucks for his CD. He thanks her with a nod, so as not to interrupt the "Try to Remember" lyrics as he muses "When life was slow and oh, so mellow" Smoke swirls upward from the incense he burns. After dropping a few dollars in his tip bucket, I stop in my tracks as I pass a bowler-hatted guitarist and his exuberant pooch, Cleo, who takes dollars offered by the crowd in between her teeth and carries them to her owner's tip jar. Smart dog! I pass hand-painted T-shirts with vibrant bird of paradise flowers on them; I decide I have to buy one. And then I spy Will Soto. With his distinctive gray ponytail and

Clockwise from top left: Blue Heaven; Safe Harbor Marina; a nap at Fort Zachary Taylor Park; Pier House; Key West pink shrimp at Hogfish Bar & Grill; a resident rooster



headband, he looks like a cross between a tai chi master and, as he puts it, an “acrobat/funambulist.” Lean and fit at 60-something, he is, well, really something. His high-wire and juggling act puts him 10 feet up in the air at the water’s edge.

Soto’s a Key West icon. He actually had a retirement party a few years back, but couldn’t go through with it. “Best party ever!” he jokes. “I was in the Navy and landed in Key West in 1966. It was like the wild, wild West back then,” he says with a deep laugh. After working as a sculptor for 10 years, Soto returned to Key West in 1976, where he met others of his ilk — renegade musicians, artists and daydreamers — all of whom rocked the sunset nightly. His steely blue-gray eyes are as intense as his grin. “It was a social movement bordering on the sun as a sacrament,” he says of the nightly event.

He proudly points out a plaque at Mallory Square that recognizes his contributions to the sunset as an art form. Soto was one of a number of performers and artists who formally organized the Key West Cultural Preservation Society Inc. in 1984 to keep the nightly gathering a win-win for buskers and the city. He’s the only original member still around. Taking a deep breath, he blows through a hole in a conch shell, calling onlookers to come close because he’s about to start. As a boomer couple passes by, he calls out, “Miss, come on over and bring your father with you.” The crowd chuckles. Then, when he’s in the throes of juggling fire sticks while on the high wire, he yells, “If anything flies into the crowd, it’s not part of the act!”

Soto wraps his show, and a roadie packs his rigging. He extends a dinner invite, asking me to

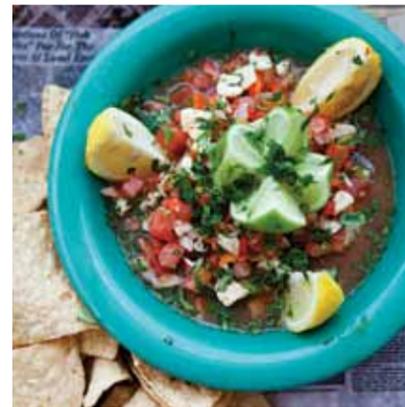
join him at **Sweet Tea’s**, a new Southern-comfort-style restaurant at the quieter end of town. How can I refuse? En route, Soto insists on driving past 314 Simonton. The circa 1919 building is where the Pelican Poop Shoppe, a Caribbean arts store, now stands. “Ernest Hemingway rented a room there,” he says with conviction, “when he was writing *A Farewell to Arms*.”

Settled into a cozy banquette with comfy pillows, we eye the chalkboard pillars announcing the nightly specials at Sweet Tea’s. Soto dives into a heaping plate of jerk chicken. Since the night is still young, we meet up with Soto’s auburn-haired wife, Amy, for espresso martinis at **Virgilio’s** martini bar off Duval. The band has a salsa beat. Between martini sips, I learn that Guy Laliberté, the creator of *Cirque du Soleil*, was a Key West sunset stilt walker, among other things. He used to sleep on Soto’s couch long before attaining fame as a billionaire circus impresario. The two men remain close friends to this day. Back at the Pier House, I fall into bed, my mind ruminating on the day’s fun facts and intriguing characters.

CHICKEN CROSSING Morning comes and breakfast is at **Blue Heaven**, a century-old shack of a restaurant in the Old Town neighborhood known as the Bahama Village, a homestead for Bahamian descendants. A quick walk from the Pier House takes me to the corner of Thomas and Petronia streets. Hemingway had a presence at this once-famous dance hall and bordello, which was also used for boxing matches. He supposedly refereed and sparred. It’s also said that cockfighting and other forms of gambling took place here too.

