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Fiesta Key Murals

by Dennis Gaub

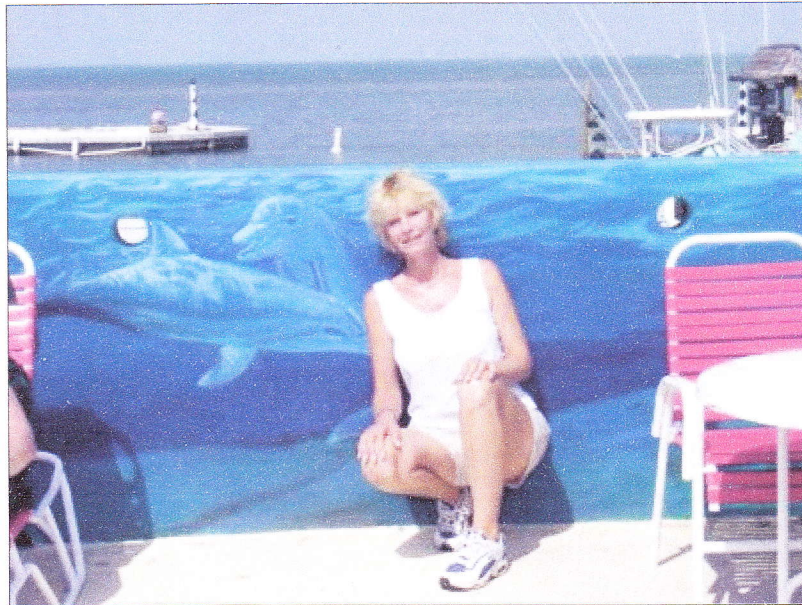
Visitors to Florida's Fiesta Key KOA campground can now enjoy whimsical original art intended to educate viewers about the importance of preserving the endangered Florida Keys Coral Reefs.

The paintings come from the brush of artist Tamara Gerkin. Earlier this summer, Gerkin, who has a studio in Port Richey, Florida, completed underwater murals that cover more than 200 feet of masonry wall. The murals splash across both the inside and outside walls of the campground's Olympic-size swimming pool.

Describing the project in a recent telephone interview, Gerkin said she started working on the interior part of the pool last October.

"I went back and forth between Tampa, where I live, and the KOA. I'd work 3-4 weeks at a time until I was exhausted," she said.

It took Gerkin 19 days to complete one of the walls, which depicts a grouper coming out of a cave covered with coral. Much more time went into painting a wall featuring dolphins, while a wall painted with sailfish was finished in 12 days.



On her [Web site](#), Gerkin explains the steps in her pool-painting project.

First, she covered the entire wall with blue-tinted exterior latex primer. After allowing the primary to dry for 24 hours, she used a filbert brush to sketch in compositional elements and shapes.

For the rest of the painting, she used professional-quality fine art acrylic paints.

"Though I generally create a mural by bringing it to the same state of completion at each stage, working outdoors on long walls dictates painting in small sections," she writes on the site.

When Gerkin moved to the outside wall, its size slowed her down. The 6-foot-by-63-foot span took about two months to finish.

The large viewing distance prompted her to use fish and coral that are larger than life in scale, as well as stronger colors.

Gerkin said she tried to portray personalities of several Fiesta Keys staff members through her murals. For example, the grouper represents her brother, Larry, whom she calls a "gentle giant." An adoring pair of seahorses symbolizes KOA manager Tom Brooks and his wife, Stacie.

Gerkin said her goal, in painting the murals, was to "educate people about the different types of fish and coral.

"By depicting the different types of coral as realistically as I can, I try to educate people about how beautiful the reef is," she said.

Gerkin said she hopes viewers realize that unless pollution of the oceans ends, "it's going to kill the coral reefs" of the world.



The murals apparently have made a lasting impression on those who've seen them. A visitor to Gerkin's studio during the interview joined the conversation and described the paintings as "awesome" and "very realistic."

And, with cooler weather just around the corner, now is a good time to make reservations for a fall or winter stay at the [Fiesta Key KOA](#), where the murals have joined a long list of campground amenities and local attractions.

Some Florida Keys Coral Reef facts

- The Florida Keys coral ecosystem is the third largest coral reef tract in the world – more than 360 kilometers long, encompassing 2800 square nautical miles and including the world's largest grass sea bed (Florida Bay).
- Four million tourists visit the Florida Keys annually, contributing \$1.2 billion in tourism-related services to the economy.
- The Florida Keys coral reefs are the top dive destination in the world.

Source: [EPA "Coral Reef Initiatives"](#)

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