

# Floridian Fun



## **Southend Boys' and Girls' Choir**

**Florida Tour  
Summer 2006**

**The Report by Joe Knock**

## ***Dedication***

This report is dedicated to all the parents of the choristers. Without them, we simply wouldn't have been allowed to go and wouldn't have been able to afford any of it. And of course letting us abandon them for 12 days without any real contact (bar one email in my case) was an awesome gift.



Thanks Mum and Dad!

## ***Introduction***

The Southend Boys' and Girls' Choir have always gone on trips. From Paris to Australia, everyone always had fun. But no one had truly experienced how fun these tours could be until Summer 2004 when, for the first time, both choirs toured together throughout East America (New York, Boston, Niagara, Cleveland, Chicago and Wisconsin).

Needless to say it was a success. We all had fun. The American audiences enjoyed our supposedly angelic singing. Richard somehow managed to enjoy the trip along with the stress of being tour manager.

So someone thought we should do it all over again. Don't ask me who but I think we're all glad they had that idea.

I was faced with a choice between the February half-term history trip to Russia with Westcliff High School for Boys (cold and cultural) or the summer vacation to Florida with the choir (hot and musical). It didn't take me long to make the right decision.

After a couple of rehearsals, the publicity photo shoot and the pre-tour concert we were ready to go. Well once we had all packed that was. And read the copious amounts of letters and attended the briefing meeting and handed over several cheques...

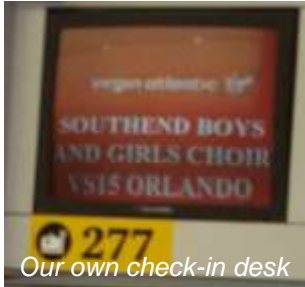


*Florida 2006 Tour members (left) compared to the America 2004 Tour members (below).*



## Day One

Two years after the Boys' and Girls' Choirs tour of America in 2004 and I was back at SHSG bus stop, although luckily it was only 6.45 in the morning not 3.30. With everyone clearly excited about being in Florida by the end of the day, the coach pulled off (only 2 minutes late) to the familiar site of parents cheerfully waving goodbye. The adventure had begun.



*Our own check-in desk*

Of course the adventure was a bit boring to start with as we joined the endless traffic and went through the normal airport routine. At least our own personalised check-in desk gave me the chance to use my new digital camera. Once our flight finally left I – like others – enjoyed the sumptuous Virgin Atlantic lunch (especially the Gü pot of chocolate for desert) whilst watching a good old chick-flick in *She's The Man*. Not that exciting you may think, but it was clearly the highlight of my flight.

Over 8 hours later and we finally landed, although health and safety regulations at the airport meant we had to enjoy the first thunderstorm of our trip whilst still on the plane. Taking the blankets with us – on the instructions of certain adults – we made our way through customs, without any trouble this time, and after reclaiming our baggage, met Gege, our driver, and collapsed straight on his coach. As everyone descended into the land of nod, I attempted to read my book only to find myself nodding off in it. A quick Burger King-stop kept everyone going that little bit longer before collapsing after the long day in the Paramount Plaza Hotel, Gainesville.



*Monorail Madness*

## Day Two



*Gator in the swamp*

After a jetlagged night (and being beaten into the shower at 2.30 a.m.), I got my first taste of what Florida had to offer. The room's balcony gave a breathtaking view of the swamp, and our first crocodile sighting. It was then time to pile everyone and everything onto the coach to meet the Gainesville Youth Chorus – our hosts for the next two nights. However, with the time already at 08.45, I – like most of the choir who were awake – was hungry for some breakfast. A quick stop at the beloved I-HOP gave me the much

needed energy boost to go meet the choir. Surprisingly – despite most of us guzzling down pancake syrup – GYC seemingly had more enthusiasm. Through the power of name-tags we all quickly got acquainted with each other and got down to the business of actually singing with each choir teaching the other new songs.

