Dry Tortugas National Park

Who would expect to find the largest masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere lying on a small and remote island 68 miles west of Key West, Florida? Dry Tortugas National Park was formed to preserve Fort Jefferson, built of 16 million bricks on Garden Key, and the six other Dry Tortugas. These isolated islands, which all lack fresh water, are the westernmost of Florida’s Keys.

The U. S. built a 65-foot-high brick lighthouse at this location in 1826 and then construction on the never-to-be-finished huge hexagonal Fort Jefferson finally began in 1846. Named after Thomas Jefferson, the third U. S. president, the fort was designed as a platform for over 400 heavy guns and was meant to safeguard American shipping at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico. Amazingly, nearly 2,000 people were living on the site at one point during the construction. Although fresh water cisterns, designed to be refilled by rainwater, were built into its walls, cracks in the fort’s masonry due to subsidence soon allowed seawater to pollute the fresh water.

Federal forces retained control of Fort Jefferson during the U.S. Civil War and by the end of the conflict in 1865 the fort’s population had fallen to 1,013, of whom 527 were prisoners. Most of those in detention were deserters who had been apprehended, whereas most civilians being held there had been accused of robbery. In mid-1865 a party of four civilian prisoners was brought to the fort. These men had been convicted of conspiracy in the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. The most famous of these was Dr. Samuel Mudd who, after providing exemplary medical...
A day trip from Key West to Dry Tortugas National Park is a fun adventure for the whole family and will provide many happy memories. A comfortable ferry and a faster catamaran service offer nine or 10-hour day trips with round trip prices from US$165 per person. See www.yankeefreedom.com for details. A more-expensive 35-minute-per-way seaplane service also operates. See www.tinyurl.com/jeffair for more information.

Key West is a three-hour drive south of the Miami. Round trip restricted economy class airfare from Cairo to Miami begins at about EGP 6,600.

attention to the fort occupants during an 1867 yellow fever outbreak, was later pardoned and sent home.

In 1888 Fort Jefferson was converted into a quarantine station since the facility’s limited military usefulness was no longer thought to justify the high annual maintenance costs. In 1935 President Franklin Roosevelt visited Garden Key by ship and designated the area a U. S. national monument. Finally in 1992 the seven isolated keys and fort were declared a U. S. national park.

ABOUT TED COOKSON: Egypt’s most widely-travelled travel agent, Ted has been to every country in the world. He has also visited 316 of the 321 destinations on the list of the Travellers’ Century Club (visit www.eptours.com and refer to World Travel Club). A travel agent in Cairo since 1986, Ted manages Egypt Panorama Tours, a full-service travel agency, at 4 Road 79 (between Roads 9 and 10, near the ‘El Maadi’ metro station) in Maadi.

Contact Egypt Panorama Tours (open Sunday-Thursday 9am-5pm) at: Tel. 2359-0200, 2358-5880, 2359-1301. Fax 2359-1199. E-mail: ept@link.net. Web site: www.eptours.com. The password for residents is eptcool. Both text and PDF versions of all of Ted’s travel articles published since 2002 are archived online at www.eptours.com under ‘Ted’s International Travel Articles.’ Many of the archived articles also contain video clips.