

Cathedral of Palms

Written by "Miz Mer-Mullet-Maid"

Thursday, 21 January 2010 17:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 21 March 2010 18:58

Before the arrival of central air conditioning, folks tended to be more connected with the outside. For most of the year the jalousie windows that wrapped around our house in St. Petersburg were left open to let in the light and air, but keep out the blazing summer sun and the rains that passed through nearly every afternoon. Inside the fans whirred on high speed and outside we sucked on popsicles and played in the garden hose. The corner stores had wide open air fronts as did all the fruit and vegetable stands. Often the inside and outside simply merged together.

Just outside my bedroom window towering ominously was a gigantic sabal palmetto. Lying in my bed at night I could hear the large fronds as they rustled soothingly with the breezes that blew in from the bay. But I knew a horrible truth about that dreaded palm. It provided a haven for the common palmetto bug and my mother cursed that tree often. Now a Florida roach is horrid enough, but one that could up and fly directly at you when it was disturbed scared the living daylights out of me. So I avoided going near the tree when I played outside and tried to steer clear of the dark, damp places I knew the huge brown bugs liked to hide. The day my mother had the palm cut down, I rejoiced the fall of that horrible palmetto bug kingdom in the sky.

Over time, I came to appreciate the sturdy sabal palmetto, native to Florida and commonly known as the cabbage palm, named for its edible central bud called "swamp cabbage" by Florida pioneers. This edible delicacy became extremely popular in the United States during the Great Depression when it was served up as "millionaire salad." Because the whole tree must be sacrificed to obtain the delicate hearts of palm, demand for this salad threatened to endanger the tree. The state of Florida responded by enacting legislation to limit harvests. Sabal palms grow 60-80 feet tall with a crown of fronds up to 18 feet wide. It is the official state tree of Florida. The natural beauty of a sabal palm bathed in the golden glow of early morning light to me is about as Florida as it gets.

It was late one recent Saturday afternoon when I joined fellow Green Guide, Bill Osborne, for a bicycle hike along forest roads and the Florida Trail as it crosses the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge through the area known as Shephard Springs. Bill is a true Renaissance man who excels at everything he sets out to do. Today we set out to find and explore a place called "Cathedral of Palms." At the FR 214 entrance off Shell Point Road before the fork, we unload our bicycles and start off.

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The wild azaleas are blooming on this comfortable spring afternoon, their delicate fragrance wafting effortlessly as we pedal with purpose along the crisscrossing forest roads. It is not easy finding the way, but my friend leads as we make the turn onto FR 200, a picturesque old homestead road. The moss draped hardwoods bend inward creating a canopy archway that frames the soft blue sky. We move swiftly down the passageway with the descending sun warming our backs.

"Stop!" I exclaim as the sabal palms begin to grow denser alongside the road. We stop our bicycles and stand there gazing upwards listening as the soft rustling of palm fronds ride in on the first of the evening breezes.

"Do you suppose this is the place?" I ask excitedly. I can feel the hair on my arms beginning to tingle.

"Not yet," smiles my friend wisely. So back on the bikes we go, pedaling faster and further down our path, away from the dropping sun and into the lengthening shadows.

My friend points up ahead and I follow as we turn southward onto a smaller trail that leads us deeper into the forest. We dodge expansive clumps of saw palmetto and maneuver around slash pines as we cycle down the narrow footpath into wetlands and past standing pools of swampy water where mosquitoes wait to fill up their dance cards with hot blooded partners.

My gaze has been directed downward as I watch out for ruts and rocks and assorted obstacles. The dark damp earth gradually begins to lighten with a scattering of fallen palm fronds. Soon I am pedaling over ground completely carpeted with decaying fronds. I look up and this time I know with certainty that we have arrived on the doorsteps of the palm cathedral.

I blink my eyes hard and try to make sense of the extraordinary and surreal sight that beholds me. Sabal palms tower majestically above and completely surround me as far as my eye can see. I am gloriously standing in one of the largest remaining virgin palm hammocks in Florida. As we move through the stillness of this hallowed place, I sense the collective presence of ancestral spirits. I feel an overwhelming sense of connectedness and know I am in an

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exceptional and mystical place.

My friend and I walk in silent reverence through the cathedral and take photographs we know will never truly capture this magic. Time has been suspended, but now the fast fading daylight startles us back to reality. We know we must leave as we have a distance yet to go. The experience of being here in the Cathedral of Palms may be a struggle later to express in written word, but I do know the enchantment I feel as we depart will surely draw me back.

We complete our journey squeezing out the last remaining drops of daylight. We load the bicycles and climb tiredly back into the car.

“Let’s roll down the windows,” Bill suggests, “I want to stay connected to the outside.”

And so we slowly drive away listening to the sounds of the approaching night, the inside and the outside melding together into the twilight.

The round trip hike through the Cathedral of Palms and past Shephard Springs is approximately 5 miles. Contact the Refuge Visitor Center (850) 925-6121 or www.florida-trail.org for maps and detailed directions.