

Fully vaxxed, we put pandemic in rearview mirror with road trips to Florida, Virginia



Fewer crowds congregated at Newton Park Beach in Fort Myers Beach, Fla. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

By Katherine Rodeghier

Daily Herald Correspondent

4/11/2021 9:23 AM

It was the moment I had been waiting for. Fully vaccinated, I set out on a long journey, timing my visit to pick him up at school on his 7th birthday. And there he stood, waiting along the curb clutching balloons from a classroom party. He looked so much older, so tall, as he climbed into his car seat.

"Hi, Grandma."

That sweet smile, and later those long-awaited hugs from him and his little brother at my daughter's house, made the 13-hour drive from suburban Chicago to Virginia worthwhile. So was my next drive to see family and friends wrapping up winter in Florida.

I was not alone, particularly in Florida where restaurants and hotels filled in late March and traffic slowed to a crawl as seniors merged with spring breakers bent on escape from COVID-19 isolation. Even before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention proclaimed travel free of restrictions for the fully vaccinated, it appeared the over-65 crowd had begun breaking free, perhaps leading a wave of pent-up demand for a vacation.

Where to go first? For my husband and me it was Charlottesville, Virginia, for a mix of family time and historical attractions.

Then where? Some place warm. Some place with a beach.

Florida fling

The Sunshine State wasn't my first choice. I'd been there many times and longed for something new. We nearly pulled the trigger on an all-inclusive resort in Punta Cana when we reconsidered. Was it safe to fly yet? What if the virus flared up in the Dominican Republic making it difficult to return home? And as appealing as tropical drinks on a Caribbean island sounded, what we both wanted after a year of being holed up together was our friends. Different

faces. Different conversations. Three couples we'd sorely missed during our pandemic-induced separation happened to be staying along the Gulf Coast.

So we embarked on another road trip, this time a 15-hour drive from Virginia to Fort Myers, Florida.

Although signs at restaurants, gas stations and hotels indicated a need for face coverings, they seemed to be worn less frequently the farther south we drove. By the time we reached Florida, masking became a mixed bag; prevalent in tourist areas, not so much elsewhere.

Of course, no one wore masks while dining in restaurants serving Florida favorites -- grouper, red snapper, shrimp -- along with those colorful, tropical cocktails I'd been craving. At Prawnbroker in Fort Myers, we snagged one of the last parking spots. Inside, a sea of gray-haired diners packed tables. Thank goodness our Cape Coral friends made reservations well in advance.

Friends in Marco Island also wisely booked weeks ahead at Campiello in Naples. Social distancing proved nonexistent on the crowded patio. Our courtyard table seemed safer, important to our dining companions who had spent months in Florida and hours online without getting an appointment for the vaccine. We walked off an excellent dinner with a stroll past chichi shops, dodging fellow mask-wearers on busy sidewalks.

The Fish House Restaurant in Bonita Springs would not take a dinner reservation, so my brother-in-law suggested Plan B: Do what local seniors do, go early. Friends from nearby Estero joined us at 4:30 at a table overlooking an inlet to the bay where fishing boats motored past. No wonder our entrees tasted so fresh.

Enjoying a day on the sand in Fort Myers Beach proved problematic. Traffic quickly backed up and when our GPS indicated the last 2.4 miles would take 24 minutes, we doubted we'd find

parking. We made a U-turn and spent the afternoon at our hotel pool. After some online research into less popular beaches nearby, we set out earlier the next morning for Newton Park and found parking steps from the sand, a bargain at \$3 an hour.

But jammed highways continued to plague us on the drive back to Chicago. Twenty miles south of Atlanta traffic came to a dead stop, then crawled for two hours. A phone app located a hotel for the night but by the time I pressed "reserve" it had filled. Finally, at 9 p.m. we pulled into a nondescript motel and checked into one of the last available rooms. Dinner was peanut butter and crackers from the snack bag in our car. The next morning a couple our age with Minnesota license plates commiserated, saying they'd stopped at four hotels before finding room at ours.