After a pizza lunch, it was back to the singing, although this time in a more relaxed and informal manner as we partook in one of GYC's workshops, with a couple of snack breaks thrown in for teeth-rotting goodness. Needless to say, we all had fun and left happily into the glorious sunshine with our hosts before the big 'cook-out' at the Pratt's farm. Luckily for me and Rich (my intrepid hosting buddy) we were staying on the Pratt's farm. It was only when the cook-out began (basically a barbeque) that we realised the full scale of the celebration – we all (metaphorically) 'dived' into the pool and had great fun before tucking into great food. The masses left were quickly demolished by the Pratt brothers/friends/old babysitters after the party was over. At least I did my bit by munching on baby carrots...



I don't want to be stereotypical and don't think I can really be stereotypical about people within the American Culture, but all that's not gonna stop me from calling the Pratt brothers and their friends Jocks – in a good way though, as they didn't seem dumb. The entire family seemed to just be physically massive though, but then again I guess having a gym in your five-door garage helps. Rich and I did however drop their invitation to go out and do who knows what, using the 'get into

bed' card as an excuse. I was truthfully quite happy to get into my bed for the night (although Rich had been relegated to the air bed on the floor) and enjoy the unusual ornaments of stuffed animals. Needless to say Kyle (whose room we had invaded) was a hunter. Luckily, Sandy (the mother) had assured us she removed all the knives and guns that had been lying around. A pleasant thought as I cosily drifted off to sleep.

### **Day Three**

A delightful massive breakfast (in both quality and quantity) awaited both Richard and I after our deep slumber. Bagels, bacon, sausage meat, pancakes and fruit all swiftly entered my mouth and there was still more out for use to eat. There just wasn't time though as it was off to the coach for our first real adventure.

After the excitement of reading the detailed article about our visit in *The Gainesville Sun* and ensuring all the "chips" (that's crisps to use English folk) had made it aboard the coach, it



was off to the natural environment of Poe Springs. The water was refreshing, albeit startlingly freezing on first entering the pool. I'm just not sure all the sunbathers saw it that way...

It was then lunchtime – subs and chips for everyone, along with masses of watermelon still left over from the cook-out. It was here that I had the pleasure to bond with Miss. Lou (the GYC accompanist) and just enjoy the simplicity of relaxing on a holiday from reality. If only there had been a photo of our brief fling together...

From the relaxing springs, it was back to the hectic rush of getting ready for a concert and packing up to move on. Still, Rich and I found time for a dip in the pool and – once we worked out how to use the shower – a thorough wash. And a quick go on the trampoline. We then had yet another scrumptious meal – the only time I remember actually enjoying steak – before leaving the Pratt farm for one last time, with sleeping bags in tow.

The concert saw both choirs deservedly applaud each other – but of course we all knew which ensemble was better and gained a standing ovation or three. Miss. Lou brought another smile on my face afterwards, saying how lovely it was that I always smiled – at times, I felt it was impossible not to. Alas, after our traditional plaque given finally occurred (to the great amazement of Miss. Dee) most of the adults disappeared to leave us youngsters to enjoy our 'lock-in' – a sleepover for those of you not with the lingo. Needless to say we weren't actually 'locked-in' and levels of hyperactivity were off the scale.



### **Day Four**

Luckily for those – like me – who actually treasure sleep, Paul told us all it was 'time to wind down' at midnight and – with Liam finally having stopped poking me – it was bedtime. I got 6 sweet hours of the precious rarity at sleepovers, but 6am still seemed to arrive too early, considering it was still dark outside.

Another bountiful cooked breakfast awaited us happy eaters as we all tried to cram sleeping bags back into the bags we got them out of. The traditional exchanging of email addresses (now with the added variant of myspace addresses) took place, along with dozens of photos being taken on numerous cameras of another SYC and GYC group

pose. And of course, there was time for another spontaneous sing-song. We'd started to get rather good at singing altogether.



