

Our Trip Takes Us

By Becky Hirn

I'm going to come away from this trip being able to say I've learned quite a few things. I've learned things about different cultures, about geography, about the kindness of strangers and about my own family. Florida has taught me something new. It was a lesson I would not have asked for but I needed anyway. Florida taught me a little something about myself.

When we decided to drive all the way down to the Florida Keys, I don't think either Dan or I knew just how much time it would take. Florida is one long state. One day we put a record nine hours on the road. I kept thinking about all the great things we were missing. But it was all part of the schedule. Get to a state park near Tampa for Thanksgiving. Then move towards the Everglades and the Keys.

After stopping for an overnight at a Fort Myers Camping World we headed deeper south. The true subtropical weather was really starting to show down here. We had the windows open again. The sun was pouring in.

The week before while talking to some family members I'd asked if they thought I might be eaten by alligators while we were down there. They replied, "Probably, they're everywhere in the Everglades." I tried to correct them by saying that I did not ask whether I would eat some alligator, but rather, would one eat me. We all laughed but they still assured me that I would see them. I cringed and hoped the gators would be caged.

Driving along State Route 29, we got our first glimpse of the creatures. Gobs of them were sunning themselves in a marshy strip of water running parallel to the road. I was relieved to be in the RV speeding past at 50mph. While we were headed for the campground, Long Pine Key, it was only midday and we felt the urge to find a place to park the RV and go exploring. The Shark...Visitor Center fit the bill. We pulled in despite the "parking lot full" sign and slid into the last remaining RV lane. Perfect timing.

What came next shocked me. Just beyond a little bike rental shop and visitor center was that same marshy kind of canal. We walked up, checking out the birds and fish. When a large group of people to the left of us moved on down the trail, it revealed to me that my children, my family, were standing just 20 feet from a huge alligator. Dan stepped closer to take pictures. I grabbed at the kids. I begged Carter not to run up to Dan. Many other people were safely walking and biking past the alligator. They were all taking pictures. My body was shutting down. Looking ahead on the trail I saw at least 10 more gators. Dan was motioning to me "Come on!" I looked at him in disbelief. He frowned. So I went. I wanted to run back with every step forward. One gator had its mouth open. I wanted to puke. We walked a little more through people and alligators. We were less than 10 feet from them now. It just felt all wrong to me. Finally, I walked up to Dan, with tears in my eyes and said. "We have to go." He knew I was serious but asked anyway.

When we made it past the last alligator I could breathe again. I felt sore all over. My feet hurt from clenching them. And my adventurous spirit, the one I'd left Delphos with so many months before, was severely bruised. I was forced to face the fact that I was very scared, and other people were not. I began thinking about other things I was scared of, the deep ocean, unpredictable horses, the unknown, and the uncontrollable. It came down to control and I lost it. All this was in front of Dan and the kids. It took most of the next day to lick that wound.

I'll never get used to the idea of walking past an alligator in the wild. But the next day during a bird hike, we saw 25 more gators. It was safer this time as we were on a boardwalk. Ten two days later Dan got some alligator nuggets while we were out for supper. I tried one. Finally, I felt like I was at the top of the food chain again.

Fear is a game changer. It changed me while we were in Florida. In telling Dan later about my fear, he said he was sorry I felt so scared. He also conceded that there's nothing wrong with being afraid of alligators. Darn right there's not.

Becky Hirn is a Delphos resident traveling America with her family for a year. She documents the journey at www.ourtriptakesus.com. Follow the Hirn family in photos, blogs, on Facebook and Twitter. Or learn how to partner with the trip as an advertiser. You may e-mail Becky at beckyhirn@ourtriptakesus.com