The Rotunda is the centerpiece of the University of Virginia's Academical Village designed by Thomas Jefferson. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

History fix in Virginia

March remains the off season in Virginia, so crowds weren't an issue. With the grandsons in school and their parents working, we took off to satisfy our hunger for history.

The University of Virginia, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Charlottesville, had paused its historical tours during the pandemic. No matter. We'd toured the Grounds before and knew our way around. The Academical Village Thomas Jefferson designed when founding the school in 1819 still stands with its Rotunda modeled on the Pantheon in Rome, the serpentine walls of the Pavilion Gardens and the Range housing 19th-century dorm rooms, including No. 13 once occupied by Edgar Allan Poe.



A recent addition to the University of Virginia, the Memorial for Enslaved Laborers, remembers African Americans forced to build and work at the university in the 19th century. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

The new Memorial to Enslaved Laborers packed an emotional punch. An elliptical granite ring, representing shackles, is inscribed with the names of a some of the more than 4,000 enslaved African Americans who built and toiled at the university. Historical accounts are engraved on an inner ring. From 1856: "An enslaved eleven-year-old girl is beaten unconscious by a UVA student. Claiming his right to discipline any slave, he suffers no consequences."



A lone cannon at The Wilderness Battlefield is a relic of one of the bloodiest campaigns of the Civil War. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

A day trip northeast to Fredericksburg led to the sites of four Civil War battles preserved by the National Park Service. Strategically positioned halfway between the Confederate capital in Richmond and the Union capital in Washington, the region suffered some of the bloodiest conflicts in the war with more than 105,000 casualties. We drove tree-lined roads through the Chancellorsville Battlefield where Gen. Robert E. Lee won for the Confederacy but lost his right-hand man, Gen. Stonewall Jackson, mortally wounded when accidentally shot by his own men. At a roadside exhibit at The Wilderness Battlefield, a cannon pointed toward woods historical accounts say were so thick that days of fighting ended in a stalemate.



Surrender documents were signed by Gen. Robert E. Lee and Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at McLean House in the village of Appomattox Court House, now a national park. -
Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

The battle at the village of Appomattox Court House didn't end in a draw, but defeat for the Confederacy. We drove south on scenic country roads to the national park where Lee surrendered to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865. The visitor center in the reconstructed courthouse was closed by COVID, but a ranger handed us a map for a self-guided tour. We walked through the jail and tavern, passed the general store and law office and peeked through the windows of the reconstructed McLean House where the surrender documents were signed. On the porch, visitors posted their thoughts on index cards. "Freedom & A fresh start," read one.

Outings with our daughter and family had to be outside because they had not been vaccinated. We hiked through woodlands, took in the view from an apple orchard perched near Jefferson's mountaintop home at Monticello, dined on restaurant patios and stopped by craft breweries. A winery canceled our brunch reservation at the last minute -- due to COVID, we guessed -- so we took a Sunday drive in the countryside on our last day together. Serendipity led us to Glass House Winery where we spent the warm spring day enjoying wine and cheese on a lakeside picnic table while we listened to a bluegrass band and watched our laughing boys chase Frisbees.

We put 3,700 miles on our car fleeing pandemic isolation, well worth it for the chance to rekindle friendships and create family memories, especially with grandsons growing too fast.

If you go

Florida

- The Prawnbroker Restaurant & Seafood Market, Fort Myers, Florida, (239) 489-2226, prawnbrokerfortmyers.com
- Campiello, Naples, Florida, (239) 435-1166, campiellonaples.com/
- The Fish House Restaurant, Bonita Springs, Florida, (239) 785-1293, thefishhouserestaurants.com
- Newton Park, Fort Myers Beach, Florida, fortmyers-sanibel.com/listing/newton-park/50006

Virginia

- University of Virginia Guide Service, Charlottesville, Virginia, uvaguides.org
- Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park, Fredericksburg, Virginia, nps.gov/frsp/index.htm
- Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, Appomattox, Virginia, nps.gov/apco/index.htm
- Glass House Winery, Free Union, Virginia, glasshousewinery.com

<https://www.dailyherald.com/entlife/20210411/fully-vaxxed-we-put-pandemic-in-rearview-mirror-with-road-trips-to-florida-virginia>