Florida Keys & Key West

Includes
Key Largo & Tavernier ...........158
Islamorada ..............162
Long Key ...............164
Grassy Key ..........165
Marathon .............165
Big Pine, Bahia Honda & Looe Keys ...168
Sugarloaf & Boca Chica Keys ...170
Key West .............171

Best Places to Eat
- Café Solé (p182)
- Nine One Five (p182)
- Midway Cafe (p164)
- Key Largo Conch House (p161)

Best Places to Stay
- Deer Run Bed & Breakfast (p170)
- Lighthouse Court Inn (p180)
- Mermaid & the Alligator (p180)
- Tropical Inn (p180)

Why Go?
If Florida is a state apart from the USA, the Keys are islands apart from Florida – in other words, it’s different down here. They march to the beat of their own drum, or Alabama country band, or Bahamanian steel calypso set... This is a place where those who reject everyday life on the mainland escape.

What do they find? About 113 mangrove-and-sandbar islands where the white sun melts over tight fists of deep green mangroves; long, gloriously soft mudflats and tidal bars; water as teal as Arizona turquoise; and a bunch of people often like themselves: freaks, geeks and lovable weirdoes all.

Key West is still defined by its motto, which we love – One Human Family – an ideal that equals a tolerant, accepting ethos where anything goes and life is always a party (or at least a hungover day after). The color scheme: watercolor pastels cooled by breezes on a sunset-kissed Bahamian porch. Welcome to the End of the USA.

Have a drink.

When to Go

Key West

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Dec–Mar It’s dry, the sun is out, the weather is grand and the lodging is at its most expensive.

Apr–Jun Sea breezes help to keep the summer heat down, and hotel rates drop precipitously.

Jul–Nov There’s some rain (and maybe even some hurricanes), but plenty of festivals too.
History

Calusa and Tequesta peoples plied these waters for thousands of years, but that era came to a depressingly predictable end with the arrival of the Spanish, the area’s first European settlers. Upon finding Native American burial sites, Spanish explorers named Key West Cayo Hueso (pronounced kah-ya way-so, meaning Bone Island), a title since anglicized into its current incarnation. From 1760 to 1763, as the Spaniards transferred control of Florida to Great Britain, all of the islands’ indigenous peoples were transferred to Cuba, where they either died in exile or integrated into the local ethnic mélange.

Key West itself was purchased by John Simonton in 1821, and developed as a naval base in 1822. For a long while, the area’s cycle of boom and bust was tied to the military, salt manufacturing, lime production (from coral), shipwrecks, and sponges, which were harvested, dried and turned into their namesake bath product.

In the late 1800s the area became the focus of mass immigration as Cubans fled Spanish rule and looked to form a revolutionary army. Along with them came cigar manufacturers, who turned Key West into the USA’s cigar-manufacturing center. That would end when workers’ demands convinced several large manufacturers, notably Vicente Martínez Ybor and Ignacio Haya, to relocate to Tampa in southwest Florida. Immigrants from the Caribbean settled in the Keys in this period, and as a result, today’s local African Americans tend to be descended from Bahamian immigrants rather than Southern slaves – something of a rarity in the US.

During the Spanish-American War (1898), Key West was an important staging point for US troops, and the military presence lasted through to WWI. In the late 1910s, with Prohibition on the horizon, Key West became a bootlegging center, as people stocked up on booze. The Keys began to boom around 1938 when Henry Flagler constructed his Overseas Hwy, replacing the by-then defunct Overseas Railroad.

Key West has always been a place where people buck trends. A large society of artists and craftspeople congregated here at the end of the Great Depression because of cheap real estate, and that community continues to grow (despite today’s pricey real estate). While gay men have long been welcomed, the gay community really picked up in earnest in the 1970s; today it’s one of the most renowned and best organized gay communities in the country.

Climate

Though it’s warm and tropical in the Keys, it never gets higher than about 97°F. The peak in summer is usually about 89°F, with the temperature staying a few degrees cooler than Miami because the Keys are surrounded by ocean (and refreshing ocean breezes). The coldest it gets is usually in the 50s (when some people dress like a blizzard has descended), and water temperature stays in the 80s most of the time. The thunderstorm season begins by late May, and then everyone buckles down for the feared hurricanes – if they arrive, expect them in late summer and early fall.

Information

The Monroe County Tourist Development Council’s Florida Keys & Key West Visitors Bureau (800-352-5397; www.fla-keys.com) runs an excellent website, which is packed with information on everything the Keys has to offer.

Check www.keysnews.com for good daily online news and information about the islands.

Getting There & Away

Getting here can be half the fun – or, if you’re unlucky, a whopping dose of frustration. Imagine a tropical-island hop, from one bar-studded mangrove islet to the next, via one of the most unique roads in the world: the Overseas Hwy (US Hwy 1). On a good day, driving down the Overseas with the windows down, the wind in your face and the twin sisters of Florida Bay and the Atlantic stretching on either side, is the US road trip in tropical perfection. On a bad day, you end up sitting in gridlock behind some guy who is riding a midlife-crisis Harley.

Greyhound (800-229-9424; www.greyhound.com) buses serve all Keys destinations along US Hwy 1 and depart from downtown Miami and Key West; you can pick up a bus along the way by standing on the Overseas Hwy and flagging one down. If you fly into Fort Lauderdale or Miami, the Keys Shuttle (888-765-9997) provides door-to-door service to most of the Keys ($70/80/90 to the Upper and Middle Keys/Lower Keys/Key West). Reserve at least a day in advance.

UPPER KEYS

No, really, you’re in the islands!

It is a bit hard to tell when you first arrive, though. The huge, rooty blanket of mangrove
Florida Keys & Key West Highlights

1. Watching the sun set over the ocean as you sit and take in the raucous show at Mallory Square (p171).
2. Diving around the rainbow reefs of John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park (p159).
3. Paddling out to eerie, lonely, beautiful Indian Key Historic State Park (p162).
4. Donning a purple-and-green crocodile costume and partying in the streets at Key West’s Fantasy Fest (p178).
5. Scratching Papa’s six-toed cats behind their ears at the Florida Keys & Key West Highlights.
lovely **Hemingway House** (p172).

