

Florida Keys – A Taste of

When Sylvia Brown flew to Florida her health was poor. But she says: "I didn't care. The PAY-OFF was that I was living my life! I was challenging MS head-on, facing my fears and pushing back boundaries."

My partner Steve owns a home in Florida. So every year we enjoy escaping the cold winter weather and flying off to the sunny climes of the Florida Keys.

My first trip was a real leap into the dark. I had never been



Steve's unit

to the States, never mind as a wheelchair user with MS. I agreed to go after much reassurance from Steve that all would be well! We carefully planned it all out, even down to where to buy continence pads.

We were raring to go. But 10 days before we were due to leave, we heard that Steve's unit wouldn't be ready. It was being rebuilt after the old one had been blown away by Hurricane George in 1998.

Thankfully our builder, Jack, said we could stay in his trailer. I still had reservations. Would I cope?

With all the worry I kept getting urinary tract infections and my mobility was not good, but I knew I had to go. I didn't want to look back at my life and see

missed opportunities or have regrets, so wild horses wouldn't have stopped me!

Our total journey time was 21 hours and on arrival I was convinced I was dying. Steve was very concerned. Had we taken on too much?

I saw a palm tree and smiled

The next day things seemed a little better. I peeped out of the hotel window, saw a palm tree and smiled. Steve collected our hire car, a big Chevy Venture, perfect for transporting the scooter. Next minute there I was scooting around the Everglades in glorious sunshine, exhausted and shaken but distracted by the spectacular wildlife.



Don't get too close!

My main concern was not getting too close to all the alligators lying around!



Sylvia Brown and Steve Wright

We cruised down the US1 Highway, radio blasting, over the famous Seven Mile Bridge and down through the Keys. It looked like paradise, with palm trees, key deer, pelicans and brilliant sunshine in the middle of winter.

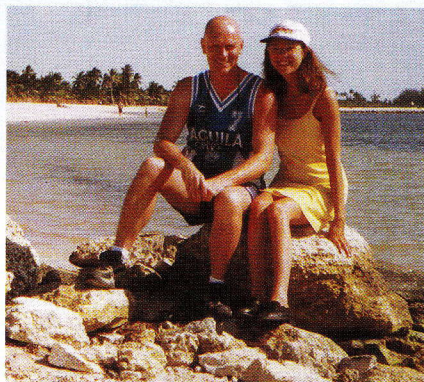


A drive through paradise

The next ten or so days my health was pretty rocky, but I didn't care. The PAY-OFF was that I was living my life! I was challenging MS head-on, facing my fears and pushing back boundaries. Somehow I knew that whatever happened I would handle it.

In Venture Out*, the park where Steve's house is located, I

e of Paradise



Great beach for canoodling

could swim in the pool everyday and bathe in the hot tub to my heart's content - I just had to be careful not to overheat!

With the reefs the Keys are a great place for snorkelling and scuba diving. The beach at Bahia Honda is wonderful. It's famous for the derelict Flaggler's railway bridge, now home to osprey, who venture out of their nest into dog fights with pelicans. And as the sun shimmered on the sea we even saw the phantom



Palm tree lagoon

shadow of a lone bonnet-head shark glide over the reef.

The high point was swimming with dolphins

Key West is just 25 minutes' drive away. The sunset there is world-famous. You can almost hear the sun sizzle as it sinks into the sea

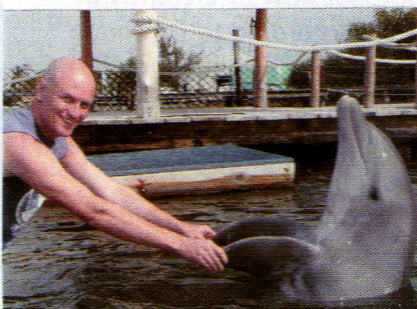
We even met our very own 'Hemingway' cat, famous for having six claws on their front paws. When "Scooter" - his real name! - strolled into our place we felt very honoured. His front paws were a sight to behold.

The high point of my holiday had to be swimming with the dolphins. As we swam in the cold water in our wet suits, the dolphins came past very close. Dolphins are very intelligent, playful and fun-loving creatures,

Dolphin Splash



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so Steve decided to make some very strange noises underwater to intrigue them. Two dolphins came up to investigate. They gave him a most curious look as if to say, 'Are you completely nuts?' They had Steve sussed straight away!

The next year we went to the 'Dolphin Research Centre' and did the 'Dolphin Splash.' Here, you only went up to your waist in water (I was supported from behind by a carer) so it wasn't

so cold and you didn't need a wetsuit. We then had fun with Tina the dolphin who happily came up to shake flippers with us and be kissed (she was well rewarded with fish!!!).

I'm flying!

This year I achieved another dream. We went up in a 4-man plane with Fantasy Dan and flew over the reefs and down to Key West. As we flew over, we looked down and saw stingrays and fish in the water and even the odd shark.

On the way back Dan turned to me and said right 'you're flying the plane now!' I sat upfront where there were dual controls and took the wheel.

I proclaimed 'I'm flying!' I even brought the plane in to land - with a little help from Dan.

In the third week of our holiday the new unit was ready and we moved in.

By this stage I was walking better than ever and radiating with health. For the first time I even managed to walk short a distances with just a stick.

By feeling the fear and doing it anyway I had taken a gamble and it had paid off big time. I had also learned that it was possible to transfer my life out into the big world and cope despite the complications of MS.

Info Box

More pix on Sylvie's website:
www.livingwithms.co.uk/ms/florida.html

Steve Wright's unit is available for rent. Tel 0114 262 0544.
(Please note there are steps.)
*:www.ventureout.org