

Oranges and rattlers

Beat winter blahs in the Sunshine State

By Jane McDonald
There is nothing like leaving Toronto International Airport on a dark February morning at 30 degrees below zero Celsius and arriving a few hours later at a tropical 30 degrees above.

Tampa Airport, one of the most beautiful airports I have ever seen, gave me this winter break a few years ago and I recommend it for anyone faced with the worst part of a Canadian winter — those last couple of months when Ontario begins to look like the set from the movie "Dr. Zhivago".

I was working for a newspaper at the time and had been assigned to do a story on a local real estate agency trying to convince Canadians to buy land in the Sunshine State.

I had checked the firm out with the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations and they had given it a clean bill of health, so it was just a matter of seeing the property the firm had to offer.

As it turned out, it was all on the up-and-up and that meant a rather routine story and the chance to enjoy warm sunshine while my co-workers and neighbors back in Canada scraped

windshields and shivered as their feet hit the bedroom floor each morning.

It was February of 1974 when I landed in Florida, so the fuel shortage was in full swing, making it difficult to get around. Even a rented car meant a quarter-filled gas tank and at rural Lake Placid in the centre of Florida where I was staying, the population was scattered, with no transit system.

Orlando and Disneyworld were located about 100 miles to the north and the coasts were about 150 miles to either side of me. The fuel shortage even prevented me from driving the relatively few short miles to Sarasota for a chance, however slight, of bumping into my favorite author, John D. MacDonald, who spells his last name a little funny, but nevertheless is a terrific writer.

However, all these shortcomings were forgotten as soon as I stepped off the plane and felt the sunshine bake into my Ontario pallor and my frost-brittled bones.

Can you imagine how much better a trip such as mine would be today when the fuel restrictions have been lifted?

Anyway, the accommodation for the

group of Canadians I was with was excellent — a recently-built Holiday Inn complete with palm-encircled pool — a sight every one of the Canadians seemed fascinated by.

Across from the hotel was an orange grove where I thought I would pick a few fresh citrus the night before I was to leave for home.

Unfortunately, I didn't realize that picking oranges in Florida from privately-owned orchards is against the law. And I also wasn't aware until the next day that a rather large contingent of State Troopers was billeted at the Holiday Inn.

So, unaware of the fact that I could be arrested at any minute, I ran across the four-lane highway, not an easy task in itself, and started picking oranges and grapefruit in the dead of night.

And as it turned out, I very easily could have become the dead part of the night; not because the State Troopers could have shot me; nor from getting hit by a car as I crossed the highway again back to the Holiday Inn; but because I wasn't the only interloper in the citrus grove.

It seems that the sandy areas where I had filled my shopping bag with



genuine Florida produce was where rattlesnakes sleep at night. I didn't learn this until the next day when a chambermaid who saw my bag of goodies almost fell over when I told her where I had filled it.

Anyway, I did get home safely that following day, after almost missing the plane — timetables are another of society's set of rules that I find difficult

to follow — and gave my loved ones their hard-earned fruit.

Even though it was a working vacation and cars were lined up for blocks in a desperate search for gasoline, it is good to remember that particular trip on these grey, dreary mid-winter days when you think you'll never see anything green again except the

dollars you pay out on fuel bills.

And the people of Florida were exceptionally friendly, showing a great deal of interest, if very little knowledge, for Canada. For example, the "Canadian Night" held at the hotel dining room in our honor featured roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

Florida may not be as much of an "in" place to go anymore what with travel throughout the West Indies, Mexico and Cuba opening up in recent years, but it does afford you a relatively inexpensive and convenient way to beat the slush of winter.