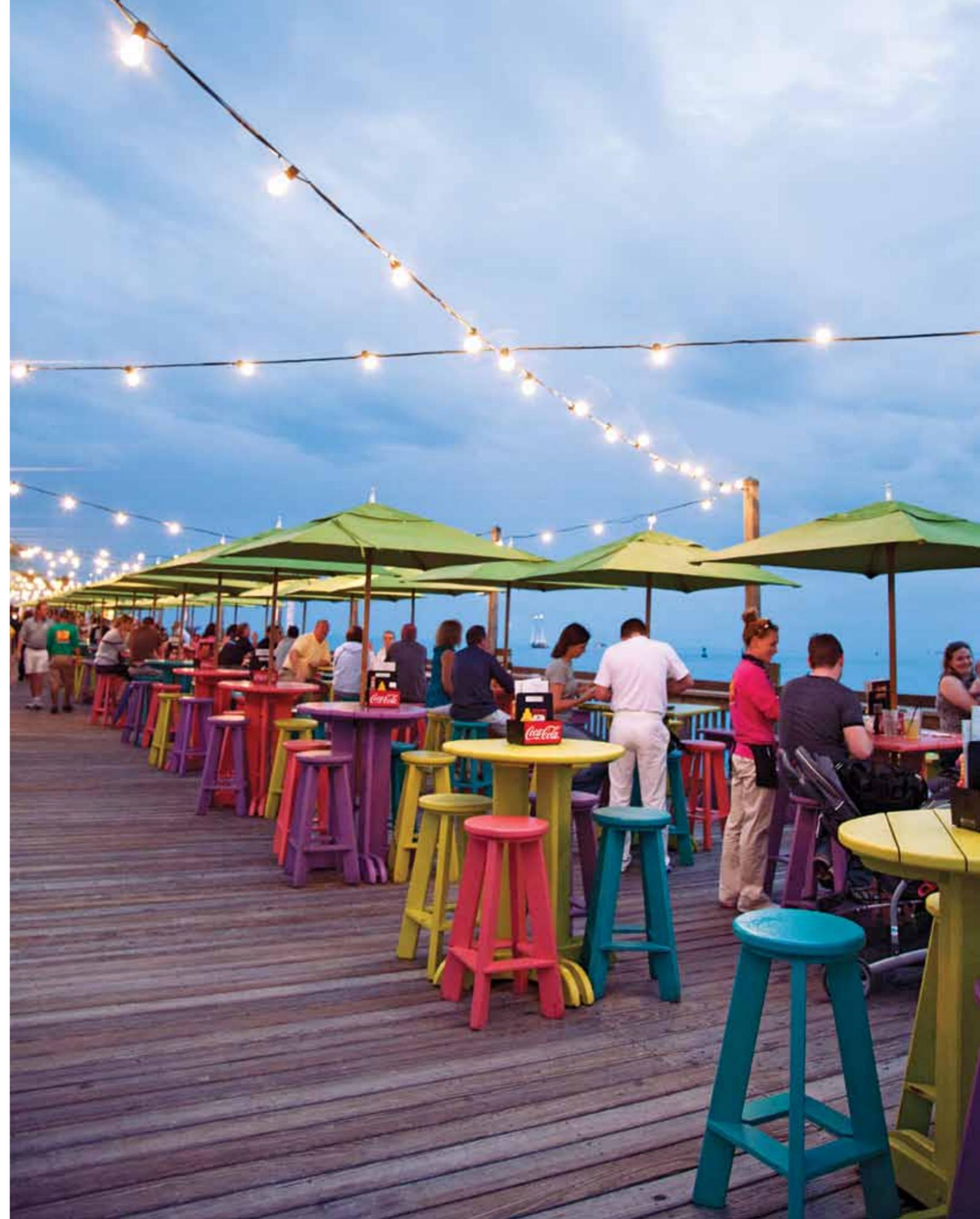
Below from left: Blue Heaven’s pancakes; Chart Room bar; Hogfish’s conch salad. Opposite: Sunset Pier’s harbor dining.

