

## Exchange to Sarasota November 2016

A couple of years ago, Sandra and I hosted two ladies from Sarasota club who had joined our popular Gardeners' Exchange. Over dinner one evening, Ramona asked whether we would be interested in an exchange with their club. The prospect of a bit of warmth and sunshine in November clearly appealed to our club and, before long, the details had been agreed and the exchange was "on", with an add-on of 3 nights in New Orleans.

So, at the end of October, seven of us headed for Heathrow by taxi, the other seven making their own way down. After six months of battling against the world's most uncommunicative travel agent, it was quite a relief to be finally in the air...

Thanks to American Airlines and Uber, we eventually found ourselves in the Hyatt French Quarter in lovely, spacious rooms. The next couple of days were full-on but we managed to fit in lots of delicious food, a walking tour of the French Quarter and a trip with "Cap'n Lou" on his swamp boat, all the time enjoying the warmest November for 30 years! The madness that is Bourbon Street was definitely an assault on the senses, but not to be missed.



On the edge of the Mississippi River that flows through New Orleans



New Orleans takes Halloween very seriously – some scary decorations on the buildings



Some very attractive architecture



Interesting Trolley buses to ride on, a good way to see the sights

In no time at all, we were back in the air, heading for Atlanta and eventually Sarasota, where we were met by the smiling members of the FF of Sarasota. After photos in the gardens of the Ringling Museum, we headed off for a lovely welcome meal in the very smart and prosperous town of Sarasota.

Over the next week, we enjoyed a full and varied programme, including the Ringling Museum – the story of the famous Ringling Circus, Ca' d'Zan, the opulent home of John Ringling, evening visits to Sunset and Siesta Keys – enjoying the hypnotic drum performance that takes place every sundown



A small part of the amazing circus model at the Ringling Museum



The drum circle, a regular evening/sunset entertainment on one of the beaches. This was where Margie encountered her "Free Hugs".



Sunset off the same beach

Selby Gardens hosted a wonderful open-air jazz concert, not to mention a world-class display of orchids. A day in Myakka State park with an airboat ride to see their huge alligator

population and a trip to Snook Haven to see the Gulf Coast Banjo Society rehearsing were some of the highlights.



Margie is upfront on the boat ride, the location where, we were told, was the most likely place for being tossed off the front of the boat to be eaten by alligators!



Some of the alligators in Myakka State Park were very large, this one was about 10 feet long



The one Peter is holding is a little smaller!

We also took a wonderful evening cruise around Sarasota Bay, exploring some of the magnificent waterside properties on the way. On top of all of this, we had the backdrop of the presidential election and the sense of dismay from most of our hosts at the eventual outcome!

At the end of our week, we were beginning to feel quite envious of the seven of our group who were heading off for a further week in the Florida Keys. We had experienced glorious weather every day, great food, comfortable accommodation and, above all, the friendship and warmth of a happy club. Thanks to everyone in our group for being great travel companions. This turned out to be an excellent exchange and I am sure that we are all looking forward to meeting up with our friends again when Sarasota Club comes to Cornwall next year!

*Martin*