6 Strolling through the palm-hammock and pineland scrub at eco-educational **Crane Point Museum** (p166).

7 Feeding the giant tarpon swimming in circles at **Robbie’s Marina** (p163).

8 Making an island-hopping day trip and detour to **Dry Tortugas National Park** (p179).
forest that forms the South Florida coastline spreads like a woody morass into Key Largo; little differentiates the island from Florida proper. Keep heading south and the scenery becomes more archipelagically pleasant as the mangroves give way to wider stretches of road and ocean, until – bam – you’re in Islamorada and the water is everywhere. If you want to avoid traffic on US 1, you can try the less trafficked FL 997 and Card Sound Rd to FL 905 (toll $1), which passes Alabama Jack’s (p162).

**Key Largo & Tavernier**

We ain’t gonna lie: Key Largo (both the name of the town and the island it’s on) is slightly underwhelming at a glance. ‘Under’ is the key word, as its main sights are under the water, rather than above. As you drive onto the islands, Key Largo resembles a long line of low-lying hammock (raised areas) and strip development. But that’s just from the highway: head down a side road and duck into this warm little bar, or that converted Keys plantation house, and the island idiosyncrasies become more pronounced.

**SHOULD YOU SWIM WITH DOLPHINS?**

There are five swim-with-the-dolphin (SWTD) centers in the Keys, and many more arguments for and against the practice.

**For**

- While SWTD sites are commercial, they are also research entities devoted to learning more about their charges.
- The dolphins raised on-site are legally obtained and have not been captured from the wild.
- The dolphins are safe from environmental hazards often found in the wild – accidental catches, run-ins with boats and pollution.
- Dolphin swim programs increase visitors’ knowledge of dolphins and promote conservation.
- At places such as the Dolphin Research Center (p165), the dolphins can actually swim out of their pens into the open water, but choose not to.

**Against**

- Dolphins are social creatures that require interaction, which is impossible to provide in captivity.
- SWTD tourism encourages the capture of wild dolphins in other parts of the world.
- Dolphin behavior is never 100% predictable. Dolphins can seriously injure a human, even while playing.
- SWTD centers encourage customers to think of dolphins as anthropomorphized ‘friends,’ rather than wild animals.
- Dolphins never appreciate captivity. Those that voluntarily remain in SWTD sites do so to remain close to food.

**SWTD Centers**

If you decide to swim or see dolphins in the Keys, you can contact one of the following:

- **Theater of the Sea** ([305-664-2431; www.theaterofthesea.com; MM 84.7 bayside; adult/child 3-10 $30/21; 9:30am-5pm]) has been here since 1946. Structured dolphin swims and sea-lion programs ($135) include 30 minutes of instruction and a 30-minute supervised swim. You can also swim with stingrays ($55).
- **Dolphins Plus** ([305-451-1993, 866-860-7946; www.dolphinsplus.com; off MM 99.5 bayside; swim programs $135-220]), a Key Largo center, specializes in recreational and educational unstructured swims. They expect you know a good deal before embarking upon the swim, even though a classroom session is included.

There is also dolphin swimming at Grassy Key’s Dolphin Research Center (p165) and Hawk’s Cay Resort (p165).
The 33-mile-long Largo, which starts at MM 106, is the longest island in the Keys, and those 33 miles have attracted a lot of marine life, all accessible from the biggest concentration of dive sites in the islands. The town of Tavernier (MM 93) is just south of the town of Key Largo.

If you approach Key Largo from FL 905, you’ll be driving through Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge (www.fws.gov/nationalkeydeer/crocodilelake; FL 905), one of the last wild sanctuaries for the threatened American crocodile, indigo snake and Key Largo woodrat – the latter is an enterprising fellow who likes to build 4ft by 6ft homes out of forest debris. That said, the wildlife areas are closed to the public, and your chances of seeing the species we’ve mentioned from the road are negligible.

**Sights & Activities**

**Florida Keys Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center**

WILDLIFE RESERVE
(www.fkwbc.org; 93600 Overseas Hwy, MM 93.6; suggested donation $5; ☀ sunrise-sunset; 🦦

This sanctuary is the first of many animal hospitals you’ll come across built by critter-loving Samaritans throughout the Keys. You’ll find an alfresco bird hospital that cares for birds that have swallowed fish hooks, had wings clipped in accidents, been shot by BB pellets etc. A pretty trail leads back to a nice vista of Florida Bay and a wading bird pond. Just be warned, it does smell like bird doo back here.

**Harry Harris Park**

PARK
(MM 93.5; ☀ sunrise-sunset; 🦦) This small park is a good place to take the kids – there’s a small playground, a picnic table and other such accoutrements. Rare for the Keys, there’s also a good patch of white sand fronting a warm lagoon that’s excellent for swimming.

**Caribbean Club Bar**

FILM LOCATION
(http://www.caribbeanclubkl.com; MM 104 bayside; ☀ 7am-4am) Here’s one for the movie fans, particularly Bogie buffs: the Caribbean Club Bar is, in fact, the only place in Key Largo where Key Largo, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, was filmed (the rest of the island was a Hollywood soundstage). If that’s not enough, the original African Queen, of the same-titled movie, is docked in a channel at the Holiday Inn at MM 100 – just walk around the back and there she is.

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**DIVER DOWN**

If you go diving in the Keys, Florida state law requires you to raise a ‘Diver Down’ flag on the boat whenever you are underwater. If you don’t have one, they can be bought at any Keys dive shop.

