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CURSES, CRIMINALS AND CANALS

Thu, May 3, 2012

Canoe Project, Featured

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BY **TERENCE CANTARELLA**



Photo by Kenny Malone

Years ago, Terence Cantarella had the idea to navigate Miami-Dade's canals via canoe. He's not an experienced paddler or an avid outdoorsman, but he wanted to seize a homegrown opportunity for adventure: "I wasn't going to explore the world's oceans like Jacques [Cousteau]. I don't have the time or money for that. I was going to spend four days circumnavigating Miami-Dade county via the canals."

He brought the idea to [WLRN](#) and he embarked on the [Canoe Project](#), a four day journey [\[map\]](#) starting at Biscayne Bay near 70th Street in Miami. He paddled down the Little River and through the neighborhoods of Belle Meade and Shorecrest. Then, he navigated through the Miami Canal parallel to Okeechobee Road ([where he had to carry his canoe across several lanes of traffic](#)), down the Miami River and the Coral Gables Waterway,

★ JOURNEY THROUGH MIAMI-DADE'S CANALS



WLRN contributor Terence Cantarella begins his journey through Miami-Dade's canal system by canoe on Monday, April 16.

Follow his journey on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), and tune in to WLRN 91.3 FM every morning and afternoon to hear about his travels.

Look for [daily blog posts and updates](#) and follow along on our [map](#), [Storify feed](#) and [photo gallery](#).



Map



Storify



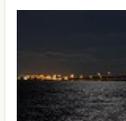
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★ Under the Sun's South Florida Photo Share on flickr



ending at Scotty's Landing in Coconut Grove on Thursday.

Here he reflects on his journey.

When Terence started on his journey, people advised him that he would need a gun. They warned him against the “corpses, alligators, toxic sludge, criminals, crazies [and] *chupacabras*” he might encounter.



El Portal (Photo via Terence Cantarella's Twitter feed)

Terence writes that canals are a place where the world moves surprisingly slower: “To get there, all you need is an old canoe, raccoon spray, and a blanket. You don't need money. You don't need much time. And you *don't* need a gun.”

You can read Terence's full essay below. Find a timeline of photos and videos from the journey [here](#). Also, if you have an idea for WLRN's next South Florida adventure, [share your idea with us](#).

★ CURSES, CRIMINALS AND CANALS

by Terence Cantarella

Everyone said I would need a gun.

I already had the canoe. I bought it off Craigslist from some guy named Del in Hollywood for \$150.

“Is it stable?” I asked.

Del shrugged then offered to throw in a life-vest.

So I strapped the canoe to the roof of my car and named it ‘Calypso,’ after the ship of explorer Jacques Cousteau—my childhood idol.

But I couldn't explore the world's oceans like Jacques. I don't have that kind of time or money.

Instead, I took a week off work to circumnavigate Miami-Dade County via the canals. It would take four days. I would sleep on the banks, under bridges, in parks, in vacant lots—wherever I could find.

I was warned about what I'd run into: corpses, alligators, toxic sludge, criminals, crazies, *chupacabras*. But I wanted a *bad* journey and a *great* story. I wanted to come home sunburnt, starving, and with some kind of infection.

I packed a few supplies, but no luxuries. No tent, no blanket, not much food, and *no* gun.

I launched from Biscayne Bay, near Northeast 70th Street and paddled west along the Little River. At Manatee Bend Park, I waited under the coconut palms for sea cows that never showed up. I carried my canoe around a dam in Little Haiti, tied off in El Portal, then rested at an Indian burial mound under oak trees draped in Spanish moss.

I'd read online that the site harbors an ancient Indian curse. I sat for a while, trying to absorb the energy, then paddled on.

★ UNDER THE SUN ON THE WEB



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In West Little River, the canal turned gritty. I passed crumbling bungalows and saw disheveled men curled up on mattresses under bridges. Three strangers waved me down from their yard and gave me beer. They said they never see *anyone* on these canals.

As night approached, I used my paddle as a rudder and let the wind push me westward into Hialeah. I pulled up the canoe behind a row of houses, laid down inside, and stared at the stars. I spent the night shivering, but happy to be on this vagabond journey.

I'd been searching for a local adventure like this for years. But hikes, bike rides, and snorkel trips never seemed very exciting. Without danger and unpredictability, where's the adventure?

On day two, I went ashore for Cuban coffee and guava pastries. The Little River canal ends at Okeechobee Road. I carried my canoe across twelve lanes of traffic, looking like a confused *balseiro*, and slid into the Miami Canal on the other side.

I saw a small woman standing in her garden in the industrial town of Medley. She waved me over. I climbed a ten-foot stone wall to her trailer and we drank stale coffee out of an old jar and chatted by the water. Her name was Bessie. She said she was 82, alone, and glad for the company. Her brother had lived next door but died a couple of years ago. She showed me paintings he made of Florida landscapes, gave me tomatoes and a papaya from her tree, and made me promise to come back one day.

If Miami's canals could take human form, I decided, they would look and sound just like Bessie: weathered, affable and lonely.