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WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

→ **BREAKFAST** Wake up with the roosters, literally, at Blue Heaven restaurant. Roosters and chickens roam this eccentric dining fave. Don’t miss made-from-scratch pecan pancakes. bluheavenkw.com → **RUM** The Chart Room bar at the Pier House is a glorified watering hole, where Jimmy Buffett once crooned. It’s perfect for a planter’s punch and Key West lore. pierhouse.com → **SEAFOOD** Stock Island’s Hogfish Bar & Grill is known for scrumptious hogfish sandwiches, naturally, and the best conch salad. You might spot *J. B. Magruder*, Mel Fisher’s legendary salvage vessel anchored at Safe Harbor Marina, here. hogfishbar.com → **COCKTAILS** Locals love Virgilio’s, the sultry back-room bar of La Trattoria, where classic cocktails flow and hot bands make you want to boogie. virgilioskeywest.com → **LUNCH** Enjoy mahimahi on toasted Cuban bread with sweet Caribbean slaw, harborside at the Pier House Beach Bar. Watch the red sails of the schooner *Jolly II Rover* blow past. pierhouse.com → **ALFRESCO** Escape from the hectic Duval Street scene to Sweet Tea’s. Dine on an intimate outdoor patio with colorful cushioned seats. The house specialty is the shrimp and grits with a Southern-style Key West twist. 305.509.7451



The Dade County Pine building is worn; countless white-feathered chickens and reddish-brown roosters roam among the tables and around a huge, glorious Spanish lime tree. Early risers — and we're not just talking chickens — pack the restaurant. A steady hum of cackles and cock-a-doodle-doo floats through the air, and although the diners with dogs keep them secure, an occasional kerfuffle occurs when a chicken gets too close to a terrier. There's even a rooster graveyard on the property.

Penn Alexander, a noted Key West chicken advocate, suggested Blue Heaven for breakfast because of these feathered friends. Alexander is outspoken about his support of the island's fowl heritage and has even given names to many that frequent the street where he lives, such as Peg, a limping rooster. "You'll see chickens all over the city — a couple thousand dwell here," Alexander says. He's right; they're everywhere. I actually start fearing for their lives as I see them recklessly crossing Duval in heavy traffic (no chicken joke intended).

The root of the chicken lineage is mixed, depending on whom you ask. Some locals say they date back to various shipwrecks, thanks to the Spaniards. Others say it was the Cubans who brought them, both for food and cockfighting. No matter the origin, I conclude that the island's feathered population is a show not to be missed as I linger over a morning *café con leche* and Blue Heaven's crunchy house-made granola. As I depart, Alexander's words ring true: "These chickens should be the Key West bird of paradise."

Will Soto's up-in-the-air antics keep the crowd enthralled at Mallory Square's nightly sunset bash.

SUNKEN TREASURE The next stop is **Mel Fisher's Maritime Museum**, the lasting legacy of the internationally acclaimed treasure hunter. Here, Capt. Don Kincaid surprises me with his firsthand knowledge of these salvaged treasures. Kincaid speaks of his Bahamian roots and tells of his great uncle Dominguez, who hailed from Spain and was one of the last turtle fishermen to sell the meat to Key West restaurants for turtle steak. The famed turtle kraals, or corrals, were shoreline holding pens. Kincaid says that turtling became illegal in 1975, and describes turtle steak as "wonderfully delicious and tender." He suggests that I visit the **Key West Turtle Museum** in the historic Key West Bight.

Our conversation shifts back to shipwrecks. Kincaid photographed the undersea treasure excursions with Mel Fisher and his crews. His enthusiasm is contagious as he shows me an endless number of photos he shot of gold chains, pearls, a 78-carat emerald and other objects that are currently on display, secured behind glass. He leads me through the eye-popping exhibitions detailing the last of the 1860 slave ships that wrecked off Key West. But Kincaid's obvious pride is in the 1622 legendary Spanish galleon *Nuestra Senora de Atocha*, with its hefty cargo of silver bullion and ingots that went down in the deep. Fisher embarked on a 16-year quest, starting in 1969, searching for it. His remarkable salvage in 1985, worth in excess of \$450 million, is the foundation of the **Key West Maritime Museum**. Kincaid wears a 1715 coin from a sunken ship named *Carmen* around his neck. It is not a reproduction. "The coin was a special gift from



WHERE TO STAY

→ **VIEWS** The Pier House on the Gulf of Mexico has suites with balconies made for sunsets (above). pierhouse.com The Ocean Key Resort is home to the lively Sunset Pier restaurant. oceankey.com → **CHARM** Gecko's Garden cottage at the Tropical Inn is a slice of bliss on Duval Street. tropicalinn.com Lux Marquesa Hotel, with its 1884 conch house architecture, is a gem. marquesa.com