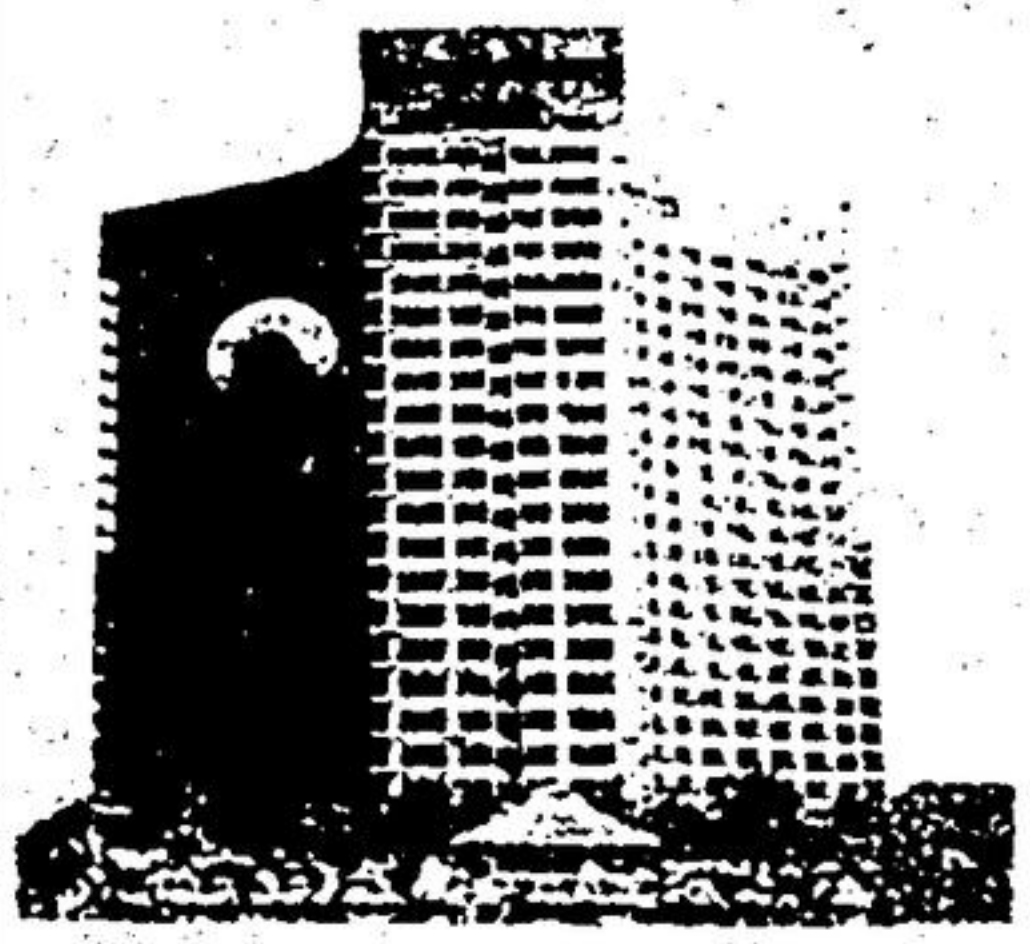
And Florida is almost as close as a call to your travel agent.

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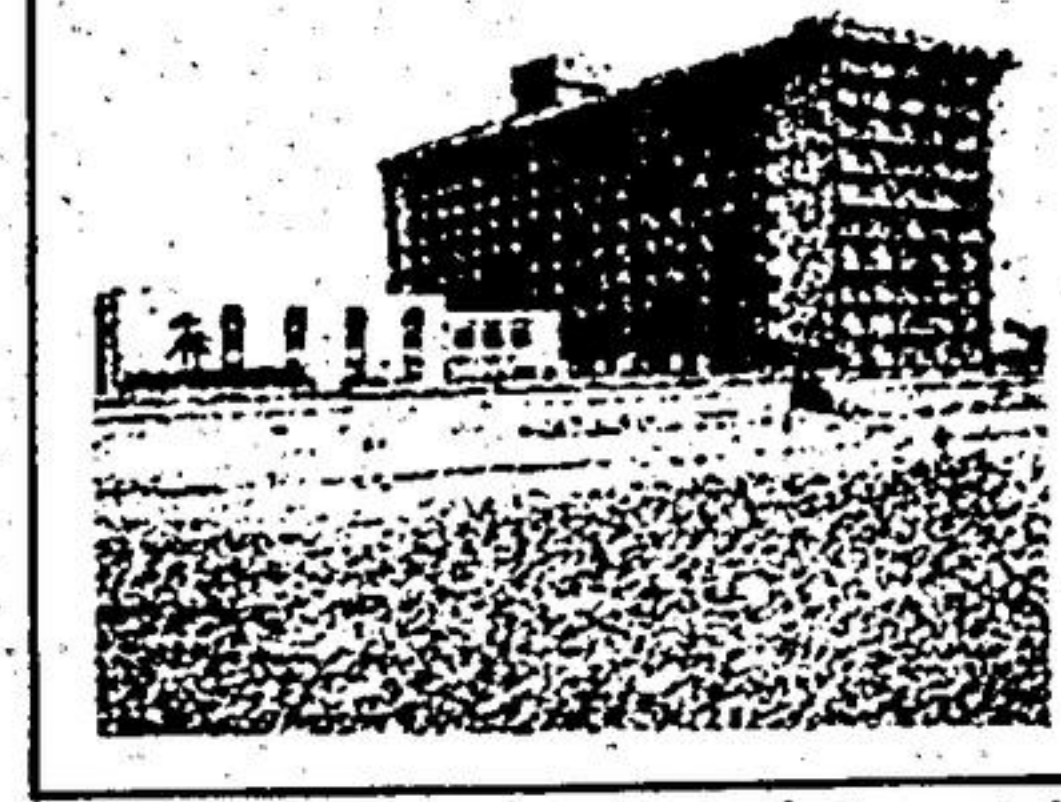
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