**John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park**

PARK
(305-451-6300; www.pennekamppark.com; MM 102.6 oceanside; car/motorcycle/cyclist or pedestrian $8/4/2; ☀ 8am-sunset, aquarium to 5pm; 🦕) John Pennekamp has the singular distinction of being the first underwater park in the USA. There’s 170 acres of dry parkland here and over 48,000 acres (ie 75 sq miles) of wet: the vast majority of the protected area is the ocean. Before you get out in that water, make sure to dig around some pleasant beaches and stroll over the nature trails.

The Mangrove Trail is a good boardwalk introduction to this oft-maligned, ecologically awesome arboreal species (the trees, often submerged in water, breathe via long roots that act as snorkels – neat). Stick around for nightly campfire programs and ranger discussions.

The visitor center is well run and informative and has a small, cute aquarium (8am to 5pm) that gives a glimpse of what’s under them than waters. To really get beneath the surface of this park (pun intended), you should take a 2½-hour glass-bottom boat tour (305-451-6300; adult/child $24/17; ☀ 9:15am, 12:15pm & 3:15pm). You won’t be ferried around in some rinky-dink fishing boat; you’re brought out in a safe, modern 38ft catamaran from which you’ll ooh and aah at fiigreed flaps of soft coral, technicolor schools of fish, dangerous-looking barracuda and massive, yet ballerina-graceful, sea turtles. Besides the swirl of natural coral life, interested divers can catch a glimpse of the Christ of the Abyss, a submerged 8.5ft, 4000lb bronze sculpture of Jesus – a copy of a similar sculpture off the coast of Genoa, Italy, in the Mediterranean Sea.

If you want to go even deeper, try straight-up snorkeling trips (305-451-6300; adult/child $30/25) or diving excursions (305-451-6322; $55). Divers may want to take out a canoe ($20 per hour) or kayak (single/double per hour $12/$17) to journey through a 3-mile network of trails. Call 305-451-6300 for boat-rental information.

To learn more about the reef in this area, go to www.southeastfloridareefs.net.
FLORIDA KEYS OVERSEAS HERITAGE TRAIL

One of the best ways to see the Keys is by bicycle. The flat elevation and ocean breezes are perfect for cycling, and the Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail (FKOHT; www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/state/keystrail) will connect all the islands from Key Largo to Key West.

If you are keen to ride, it’s currently possible to bike through the Keys by shoulder riding (it takes three days at a good clip). There are particularly pleasant rides around Islamorada, and if you’re uncomfortable riding on the shoulder, you can contact the FKOHT through its website for recommended bike excursions.

Jacob’s Aquatics Center  
WATERPARK  
(305-453-7946; http://jacobsaquaticcenter.org; 320 Laguna Ave, MM 99.6; adult/child/student/family $10/6/8/25; 11am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun; ) Jacob’s is a complex of all kinds of aquatic fun. There’s an eight-lane pool for lap and open swimming, a therapy pool with handicapped access, courses on water aerobics. For the kids there’s a small waterpark with waterslides, a playground and, of course, kiddie-sized pools.

Sleeping

One of our favorite small hotels on the island, Largo Lodge (305-451-0424; www.largolodge.com; MM 102 bayside; cottages $150-265; ) was undergoing extensive renovations at the time of research, and was scheduled to re-open in early 2015.

Air-con is standard in virtually all Key accommodations. Lodgings have higher rates during the high season (mid-December to April). In addition, many properties add a ‘shoulder’ (midseason) that runs from May to June; rates may fall somewhere between low (July to November) and high during midseason. Many hotels (especially smaller properties) enforce two-night minimum stays. Expect rates to be extremely high during events such as New Year’s and Fantasy Fest, when some places enforce up to seven-night minimum stays.

John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park  
CAMPGROUND $  
(800-326-3521; www.pennekamppark.com; camp/RV site both $36; ) You don’t even have to leave Pennekamp at closing time if you opt for tent or RV camping, but be sure to make a reservation, as the sites fill up fast.

Stone Ledge Paradise Inn  
HOTEL $$  
(305-852-8114; www.stoneledgeparadiseinn.com; 95320 Overseas Hwy; r $78-118, villas $185-300; ) This is a pink palace (well, squat bunch of motel blocks) of old-school US seaside kitsch. The wooden fish hung on every door are only the tip of the nautical-kitsch iceberg, but the real joy is the sweeping view over Florida Bay at the back of the property. Rooms are pretty simple on the inside.

Hilton Key Largo Resort  
HOTEL $$$  
(305-852-5553; www.keylargoresort.com; MM 102 bayside; r from $179, ste from $315; ) This Hilton has a ton of character. Folks just seem to get all laid-back when lounging in clean, designer rooms outfitted in blues, greens and (why not?) blue-green. Throw in some beiges and you’ve got a supremely soothing sleeping experience. The grounds are enormous and include an artificial waterfall-fed pool and frontage to a rather large stretch of private white-sand beach.

Dove Creek Lodge  
HOTEL $$$  
(800-401-0057; www.dovecreeklodge.com; 147 Seaside Ave; r $169-269, ste from $350; ) This mid-sized hotel offers bright rooms decked out in citrus-shaded colors and a grounds that fronts the Atlantic Ocean. It’s a family-friendly spot with an old-school resort feel. Can help with booking tours and excursions in the area.

Key Largo House Boatel  
HOTEL $$$  
(305-766-0871; www.keylargohouseboat.com; Shoreland Dr, MM 103.5 oceanside; houseboat small/medium/large from $75/100/150; ) There are five well-decorated houseboats available, with the largest one spacious enough to sleep six people comfortably. The boats are right on the docks (and across from a bar), so there’s no possibility of being isolated from land (or booze).

Kona Kai Resort & Gallery  
HOTEL $$$  
(305-852-7200; www.konakairesort.com; MM 978 bayside; r $220-439; ) This hideaway is one of the only botanical gardens we can think of that integrates a hotel onto their grounds – or is that the other way around? Either way, this spot is lush. The 13 airy rooms and suites (with full kitchens) are all bright and comfortable, with good natural light and linoleum floors. Kona Kai also houses a lovely art gallery.
Guided tours of the extensive gardens are offered for nonguests Tuesday through Saturday for $25 (if you’re staying, the gardens are free, because they’re your backyard).

