

Hunting for Hemingway

By KM Churchill

“*Where a man feels at home, outside of where he’s born, is where he’s meant to go.*” -Ernest Hemingway

No air stirs the surface of the cool blue swimming pool in the gardens of the Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum. Nor is the calico cat lying sprawled on Papa’s rose colored couch in the living room ruffled by the tourists who reach out to stroke its fur. It’s 9:15 am on a Monday morning and the museum is already bustling with the hushed murmurs of the literary faithful who have come to pay homage at the home of one of America’s most dashing historical figures, Ernest “Papa” Hemingway.

This gracious Spanish Colonial style house in the Old Town, Key West is where Hemingway lived with his second wife, Pauline, and their two young sons from 1931 to 1940. The pale blue painted rooms are large and welcoming, with arched floor to ceiling French windows, all thrown open to let in what remains of the cool morning air.



We have come early to avoid the crowds and, wanting to absorb the feeling of the house, we decide to skip the guided tour and wander through the rooms ourselves, looking and listening for literary ghosts. Petting cats here and there as we go. Hemingway loved cats and there are cats everywhere: cats on the furniture, cat statues in the sitting room, cat figurines in the bedroom, even cat magnets in the museum store.

But the cats on the grounds are rather unusual in that many of them have six toes (polydactyl), and are possibly direct descendants of Snowball, the white six-toed cat that Papa brought home for his sons – there is even a

charming photo of the boys holding Snowball in the garden. Today there are between fifty and sixty cats living at the museum. In fact, six-toed cats have become so closely associated with the author that, even in other parts of the world, they are often referred to as “Hemingway cats”.

Most of the visitors begin their tour of the house in the downstairs rooms and so we start upstairs. The master bedroom is quiet when we enter, almost church-like, but for the cat lying curled in the center of the bed. Too soon, a tour group comes in and we discretely move toward the exit. However, the group is being led by an eloquent and amusing guide and we find ourselves lingering to listen.



She begins by explaining that the large bed in the center of the room is something of a contradiction; made up of two simple twin beds from St Louis, Missouri that have been pushed together and crowned with an ornate 500 year old headboard, originally the carved portal to a Spanish monastery. Next, she directs us to notice a small porcelain cat on a side table, a gift handmade for the author by his friend Pablo Picasso whom he'd met in Paris.

Before settling in Key West, Hemingway led an impoverished but enviable life in the bohemian Paris of the 1920's. There he met and mingled with James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and Salvador Dali, amongst others. Many of whom became his lifelong friends.

But the most interesting thing the guide tells us about the room no longer exists; a metal footbridge that spanned all the way from this bedroom, across the courtyard, and into Hemingway's writing studio (above the former carriage house). Although the bridge was dismantled decades ago, the image of Papa rolling out of bed and traversing the sleeping world to arrive at his typewriter in the early morning hours is so evocative that it hovers in the air long after the tour group has left us behind.

Intrigued by what we've overheard, and also having noticed other visitors roaming the rooms with sheets of paper they appeared to be referencing, we go back downstairs in search of more information. On the veranda is a box filled with folders labeled: French, Spanish, Japanese, German, Italian, Korean, but there doesn't seem to be one marked "English". Frustrated, I stand up to look for a staff member, when I notice a hand written sign stuck to the wall above the box. It says, "Looking for an English Translation? There isn't one. TAKE THE TOUR!" At that rebuke we skulk back inside and decide to wait for the next scheduled tour time by browsing in the little bookshop at the back of the house.

A handsome, barrel-chested man, Hemingway was a restless adventurer who recounted barely fictionalized stories of his escapades in his books. In "A Farewell to Arms" he drew upon personal experiences as a Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy during World War I. The novel was almost complete when he and Pauline landed in Key West, but he continued to struggle with its conclusion, writing more than 39 different endings, before using his personal his anguish over the difficult birth of his son, Patrick, in 1928, to finally finish the novel.



Key West was meant to be a stopping point for the newlyweds but the island's eccentric characters appealed to Hemingway and he blended in well, becoming a local character himself and earning himself the nickname "Papa", which would remain with him for the rest of his life.

Hemingway's years in Key West marked the most prolific period of his career. Here he wrote many of his classics including: "To Have and Have Not", "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber"; all written in the tropical heat of his second floor studio, and all available for purchase in the museum's tiny bookstore.

At the appointed time, our guide meets us in the sitting room where standing fans are ineffectually shifting humid air from one corner to another. First, we are regaled with the history of the house, built on foundation of solid rock coral in the mid-1800's by Asa Tift, a wealthy salvage wrecker. The house was in serious disrepair when Pauline's wealthy Uncle Gus purchased it for them in 1931 and the guide points out some of the changes the Hemingways made to the original design, such as Pauline's whimsical European chandeliers which replaced traditional ceiling fans in many of the rooms. Most of the furnishings are antiques the couple brought back from Europe, including Hemmingway's collection of carved Spanish furniture.