*The Southend Boys' and Girls' Choirs with the Gainesville Youth Chorus*

Those sad to leave their new found friends soon found a replacement just 2 hours down the road – our first Wal-Mart stop of the trip. Beth found some Lucky Charms and Christine grabbed some Cheetos, but I somehow restrained myself, knowing Walt Disney World would provide plenty of merchandise for me. I couldn't resist a further 2 hours down the road though at our service station lunch stop. The superslice of margherita at Sbarro's (an American pizza chain) fully satisfied me, with the Walt Disney World brochures we picked up giving us some light reading and democratic voting for the rest of the journey.



*Relaxing in the pool*

We soon arrived in the coastal town of Fort Lauderdale and rushed to our La Quinta Inn rooms so we could rush into the swimming pool – and delightfully scorching hot-tub – before dinner at the Golden Corral Buffet. Some of us took the opportunity to 'dress-up' under the misguided impression it wouldn't be a popular chain restaurant. We still all enjoyed the dishes on offer, particularly desert, with the more experienced of us being transported back 2 years to a similar evening in Niagara.

It was then back to the hotel for an early night. Well at least I chose to have a relatively early night, not that my roommates or anyone else seemed to. But with a need to be up at 6am the next morning to get ready for church it seemed like the right thing to do unless I wanted to fall asleep during the sermon...

### ***Day Five***

Getting up at 6am, I was annoyingly still beaten into the shower by Rich. It was all in aid of us needing to be at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in time for an early 8.15am

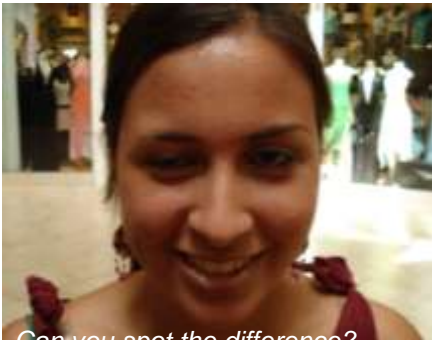
performance as part of the service. The whole church visit was certainly an experience for everyone.

Roger and Rosemary had constantly told us at pre-tour rehearsals how big this church was and how we could check out their website (which I in my laziness never got round to doing) but nothing could prepare us for actually coming “face to face” with the huge steeple used as an exterior shell for their radio antenna. Their beautiful sanctuary was under going renovation and although we therefore didn’t perform in it, we were able to go in and have a look around. That was the breath-taking moment. The organ made the grandest sound possible; the sunshine entered through the stain glass windows in the gentlest way; the whole area just felt so warm and friendly.



With the Sanctuary unavailable for use, the two services of the morning had to take place in the fellowship hall – impressively large in comparison to my Church hall. Those of us who stayed awake immensely enjoyed the sermon and I personally loved the sound created by the adult church choir. Of course, they loved the sound we made. They told us so – in between services when we were munching on donuts.

The hospitality continued into lunchtime, as the first fantastic church meal (traditional American of Sloppy Joes and cookies) was provided for us. In the classic words of Christine “Who needs the I-HOP when you’ve got the church?” It was true two years ago and it was true again this time round.



The afternoon was spent in one of America’s largest malls. Too large to go into every shop, but still everyone found plenty of bargains to buy and show off to each other. I was still saving myself for our trip to a certain theme park that was creeping ever nearer – waiting for my consumerism to explode all over Mickey Mouse.

All too soon we returned to the hotel, although it did give as all the chance for another delightful dip in the splendid swimming pool. Dinner was again at the Golden Corral with more opportunities for group bonding in our own private room. Packing awaited us all before we went to bed as tomorrow would be the move to Orlando. Through the excitement of that fact, and the knowledge that we would briefly visit Fort Lauderdale’s beach in the morning before moving on, I was able to enjoy one final nights sleep.

## **Day Six**

Another relatively early start. No reason as such, which did confuse Rich when I left unseasonably early for breakfast. Little did he know I had gone to use the free internet facilities in reception – a small gem of information that Christine had gained from Mr. Prior, and been kind enough to share with me. Beating the queue is always a good feeling. It did give me time to quickly check emails (again, now with the added upgrade of myspace comments) and have some limited contact with reality.