Jules’ Undersea Lodge  HOTEL $$$
(305-451-2353; www.jul.com; 51 Shoreland Dr, MM 103.2 oceanside; group of 3-4 person $350, s $675) There’s lots of talk about underwater hotels getting built in Dubai and Fiji, but as of this writing, Jules’ Undersea Lodge is still the only place in the world outside of a submarine where you and your significant other can join the ‘five-fathom club’ (we’re not elaborating). Once a research station, this module has been converted into a delightfully cheesy Keys motel, but wetter.

In addition to two private guest rooms, there are common rooms, a kitchen-dining room and a wet room with hot showers and gear storage. Telephones and an intercom connect guests with the surface. Guests must be at least 10 years old and you gotta dive to get here – plus, there’s no smoking or alcohol. If you just want to visit, you can pop in for a three-hour visit (with pizza!) for $150.

Eating

Mrs Mac’s Kitchen  AMERICAN $$(305-451-3722; www.mrsmacskitchen.com; MM 99.4 bayside; breakfast & lunch $8-12, dinner $9-22; 7am-9:30pm Mon-Sat; 6) When Applebee’s stuffs its wall full of license plates, it’s tacky. When Mrs Mac’s does it, it’s homey. Probably because the service is warm and personable, and the breakfasts are delicious. Plus, the food packs in the locals, tourists, their dogs and pretty much everyone else on the island (plus, admittedly, a fair few calories, but that’s why it tastes good).

DJ’s Diner  AMERICAN $$(305-451-2999; 99411 Overseas Hwy; mains $6-14; 7am-9pm to 3pm Sat & Sun; 6) You’re greeted by a mural of Humphrey Bogart, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe – that’s a lot of Americana. It’s all served with a heapin’ helpin’ of diner faves, vinyl-boothed ambience and South Florida staples like churrasco (skirt steak) and conch.

Key Largo Conch House  FUSION $$
(305-453-4844; www.keylargoconchhouse.com; MM 100.2 oceanside; mains $8-26; 8am-10pm; P) This wi-fi hotspot, coffeehouse and innovative kitchen likes to sex up local classics (conch in a lime and white-wine sauce, or in a vinegar sauce with capers). Set in a restored old-school Keys mansion wrapped in a Gone With the Wind veranda, it’s hard not to love the way the period architecture blends in seamlessly with the local tropical fauna.

A justifiably popular spot with tourists and locals. The fish tacos are intensely good.

Fish House  SEAFOOD $$
(305-451-4665; www.fishhouse.com; MM 102.4 oceanside; mains $9-24; 11:30am-10pm; P) The Fish House delivers on the promise of its title – very good fish, bought whole from local fishermen and prepared fried, broiled, jerked, blackened or char-grilled. Because the Fish House only uses fresh fish, the menu changes daily based on what is available. We prefer the original Fish House over the more sushi-centered Fish House Encore next door.

FLORIDA KEYS FOR CHILDREN

Check out some of the following options to entertain the kids:

Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center (p172) Get an understanding of the region’s environment.

Glass-bottom boat tours at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park (p159) Your own window to the underwater world.

Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory (p172) Pretty flying things.

Turtle Hospital (p166) Save (or watch) the turtles.

Conch Tour Train (p177) Kitschy, corny, enjoyable tour.

Ghost tours (p177) Only slightly spooky; younger kids may find this one a bit scary.

Key-deer spotting (p169) Kids go crazy for cute mini-deer.

Key West Cemetery (p172) Get Gothic with these often humorous tombs.

Robbie’s Marina (p163) All sorts of activities, including the ever-popular tarpon (giant fish) feeding frenzy.
Snook’s Bayside AMERICAN $$
(305-453-5004; 99470 Overseas Hwy; lunch mains $9-18, dinner mains $19-42; 11:30am-9:30pm) Floridians love their waterfront dining establishments crossed with a tiki bar, and Snook’s is Key Largo’s contribution to the genre. The surf-and-turf-style menu is good, but the view onto the water – and the accompanying artificial sandy beach – is better.

Drinking
Alabama Jack’s BAR
(58000 Card Sound Rd; 11am-7pm) Welcome to your first taste of the Keys: zonked-out fishermen, exiles from the mainland and Harley heads getting drunk on a mangrove bay. This is the line where Miami-esque South Florida gives way to the country-fried American South. Wildlife-lovers: you may spot the rare mulleted version of Jacksonvillia Redneckus!

But seriously, everyone raves about the conch fritters, and the fact they have to close because of nightly onslaughts of mosquitoes means this place is as authentically Florida as they come. Country bands take the stage on weekends from 2pm to 5pm.

Information
Chamber of Commerce (305-451-1414; www.keylargochamber.org; MM 106 bayside; 9am-6pm) Visit the chamber of commerce for maps and brochures.
Mariner Hospital (305-434-3000; www.baptisthealth.net; Tavernier, MM 91.5 bayside)

Getting There & Away
The Greyhound bus stops at MM 99.6 oceanside.

Islamorada
Islamorada (eye-luh-murr-ab-da) is also known as ‘The Village of Islands.’ Doesn’t that sound pretty? Well, it really is. This little string of pearls (well, keys) – Plantation, Upper and Lower Matecumbe, Shell and Lignumvitae (lignum-vite-ee) – shimmers as one of the prettiest stretches of the islands. This is where the scrubby mangrove is replaced by unbroken horizons of ocean and sky, one perfect shade of blue mirroring the other. Islamorada stretches across some 20 miles, from MM 90 to MM 74.

Sights & Activities
★ Anne’s Beach BEACH
(MM 73.5 oceanside) Anne’s is one of the best beaches in these parts. The small ribbon of sand opens upon a sky-bright stretch of tidal flats and a green tunnel of hammock and wetland. Nearby mudflats are a joy to get stuck in, and will be much loved by the kids.