That night, I crawled through a thicket of mangroves in Miami Springs. I fell asleep beside the water, thinking about Bessie.

On day three, I crossed a dam into the Miami River and paddled past rusted freighters, tug boats, and shipping containers stacked along the shore. I fought high winds on the Blue Lagoon under the Dolphin Expressway, then stopped to rest at an abandoned building. It was ten stories, gutted and covered in graffiti.

A Miami Herald photographer named Mike called me on my cell phone. He wanted to come take pictures. When he arrived at the deserted building, Mike set his camera down on a concrete ledge. We talked by the water a short distance away. About ten minutes later, we looked back and saw a guy creeping off with the \$7,000 camera.

Mike shouted. The guy ran. Then Mike ran, too. I watched the thief dive through a hole in a chain-link fence, hop in a car, and peel off. Mike jumped in his own car and squealed off into the distance after him.

It was a classic Miami moment: sunshine, water, palm trees, a thieving punk and a car chase.

I felt bad for Mike. I was on edge now, too. But this journey had *finally* become an adventure.

I got back in the canoe and paddled south. I stopped to eat grilled snapper at a waterside shack on Calle Ocho. The food was terrible. But there was beer, loud music, and pretty waitresses in tight pants. A perfect spot, I thought, for a canal man fresh from a heist.

After that, I moved on and found a small wooded area east of the Palmetto Expressway.

It was dark when I pulled the canoe up a steep bank and settled down for the night. Fifteen minutes later, the raccoons found me. First there was one and then were three. I threw rocks, stomped my feet, and shone a flashlight in their eyes, but they kept coming at me. One climbed a tree and screamed at me from above. I wondered if this was the ancient curse of the Burial Mound manifesting itself.

I moved to a clearing in the trees. I used my backpack to prop myself up in the canoe and spent the night hurling rocks at shadows.

On day 4, my last day on the canals, I stopped to bandage my blisters near Bird Road, then navigated into the Coral Gables Waterway.

Miami's ragged canals opened into wide, coral rock canyons lined with boats, bougainvillea, and million-dollar homes that I can only dream about living in. A man named J.B. gave me beer and sandwiches on a high ridge behind his house and joked that he wanted to be buried at this spot because he loved it so much.

Then I floated downstream, almost to the end of my thirty-mile journey, and took a nap in the canoe under a Tamarind tree at Cartagena Circle. When I woke up, I left the canals behind and paddled across Biscayne Bay. I made landfall in Coconut Grove an hour later, a little weary and a little depressed that my adventure was over. A crowd, alerted by

coverage on airwaves, had gathered at a restaurant there to welcome me back.

They asked questions about the trip, but I didn't have a lot to say. I'd basically spent four days paddling around Miami, drinking beer, not sleeping, and searching for places to pee.

But I returned with a love of Miami's forgotten canals. In a city that tries to project a pretty image, the canals remain refreshingly un-polished. They're not pristine, but they're not junk-filled cesspools either. They're a surprisingly quiet world where time moves slower; a convenient escape in the heart of urban Miami.

To get there, all you need is an old canoe, raccoon spray, and a blanket. You don't need much money. You don't need much time.

And you *don't* need a gun.

★ YOU CAN LOOK BACK AT THE CANOE PROJECT FROM DAY ONE ON OUR [GOOGLE MAP](#). ALSO, FOLLOW THE TRIP VIA PHOTOS, VIDEOS AND YOUR COMMENTS ON OUR [CANOE PROJECT](#) [TIMELINE](#). CLICK ON THE PHOTO BELOW TO VIEW:

Storify by wlrnunderthesun
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Canoe Project

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Terence Cantarella will circumnavigate Miami-Dade via the canals and the Miami River. He'll have nothing more than a tin canoe, a backpack, a voice recorder and two paddles. Follow the journey here as we explore Miami-Dade's canals.

Day 3 of the Canoe Project: Wednesday, April 18, 2012

“ Join us as we welcome Terence back tomorrow at the #CanoeProject meetup at Scotty's Landing! ow.ly/amzGy
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4 RESPONSES TO “CURSES, CRIMINALS AND CANALS”



Yeraldine says:

May 3, 2012 at 12:09 pm

What an amazing story of adventure happening in our own backyard. I commend you for having brought to light the existence and daily occurrences at these canals as well as the hidden beauty in their “mostly” tranquil existence. I have done kayaking in these canals, especially the ones west of Blue Lagoon/Maceo Park (5115 NW 7th St. Miami) and can relate to many of your observations. And I also run kayak tours for those interested from the Blue Lagoon or from Coral Gables location.

<http://www.hiphost.com/experiences/309>

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soflanewbie says:

May 3, 2012 at 12:38 pm

What a great story! My hat's off to Terrance.

[Reply](#)



Maria says:

May 3, 2012 at 6:38 pm

 This is so beautiful, Terence. And as beautifully written as I would expect from you. Thank you so much for sharing this adventure with the world.

[Reply](#)



Aaron John Curtis says:

May 4, 2012 at 6:37 am

Indians don't leave curses; we're all about love, man.

Great stuff!

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