The time to leave (which I *think* is “La Quinta” in Spanish) arrived in a rather huggless fashion. Of course, a short stop at the beach was in order. Everyone (well just about everyone) enjoyed bobbing up and down with the waves with the soft sand at their feet so much that those idiotically without swimming costumes just couldn’t stand back and watch and waded in themselves. Unfortunately we couldn’t stay forever and – after a quick gift shop visit (where I finally cracked and spent all of 60 cents on postcards) – we boarded the coach to Orlando.



Another service station stop soon gave us all a chance to break the tedium the long journey. Some found entertainment in Uno, others in art. I – as always – sought it in the relaxation of my music and blanket – well Virgin Atlantic’s blanket. Of course, everyone found entertainment in our lunch stop at a Wal-Mart.

We did eventually arrive at Regal Palms. Don’t let the posh name kid you into thinking we were living in the lap of luxury for 4 nights. This was after all the 4 nights of self-accommodation. However, adults were to supervise each house of choristers so the wild drunken parties reassuringly didn’t occur. I had the pleasure of being with Rich (as ever), Helen, Jenny, Cat and Becca with the supervisory skills of Alison and Paul. Our group certainly became more closely knitted over our period as housemates – and just to prove it they have now all entered my Christmas card list.

Florida’s unfavourable weather (another thunderstorm) left us with no choice but to cancel our scheduled performance. Or at least the audience that didn’t show up because of the thunderstorm left us with no choice. Instead I was picked by Alison to accompany her to



the supermarket down the road, with each adult and ‘chosen one’ spending a hideously long amount of time trawling through shelves to decide what we wanted and which brand to go for. If Alison had picked me for my decision making skills I was not a wise choice. Next we had to carry the bags back up the hill – again I wasn’t a wise choice.

Paul then cooked (well maybe we were partially on our way to the lap of luxury) and before long our house had been invaded by several of our neighbours. Even Roger and Rosemary joined the party at some point. I – exhausted as always by 10pm – decided to pull out my party trick and fall asleep on the lounge floor but did eventually find my way into bed. The trip was about to get a lot more exciting – I could just see Mickey waiting to greet us at the gates in my delirious state of mind.

## **Day Seven**

The realisation of the day took a while to kick in, but that didn't stop me from being as excited as everyone else on the coach. The air naturally filled with talk of what rides everyone wanted to go on as we soon found ourselves within the complex. Mickey had cooked us (as well as other groups participating in a "Magic Music Day") a scrummy yummy breakfast. We all managed to remain relaxed and cool about everything – doubtlessly thanks to the help from the vast air conditioning inside the pavilion.



The Disney magic began to spread during the post-breakfast entertainment – a slick show produced to inspire (and at some times threaten) us to go and perform to our best because we were making people's memories. It certainly gave us all a chance to relieve our childhood and see Roger and Rosemary's mild embarrassment at being forced to wear Mickey ears.

Our time to rehearse and perform swiftly came and went. As hot as the scorching red lights were on all our backs, it was actually fun to perform and of course we could now all tick off the "Sing at Walt Disney World" box on our "Things to do before I die" list. We even have the medals and banner to prove it. Suddenly we were in Magic Kingdom as normal tourists. At first, it didn't feel right 'sneaking' in through a staff entrance but it must have saved us a lot of time.



We were now released into the wild – on strict instructions to remain in groups of 4 or more, meet up with Richard at 4ish and – by far the most important – wear our caps at all times. Nothing was more important than sun protection. With all that organised, our group departed. We had our own headcount measures in place which I four one – as well as the rest of my group – found very beneficial at times. It didn't prevent the "Disney 8" – Ellen, Steph, Arron, myself, Beth, Leigh, Christine and Natalie – rushing to Splash Mountain to cool down. We certainly got splashed and decided we had to go on it again, so booked our fast pass tickets for later.