Indian Key Historic State Park ISLAND
(305-664-2540; www.floridastateparks.org/indiankey; MM 78.5 oceanside; $2.50; 8am-sunset) This quiet island was once a thriving city, complete with a warehouse, docks, streets, a hotel and about 40 to 50 permanent residents. There’s not much left at the historic site – just the foundation, some cisterns and Jungly tangle. Robbie’s Marina used to bring boats this way, and still does boat rentals (around $30 for a kayak or canoe). You can also see the island from the water on an eco-tour with Robbie’s ($37.50).

By 1836, Indian Key was the first seat of Dade County, but four years later the inhabitants of the island were killed or scattered by a Native American attack during the Second Seminole War. Trails follow the old layout of the city streets, or you can walk among ruins and paddle around spotting rays and dolphins in utter isolation in a canoe or kayak.

Lignumvitae Key Botanical State Park ISLAND
(305-664-2540; www.floridastateparks.org/lignumvitaekey; admission/tour $2.50/2; tours 10am & 2pm Fri-Sun) This key, only accessible by boat, encompasses a 280-acre island of virgin tropical forest and is home to roughly a zillion jillion mosquitoes. The official attraction is the 1919 Matheson House, with its windmill and cistern; the real draw is a nice sense of shipwrecked isolation. Guided walking tours (1¼ hours) are given at 10am and 2pm Friday to Sunday. You’ll have to get here via Robbie’s Marina; boats depart for tours to here and Indian Key.

Strangler figs, mastic, gumbo-limbo, poisonwood and lignum vitae trees form a dark canopy that feels more South Pacific than South Florida.

KEY LIME PIE
Many places claim to serve the original Key lime pie, but no one knows who discovered the tart treat. Types of crust vary, and whether or not the pie should be topped with meringue is debated. However, the color of Key lime pie is not open to question. Beware of places serving green Key lime pie: Key limes are yellow, not green. Restaurants that add green food coloring say that tourists expect it to be green. Steer clear.

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Florida Keys History of Diving Museum  

MUSEUM  
(305-664-9737; www.divingmuseum.org; MM 83; adult/child $12/6; 10am-5pm; P) You can’t miss the diving museum – it’s the building with the enormous mural of swimming manatees on the side – and we mean that in every sense of the phrase. In other words, don’t miss this museum, a collection of diving paraphernalia from around the world. This is the sort of charmingly eccentric museum that really reflects the quirks of the Keys. The hall of diving helmets from around the world, from Denmark to Japan, is particularly impressive.

We’re also wowed by the exhibitions of diving ‘suits’ and technology from the 19th century. Folks in the museum can also provide information on diving in a vintage Mark V diving suit (the ones with the bulbous onion-heads connected to surface pumps). Hosts lectures on diving entitled (of course) ‘Immerse Yourself’ at 7pm on the third Wednesday of every month.

Windley Key Fossil Reef Geological State Site  
PARK  
(305-664-2540; www.floridastateparks.org/windley; MM 85.5, oceanside; admission/tour $2.50/2; 8am-5pm Thu-Mon) To get his railroad built across the islands, Henry Flagler had to quarry out some sizable chunks of the Keys. The best evidence of those efforts can be found at this former quarry-cum-state-park. Besides having a mouthful of a name, Windley has leftover quarry machinery scattered along an 8ft former quarry wall. The wall offers a cool (and rare) public peek into the stratum of coral that forms the substrate of the Keys.

Ranger tours are offered at 10am and 2pm Friday to Sunday for $3.

Rain Barrel  
ARTS CENTER  
(305-852-3084, 305-852-8935; 86700 Overseas Hwy; 9am-5pm) We want to tell you the Rain Barrel, Islamorada’s local artists’ village, strikes a balance between the beautiful and the tacky. But you’re more likely to find souvenir-y tourist tat here than a truly striking work of art. That said, strolling around the seven studios and galleries that make up the Rain Barrel is nice, and who knows, you may find the piece of your dreams, or at least a hand-painted sign that says, ‘It’s always 5 o’clock somewhere.’

Robbie’s Marina  
MARINA  
(305-664-8070; www.robbies.com; MM 77.5, oceanside; kayak & SUP rentals $40-75; 9am-8pm; P) More than a boat launch, Robbie’s is a local flea market, tacky tourist shop (all the shells you ever wanted), sea pen for tarpons (very big-ass fish) and jump-off for fishing expeditions, all wrapped into one driftwood-laced compound. Boat-rental and tour options are also available. The party boat (half-day/night trips $40/45) is just that: a chance to drink, fish and basically achieve Keys Zen.

For real Zen (ie the tranquil kind as opposed to drunken kind), take an ecotour ($35) on an electrically propelled silent boat deep into the mangroves, hammocks and lagoons. Snorkeling trips are a good deal; for $37.50 you get a few hours on a very smooth-riding Happy Cat vessel and a chance to bob amid some of the USA’s only coral reefs. If you don’t want to get on the water, at least feed the freakishly large tarpons from the dock ($2.79 per bucket, $1 to watch).

Sleeping

Conch On Inn  
MOTEL $  
(305-852-9309; conchoninn.com; MM 89.5, 103 Caloosa St; apt $59-129; P) A simple motel popular with yearly snowbirds, Conch On Inn has basic, clean and comfortable rooms.

Ragged Edge Resort  
RESORT $$  
(305-852-5389; www.ragged-edge.com; 243 Treasure Harbor Rd; apt $69-259; P P P) This popular low-key efficiency and apartment complex, far from the maddenng traffic, has friendly hosts and 10 quiet units. The larger studios have screened-in porches. There’s no beach, but you can swim off the dock and at the pool.

Casa Morada  
HOTEL $$$  
(305-664-0044, 888-881-3030; www.casamorada.com; 136 Madeira Rd, off MM 82.2; ste incl break $279-659; P P P) Contemporary chic comes to Islamorada, but it’s not gentrifying away the village vibe. Rather, the Casa adds a welcome dab of sophistication to Conch chill: a keystone standing circle, freshwater pool, artificial lagoon, plus a Wallpaper-magazine-worthy bar that overlooks Florida Bay – all make this boutique hotel worth a reservation. Go to the bar to catch a drink and a sunset.

