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Robert Ortiz: Middle Keys' unofficial ambassador

By Dick Conklin L'Attitudes Contributor

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Bus riders get warm welcome in Marathon

He's got one of the most recognizable faces in town, standing every day at the bus stop in front of the Brass Monkey Lounge, greeting disembarking passengers. Robert Ortiz is Marathon's unofficial ambassador to lost or newly arrived travelers, offering directions or suggestions for people heading to Key West, the mainland, or vacationing in the Middle Keys.



Robert Ortiz is ready with information at the bus stop at mile marker 50 in Marathon.

L'Attitudes photo by DICK CONKLIN

What's his most frequent question?

That's easy - "How do I get to the Miami International Airport?"

Robert quickly rattles off the answer: "Take the northbound bus to Florida City. Get off at Wal-Mart and take the Number 38 bus to Dadeland. Now take the Metro Rail to Roosevelt Station. Go downstairs and wait for the Number 37 or the 'J' bus to the airport. Leave yourself at least four and a half hours."

In addition to directions to MIA, he says he also tells visitors about local things to do such as visiting Pigeon Key and learning about the history of Flagler's railroad. He directs them to take a shuttle to Knights Key and a tram to the island.

He knows his passengers well. "Sixty-five percent are from Dade County, coming down here to work in Ocean Reef, Tavernier, Hawk's Cay, Key Colony Beach and Marathon. Some work right here at Winn-Dixie or K-Mart. Some go on to Key West."

The New York native came to Marathon by way of Montgomery, Ala. and Beaumont, Texas, where he crewed on a merchant marine ship carrying jet fuel to Port Everglades. From there he worked for a bus company in Florida City giving out schedules and other information.

"I heard about the Keys from some friends," he says. "They called it paradise. That sounded pretty good to me."

So in 1999 Robert put his backpack and bike into the luggage compartment of a JGT bus and headed south.

"Some days I work from 5:30 am to 11:30 or midnight. I'm bilingual, so that helps a lot. I also help out with lost and found items and assist senior citizens with their wheelchairs."

His job is a volunteer one, earning tips from passengers and bus drivers. Although he receives food stamps and gets some help with his medications, he looks forward to the day when his merchant marine retirement benefits kick in.

He is homeless, sleeping in a field "over by the airport." He keeps his "place" picked up and clean, and local police often look in on him to make sure he is OK. He has a battery-operated TV to keep him company. He cleans up and gets some meals at Marathon's Higher Love shelter, and stays there overnight when the weather turns bad. He gets around town by carrying his belongings on a three-wheeled bike.

Lattitudes

GlowFur: must have for Fantasy Fest

Meeting the Friendly family's hell dog

Plant yourself at Gardenfest

Robert Ortiz: Middle Keys' unofficial ambassador

'Waters of Wonder' debuts

Helmerich to head the Tropic Cinema

Rosburg: taking flight

'the Times' debuts at waterfront

Symphony's outdoor 'pops' show nears

Art Beat

Art lovers take a walk in balmy breeze

Art Briefs

Last day to apply for grant

Fantasy Fest 2007 poster art sought

Redbone gallery hosts art opening

Kulp art showing on Big Pine Key

Upper Keys photo club is forming

Upper Keys photo Harrison wraps up 'Books and Coffee'

Caberet show at Tennessee Williams

Harris featured at library lecture

Funding workshops happen next week

Classes in clay begin Tuesday

Film submissions sought for fest

One-day watercolor class scheduled

Entertainment Calendar

MUSIC

Keys Galleries

Galleries listing courtesy of Florida Keys Council of the Arts

Movies

Regal Cinemas

Keys Movie Times

Restaurant Review

L'Attitudes is no longer doing restaurant reviews at this time.

But Robert's life isn't all buses and passengers. During the week he is also a karaoke entertainer, singing on Mondays at the Key Deer Bar and Grill on Big Pine Key and on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at Boondocks on Ramrod Key.

"I do pretty well," he says. "A couple of weeks ago I came in second place. By the time they awarded the prize, I had already left on the last bus, which stops there at 10:15 pm. But they held my \$100 prize and gave it to me the following week."

"I sing and sometimes dance," he said. "I like Motown and rock and roll. Stuff like KC and the Sunshine Band, you know, like 'Get Down Tonight.' "

Robert tries to save a little money so he can occasionally get back to New York City. "I graduated in 1973 from the Food and Maritime Trades High School. That's where I learned my merchant marine job. That school was built on an old artillery ship docked at Pier 42, by Morton Street. Our classrooms were in the cargo hold of the old John W. Brown. It is still in commission today."

Robert is more than willing to talk about his unusual sexuality. "I was born a hermaphrodite in 1954," he says. Although they called me a girl, I had dual sexuality. My momma paid \$36,000 for surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital when I was 13. That made me 70 percent male, 30 percent female. I had hormone shots twice a week as a teenager."

"Some people prefer to call me by my nickname 'Roberta,' " he laughs. "That's OK. Hey, I'm an open-minded guy!"

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