WHERE TO GO

→ **SAIL** Don't miss the raising of the sails on the historic 1939 schooner *Western Union*, the last tall ship built in Key West. Take a sunset sail on this famed vessel, which played a role in the Conch Republic's notorious faux secession. schoonerwesternunion.org → **SHOP** Wander Duval Street, the city's entertainment drag, and you'll find cool boutiques with sundresses and flip-flops, iconic Sloppy Joe's T-shirts and Cuban-style, hand-rolled cigars. fla-keys.com/keywest → **SUNSET** Grab a frozen cocktail at the bar at Sunset Pier and then keep walking till you've reached Mallory Square. It's here that the world-famous Sunset Celebration happens nightly. An array of performers and artisans fill the plaza until the sun poetically disappears. sunsetcelebration.org → **HISTORY** Mel Fisher's Maritime Museum is a must for shipwrecked treasures. melfisher.org It's a big party! The 30th anniversary of Conch Republic independence happens April 20 to 29. conchrepublic.com

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Mel Fisher," says Kincaid, who was honored by Fisher for finding an 8½-foot-long gold chain that was salvaged from *Atocha*.

I literally feel like I've won a jackpot when I'm granted an insider glimpse into the museum's off-limits archives — a place where visitors don't usually tread. It's so top secret, we have to wait for Dylan Kibler, who has the entry codes, to escort us in. A Fisher employee since the late 1980s, Kibler's casual baseball-cap attire contrasts with his serious demeanor as he explains the work of reversing the aging process of precious artifacts. We look at crossbows, artillery, ship's bells, lead musket balls, coins and stacked silver bullion bars taken from yet another coded safe. Kibler proposes that I try to pick up a heavy bar: "Shake hands with the 17th century," he says.

CONCH REPUBLIC Still curious about other Key West-centric things, I'm determined to get to the bottom of the meaning of the Conch Republic secession. The motto "We seceded where others failed" has a comedic ring to it, but it turns out not to have been a laughing matter at all. It was March of 1982 when a U.S. Border Patrol blockade at the Last Chance Saloon in Florida City tied up traffic entering and exiting the Keys for 18 miles. Cars and passengers were searched for illegal drugs and immigrants attempting to enter the mainland illegally. Tourists cancelled travel plans.

So, when then mayor of Key West Dennis Wardlow stood on the steps of the federal courthouse in Miami and was asked by reporters what Key West was going to do about it, he said, "We're going to go home and secede!" And so the Conch Republic was born (passports and all). My meeting with Peter Anderson, the Conch Republic's

secretary general, at the office of the secretary general on Simonton Street was hysterically funny and yet wildly informative. He holds court there in big, comfy brown leather chairs with a Conch Republic flag decorating the room. "The mitigation of world tension through the exercise of humor," he says, "is the whole point." And it appears to have taken hold of Anderson, who is larger than life in his diplomatic role, wearing khaki shorts and a Tommy Bahamas-style shirt, with pink-frame reading glasses hanging around his neck. Ultimately, as he tells the story, a faux declaration of war occurred on the schooner *Western Union*, when conch fritters and water balloons were hurled at a Coast Guard ship harborside. Meanwhile, on land, a flatbed truck was the platform for the mayor to hit a Navy admiral on the head with a loaf of stale Cuban bread! No joke — this wacky scenario got plenty of news coverage. Immediately, Mayor Wardlow surrendered and the blockade came to a peaceful end. Tourism returned, and the entire racket meant that Key West could make the most of the incident for just about, well, forever. "The 30th anniversary of the Conch Republic independence celebration [April 20 to 29] is going to be special," Anderson says with a chuckle as he hands me a mini Conch Republic flag as a parting gift.

Later, at the Pier House Chart Room bar, I have that tequila

I promised myself when I first checked in, and I ponder: Is the southernmost point photo-op, at the stubby red, black and yellow marker at South and Whitehead streets, truly 90 miles from Cuba? "The southernmost point is in a listening post on the Navy base," says a local, matter-of-factly, as he sips a whiskey. And that's good enough for me.

Above from left: secession schooner; Conch Republic passports; balladeer Mustafa. Opposite: the Gulf from Sunset Pier.