La Siesta Resort & Marina  
RESORT $$$  
(305-664-2132; www.lasiestaresort.com; MM 80.5, oceanside; ste $190-340; P P P) This pretty option consists of renovated suites and apartments that let in generous amounts of light and are decorated to feel modern and classy, but still refreshingly un-hip and family friendly. Service is amiable, the pool is busy and the ocean views are lovely.
Chesapeake Resort  
RESORT $$$  
(305-664-4662; www.chesapeake-resort.com; 83409 Overseas Hwy; r $200-330, ste $350-550;  P  M  S)  This all-inclusive resort is packed with activities and rooms that have more tropical character than the average Keys accommodation. An on-site tennis court is good for exercise, while the charter boat dock and marina keeps you linked in to the local world of recreational fishing and sea exploring. You won’t lack for amenities.

Drinking & Nightlife

Hog Heaven  
BAR  
(305-664-9669; MM 85 oceanside; 11am-3:30am) We’re tempted to place this joint in an eating section, as the seafood nachos are so good. But it deserves pride of place in any list of best places to drink in town, thanks to the huge crowds that trip all the way down from Fort Lauderdale for back-porch, alfresco imbibing.

Morada Bay  
BAR  
(305-664-0604; www.moradabay.com; MM 81.6 bayside; 5pm-midnight) In addition to its excellent food, the Bay holds monthly full-moon parties that attract the entire party-people population of the Keys. The whole shebang typically starts around 9pm and goes until whenever the last person passes out; check website for dates.

Information

Chamber of Commerce  
(305-664-4503; www.islamoradachamber.com; MM 83.2 bayside; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat, to 3pm Sun) Located in an old caboose.

Post Office  
(305-664-4738; MM 82.9 oceanside)

Getting There & Away

The Greyhound bus stops at the Burger King at MM 82.5 oceanside.

Long Key

The 965-acre Long Key State Recreation Area (305-664-4815; www.floridastateparks.org/longkey; MM 67.5 oceanside; per car/motorcycle/cyclist $5/4/2;  P  M  S) takes up much of Long Key. It’s about 30 minutes south of Islamorada, and comprises a tropical clump of gumbo-limbo, crabwood and poisonwood trees; a picnic area fronting a long, lovely sweep of teal water; and lots of wading birds in the mangroves. Two short nature trails head through distinct plant communities. The park also has a 1.5-mile canoe trail through a saltwater tidal lagoon and rents out ocean-going kayaks (two hours single/double $17.50/21.50).

Eating

Midway Cafe  
★ CAFE $  
(305-664-2622; 80499 Overseas Hwy; dishes $2-11; 7am-3pm Thu-Tue, to 2pm Sun;  P  M  S) The lovely folks who run this cafe – stuffed with every variety of heart-warming art the coffee-shop trope can muster – roast their own beans, make baked goods that we would swim across the Gulf for, and are friendly as hell. You’re almost in the Middle Keys: celebrate making it this far with a cup of joe.

Bob’s Bunz  
CAFE $  
(www.bobsbunz.com; MM 81.6 bayside; mains $6-12; 6am-2pm;  P  M) The service at this cute cafe is energetic and friendly in an only-in-America kinda way, and the food is fine, filling and cheap. Key lime pie is a classic Keys dish and Key-lime anything at this bakery is highly regarded, so buy that souvenir pie here.

Lorelei  
★★ AMERICAN $$  
(305-664-2692; MM 82 bayside; mains $9-22; 7am-midnight;  P  M) Need a sunset and some excellent seafood? Maybe a touch of class? Lorelei has got you covered. The sunsets really are magnificent, an experience compounded by yummy fish sandwiches, cracked conch and some frankly gorgeous ribs. Look for the big mermaid sign.

Pierre’s  
★★ FRENCH $$$  
(305-664-3225; www.pierres-restaurant.com; MM 81.6 bayside; mains $28-42; 5:10pm Sun-Thur, to 11pm Fri & Sat;  P) Why hello two-story waterfront plantation – what are you serving? A tempura-ed spiny lobster tail...good, decadent start. Hogfish meunière? Well, that’s rich enough to knock out a rhino. A filet mignon with black truffle mash potatoes? Splurge, traveler, on possibly the best food between Miami and Key West.

Beach Cafe at Morada Bay  
★★ AMERICAN $$$  
(305-664-0604; www.moradabay-restaurant.com; MM 81.6 bayside; mains $14-33; 11:30am-10pm;  P) If you can ignore the service from staff who can get overwhelmed by customers and the awful bands that occasionally ‘headline’ the lunch rush, this is a lovely, laid-back Caribbean experience, complete with an imported, powder-white sandy beach, nighttime torches, tapas and fresh seafood.

Information

Chamber of Commerce  
(305-664-4503; www.islamoradachamber.com; MM 83.2 bayside; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat, to 3pm Sun) Located in an old caboose.

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If you want to stay here, make reservations this minute: it’s tough to get one of the 60 sites at the campground (2) 800-326-3521; www.reserveamerica.com; MM 675 oceanside; sites $36; (p). They’re all waterfront, making this the cheapest (and probably most unspoiled) ocean view – short of squatting on a resort – you’re likely to find in Florida.

**MIDDLE KEYS**

As you truck down the Keys, the bodies of water get wider until you reach the big boy: Seven Mile Bridge, one of the world’s longest causeways and a natural divider between the Middle and Lower Keys. In this stretch of islands you’ll cross specks like Conch Key and Duck Key; green, quiet Grassy Key; and finally Key Vaca (MM 54 to MM 47), where Marathon, the second-largest town and most Key-sy community in the islands, is located.

