

Close Encounter With the Hemingway House Cats

The felines hold court at the Key West landmark.

By Suzanne Stowe

I was thrilled when I booked a Caribbean cruise that included a stop in Key West, Fla. As a cat lover, I knew my first stop had to be the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum.

As soon as the ship docked, I walked up Duval Street heading for the house at Whitehead and Truman. Once there, I was lucky enough to meet several of the 47 feline residents of Ernest Hemingway's former home. As soon as I entered the property, I spotted Clark, named after Clark Gable. He is a beautiful Siamese, one of the youngest cats at the Hemingway Museum. Clark was very friendly and allowed me to pet him and take his picture as he posed on one of the chairs.

Next, I encountered Charlie Chaplin, one of the more popular cats. He was given his name because of his beautiful black and white coat and his adorable mustache. He is the most photographed cat at the museum and is very people-oriented.

The felines are descendants of a cat, Snowball, given to Hemingway by a ship's captain who hailed from Massachusetts. Snowball was a special cat known as a polydactyl, meaning many digits. Sailors considered the six-toed cats good luck. The Hemingway polydactyls have six or seven toes on their front paws and often have an extra toe on their back paws as well. About half of the current Hemingway cats carry the polydactyl trait and have feet that look like mittens.

I was given a personal tour by David Horowitz, one of the guides at the museum. Dave explained the excellent care provided to the cats. A veterinarian comes every Wednesday to administer any needed vaccinations and medical care. Detailed records are kept on each cat. Most have been neutered or spayed; however there are one to two litters each year to maintain the bloodlines.

The cats are fed a high-quality dry food (Eukanuba) — except for a few of the kitties who have lost teeth that also get wet food. Most of the cats are lean because they get plenty of exercise in the extensive gardens. An exception is Spencer, named after Spencer Tracy, who is a large white kitty. Guests are discouraged from picking up the cats, but Spencer climbed all over me when I visited, rubbing his head all over my face and purring loudly. It was hard to tear myself away from this special kitty, but there were others to meet.

Princess Six Toes is the most gorgeous calico cat on the premises. She is standoffish with most of the museum staff, but will let certain visitors pet her if they offer the proper reverence (apparently I did). Audrey Hepburn is Spencer's sister and rather shy. Zane Grey is a handsome gray fellow with the distinctive mitten paws.

Lady Brett Ashley, another beautiful calico, was named after a character in Hemingway's first successful novel, "The Sun Also Rises." She greeted me at the entrance to the bookstore. Bubba, one of the older cats, is a striped tabby who loves to hang out on the bookstore counter, helping to check people out while getting his share of attention. And Willie is the official bookstore cat and has his own box there to prove it.

The cats love to explore the gardens. There, they chase lizards and frolic after butterflies. Visitors will spot various kitties sleeping in the flower beds, sleeping in the sun, drinking out of the pool or playing in the plants. Dave, my guide, said there is no reason for the cats to leave the property, where they are protected and loved.

There is a feline cemetery in the garden area. Ragamuffin, who lived to 17, is buried there along with other famous Hemingway cats like Marilyn Monroe and Zsa Zsa Gabor. Off the patio there is a beautiful marble urinal that was used at one of the bars in Key West. Hemingway bought the urinal when the bar was remodeling and it is used now as a cat fountain.

Only two of the cats spend much time in the house. Archibald MacLeish regularly snoozes in the center of the bed in the master bedroom. He allows only one other cat to enter the bedroom, which he considers his personal domain. There are no litterboxes in the house as the kitties use the gardens and lawns to do their business.

More than 40 percent of the people visiting the Hemingway Museum cite the cats as the reason they visit. There are many cat-themed items sold in the bookstore and the bookstore manager, Linda Mendez, said they are among the best-selling items. As I reluctantly left the Hemingway Museum, covered in Spencer Tracy's hair to walk back to the cruise port, I was



loaded down with items featuring some of the wonderful cats, already planning my next trip to Key West and the Hemingway Museum.

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