In the dining room is an array of photographs.

Here we see the author's first wife, Hadley Richardson, with whom he lived in Paris and had a son, John "Jack" Nacemor Hemingway (father of the actresses Margaux and Mariel Hemingway).

Next to Hadley is Pauline Pfeiffer, his second wife. Beside her is a photograph of their two sons,

Gregory and Patrick, who grew up in this house. On the left is Hemingway's third wife, Martha Gellhorn, and finally, at the bottom right, is a photograph of Mary Welch, his fourth wife, with whom he lived until his death in 1961.



While visitors crowd around the photographs to get a better look, our tour guide moves on into the kitchen and directs our attention to the unusually high sink and stove. These were specifically designed, he says, for the author, whose bad back made it difficult for him to clean and cook the fish he'd caught (which he preferred to do himself, tossing the heads to the cats in the courtyard). The higher surfaces made it easier for him to work.

And so we are led from room to room noticing all the details such as the bathroom tiles (Parisian Art Deco), the lighting in the hall (Spanish candlestick with Moorish crystals), and then out into the garden to see the salt water pool and the penny imbedded in the cement there. Legend has it that Hemingway flung the penny at Pauline when

he heard how much she'd spent on the pool's construction. Saying, "Pauline, you've spent all but my last penny, so you may as well have it!"

To get to Hemingway's writing studio, we traverse the rising heat of the courtyard and climb narrow metal stairs to the second floor of the converted Carriage House. The studio is smaller and brighter than I'd imagined; a tidy, contemplative space painted a cool pale blue. In the center hangs one of Pauline's chandeliers. Along the walls are low book shelves and, in a far corner, a chaise lounge for napping. Beyond this, French windows overlook the gardens and the pool.

On a rattan carpet in the middle of the room Hemingway's desk is not a desk at all but a round wooden table with spindle legs and leaves that easily fold away, and on it is the author's portable Royal typewriter. The same typewriter he carried with him to the Spanish Civil War and its black hard-sided travel case sits empty on the floor beside the Cuban cigar-maker's chair in which he sat to write.



Unfortunately the doorway is cordoned off with a tall wrought iron gate through which it is difficult to see and, with visitors lining up behind you, nearly impossible to take in at your leisure. We do however, each take our turn at the gate to ponder the place where Hemingway methodically worked from 6:00 am until noon, writing 700 words every morning (or, at least until lunchtime, whichever came first).

When the tour ends, the museum is hotter and more crowded than it was when we'd begun and so we thank our guide and make our way out into the gardens, following the paths that wind around the house. Past the pool and the urinal Papa brought home from his favorite bar, Sloppy Joe's, as a rebuke to his wife, which Pauline promptly had tiled and installed as a water fountain for the cats.

Past the pet cemetery, with the names of the cats buried there etched in stone: Errol Flynn, Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, Charlie Chaplin. The museum continues to choose famous names for the cats on the estate, just as Hemingway did in his time. Around the corner and past the “cat house,” (which is a miniature wooden version of the main house complete with arched windows and pale green shutters but on a scale made for cats to climb in and out of), we find a shady bench which is already occupied by a six-toed tabby cat, lounging with its mitten-like front paws dangling over the edge. She opens one sea green eye when we sit down then closes it and goes back to dozing.

The beginning of the end of the Hemingways’ Key West idle came in 1936 when the author met his soon to be third wife at Sloppy Joe’s where, when he wasn’t writing or fishing, he spent much of his time drinking. Martha Gellhorn was a well known American war journalist and she reignited Hemingway’s thirst for adventure. The following year he jumped back into the fray as a correspondent for the American Newspaper Alliance covering the Spanish Civil War. Gellhorn met up with him there and together they spent much of the next two years abroad.

Hemingway did return to Key West for short visits, but in 1939 he boarded his boat, Pilar, and sailed for Cuba. He married Martha in 1940 and they made their home in Havana. Today the house they lived in, Finca La Vigia, is also a museum.

Pauline and her children stayed in Key West, and she lived in the house for the remainder of her life. As for Hemingway, he continued to visit and draw literary inspiration from his time in the Keys. It was here that he was first introduced to

big game fishing and here too that he conceived of a story about an old fisherman lost at sea in a boat too small for the giant fish he’d caught. The story that would become “The Old Man and the Sea”, and win him the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and the Nobel Prize in 1954, marking him out as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century.