**Grassy Key**

At first blush Grassy Key seems pretty sedate. Well spotted; Grassy is very much an island of few attractions and lots of RV lots and trailer parks. These little villages were once the heart of the Keys, where retirees, escapists, fishermen and the waitstaff who served them lived, drank and dreamed (of a drink). Some of these communities remain, but development is relentless, and so, it seems, is the migration of the old Conch trailer towns.

**Sights & Activities**

**Curry Hammock State Park**

(PARK) (2) 305-289-2690; www.floridastateparks.org/curry-hammock; MM 56.2 bayside; car/motorcycle/cyclist $5/4/2; (c) 8am-sunset; (p) This park is small but sweet and the rangers are just lovely. Like most parks in the Keys, it’s a good spot for preserved tropical hardwood and mangrove habitat – a 1.5-mile hike takes you through both environments. Rent a kayak (single/double for two hours $17.20/21.50) or, when the wind is up, join the windsurfers and kiteboarders. You can also camp at the park for $36 per night – sites have toilets and electric hookups.

Local waters are blissfully free of power boats, which is a blessing down here.

**Dolphin Research Center**

(WILDLIFE RESERVE) (2) 305-289-0002; www.dolphins.org; MM 59 bayside; adult/under 4yr/4-12yr/senior $20/free/15/17.50; swim program $120-675; (c) 9am-4pm; (p) By far the most popular activity on this island is swimming with the descendants of Flipper. Dolphins are free to leave the grounds and a lot of marine-biology research goes on behind the (still pretty commercial) tourist activities, such as getting a dolphin to paint your T-shirt or playing ‘trainer for a day’ ($675). Still, swimming with dolphins is an activity that raises animal rights questions (see p158).

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Grassy Key Outpost**

(AMERICAN $$) (2) 305-743-7373; 58152 Overseas Hwy; (c) 7am-10pm; (p) The Outpost is an interesting spot that skews between fine dining and Keys casualness, both in terms of atmosphere and cuisine. There’s a Southern flair to the gastronomy; shrimp and grits come rich and smoky, while the mac’n’cheese is laced with decadent slathers of rich lobster.

**Wreck Galley & Grill**

(AMERICAN $$) (2) 305-743-8282; MM 59 bayside; mains $10-25; (c) 11am-10pm; (p) The Wreck is a Keys classic, where fisherman types knock back brew and feast on wings. It’s definitely a local haunt, where island politicos like to prattle about the issues (fishing). The food is excellent; it grills one of the best burgers in the Keys, and the aforementioned wings go down a treat with a tall beer.

**Hawk’s Cay Resort**

(RESORT $$$) (2) 305-743-7000, 888-395-5539; www.hawks-cay.com; 61 Hawk’s Cay Blvd, Duck Key, off MM 61 oceanside; r & ste winter $350-1600, summer $150-500; (p p) The Cay is an enormous luxury compound that could well have its own zip code, and besides a series of silky-plush rooms and nicely appointed townhouses, it has a variety of island activities. The Cay has its own dolphin pool, sailing school, snorkeling tours, tennis courts and boat rentals.

**Rainbow Bend**

(AMERICAN $$) (2) 800-929-1505; www.rainbowbend.com; MM 58 oceanside; r $165-270; (p) You’ll be experiencing intensely charming Keys-kitsch in these big pink cabanas, where the apartments and suites are bright, the tiki huts are shady, the bedsheets are ghastly, the beach swing is...um, swing-y and the ocean is (splash)...right there. Half-day use of the Bend’s Boston whalers (motorboats), kayaks and canoes is complimentary.

**Marathon**

Marathon sits right on the halfway point between Key Largo and Key West, and it’s...
a good place to stop on a road trip across the islands. It’s perhaps the most ‘developed’ key outside Key West (that’s really pushing the definition of the word ‘developed’) in the sense that it has large shopping centers and a population of a few thousand. Then again it’s still a place where exiles from the mainland fish, booze it up and have a good time, so while Marathon is more family-friendly than Key West, it’s hardly G-rated.

🔗 Sights

**Crane Point Museum**

*(Museum)*

(305-743-9100; www.cranepoint.net; MM 50.5 bayside; adult/child $12.50/8.50; ☇ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, from noon Sun; ☄) This is one of the nicest spots on the island to stop and smell the roses. And the pinelands. And the palm hammock – a sort of palm jungle (imagine walking under giant, organic Japanese fans) that only grows between MM 47 and MM 60. There’s also Adderly House, a preserved example of a Bahamian immigrant cabin (which must have baked in summer) and 63 acres of green goodness to stomp through.

This is a great spot for the kids, who’ll love the pirate exhibits in an on-site museum and yet another bird hospital.

**Sombrero Beach**

*(Beach)*

(Sombrero Beach Rd, off MM 50 oceanside; ☄)

One of the few white-sand, mangrove-free beaches in the Keys. It’s a good spot to lay out or swim, and it’s free.

**Turtle Hospital**

*(Wildlife Reserve)*

(305-743-2552; www.theturtlehospital.org; 2396 Overseas Hwy; adult/child $15/7.50; ☇ 9am-6pm; ☄) Be it a victim of disease, boat propeller strike, flipper entanglement with fishing lines or any other danger, an injured sea turtle in the Keys will hopefully end up in this motel-cum-sanctuary. We know we shouldn’t anthropomorphize animals, but these turtles just seem so sweet. It’s sad to see the injured and sick ones, but heartening to see them so well looked after. Tours are educational, fun and offered on the hour from 10am-4pm.

**Pigeon Key National Historic District**

*(Island)*

(305-743-5999; www.pigeonkey.net; MM 47 oceanside; adult/child/under 5yr $12.99/9/free; ☇ tours 10am, noon & 2pm) For years, tiny Pigeon Key, located 2 miles west of Marathon (basically below the Old Seven Mile Bridge) housed the rail workers and maintenance men who built the infrastructure that connected the Keys. Today you can tour the structures of this National Historic District or relax on the beach and get in some snorkeling. Ferries leave Knight’s Key (to the left of the Seven Mile Bridge if you’re traveling south) to Pigeon; the last one returns at 4pm.

The Old Seven Mile Bridge, meanwhile, is closed to traffic and now serves as ‘the World’s Longest Fishing Bridge’; park at the north-eastern foot of the bridge and have a wander.

🔗 Activities

**Marathon Community Park & Marina**

*(Marina)*

(2222 Overseas Hwy) Has athletic fields and a skate park for disaffected adolescents. The marina, better known as **Boot Key Harbor** *(Marina)*

(305-289-8877; www.bootkeyharbor.com; VHF 16), is one of the best maintained working waterfronts in the Keys, and an excellent spot to book charter-fishing and diving trips. Come during Christmas to see a ‘boat parade’ of boats decked out with Christmas lights.

**Tilden’s Scuba Center**

*(Diving)*

(305-743-0536; www.marathoncharters.com; 4650 Overseas Hwy) Offers snorkeling and diving expeditions through nearby sections of the coral reef.

**Sombrero Reef Explorers**

*(Diving)*

(305-743-2552; www.marathoncharters.com; 4650 Overseas Hwy; see-through kayaks/bicycles per day $40/10; ☇ 9am-5pm) Friendly kayak and bicycle rental services.

**Wheels-2-Go**

*(Rental)*

(305-289-4279; http://wheels-2-go.com; 5994 Overseas Hwy) Has athletic fields and a skate park for disaffected adolescents. The marina, better known as **Boot Key Harbor** *(Marina)*

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**Marathon Kayak**

*(Kayaking)*

(305-395-0355; www.marathonkayak.com; 3hr tours $60) Does guided mangrove ecotours, sunset tours and boat rentals. The three-hour paddle through a canopy of red mangroves is highly recommended.

**Siesta Motel**

*(Motel)*

(305-743-5671; www.siestamotel.net; MM 51 oceanside; r $85-115; ☄) Head here for one of the cheapest, cleanest spots in the Keys, located in a friendly cluster of cute Marathon homes – and it’s got great service, to boot.

**Seascape Motel & Marina**

*(Motel)*

(305-743-6212; www.seascapemotelandmarina.com; 1275 76th St Ocean E, btwn MM 51 & 52; r $99-
The classy, understated luxury in this B&B manifests in its nine rooms, all of which have a different feel – from old-fashioned cottage to sleek boutique. Seascape also has a waterfront pool, kayaks for guests to use and a lovely lobby-lounge where you’ll find breakfast and afternoon wine and snacks (all included).

Sea Dell Motel
(305-743-5161; 5000 Overseas Hwy; $89-209; P) The Sea Dell is a Keys classic: low-slung huts containing linoleum-floored rooms and tropical bedspreads. The rooms are more or less self-sufficient small apartments, and can comfortably accommodate small families.

Tranquility Bay
(888-755-7486; www.tranquilitybay.com; MM 48.5 bayside; $280-650; P) If you’re serious about going upscale, you should be going here. Tranquility Bay is a massive condo-hotel resort with plush townhouses, high-thread-count sheets and all-in-white chic. The grounds are enormous and activity-filled; the owners really don’t want you to leave.

Tropical Cottages
(305-743-6048; www.tropicalcottages.net; 243 61st St; cottages from $130; P) These pretty pastel cottages are a good option, especially if you’re traveling in a larger group. The individual cottages aren’t particularly plush, but they’re cozy, comfortable and offer a nice bit of privacy, along with some Old Florida atmosphere. There’s a daily $10 fee per pet.

Eating

★ Keys Fisheries
(305-743-4353; www.keysfisheries.com; 3502 Louisa St; mains $7-16; 8am-9pm; P) The lobster Reuben is the stuff of legend here. Sweet, chunky, creamy, so good it’ll make you leave unsightly drool all over the place mat. But you can’t go wrong with any of the excellent seafood here, all served with sass. Expect pleasant levels of seagull harassment as you dine on a working waterfront.

As an odd bonus, in order to order you have to identify your favorite car, color, etc; a question that depends on the mood of the guy behind the counter.

Wooden Spoon
(7007 Overseas Hwy; dishes $2-10; 5:30am-1:30pm; P) It’s the best breakfast around, served by sweet Southern women who know their way around a diner. The biscuits are fluffy, and they drown so well in that thick, delicious sausage gravy, and the grits are the most buttery soft starch you’ll ever have the pleasure of seeing beside your eggs.

Hurricane
(305-743-2200; 4650 Overseas Hwy; mains $9-19; 11am-midnight; P) Besides being our favorite bar in Marathon, the Hurricane also

GROOVY GROVES

It’s easy to think of the Keys, environmentally speaking, as a little boring. The landscape isn’t particularly dramatic (with the exception of those sweet sweeps of ocean visible from the Overseas Hwy): it tends toward low brush and...well, more low brush.

Hey, don’t judge a book by its cover. The Keys have one of the most unique, sensitive environments in the US. The difference between ecosystems here is measured in inches, but once you learn to recognize the contrast between a hammock and a wetland, you’ll see the islands in a whole new tropical light. Some of the best introductions to the natural Keys can be found at Crane Point Museum and the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center (p172).

But we want to focus on the mangroves – the coolest, if not most visually arresting, habitat in the islands. They rise from the shallow shelf that surrounds the Keys (which also provides that lovely shade of Florida teal), looking like masses of spidery fingers constantly stroking the waters. Each mangrove traps the sediment that has accrued into the land your tiki barstool is perched on. That’s right, no mangroves = no Jimmy Buffett.

The three different types of mangrove trees are all little miracles of adaptation. Red mangroves, which reside on the water’s edge, have aerial roots, called propagules, allowing them to ‘breathe’ even as they grow into the ocean. Black mangroves, which grow further inland, survive via ‘snorkel’ roots called pneumatophores. Resembling spongy sticks, these roots grow out from the muddy ground and consume fresh air. White mangroves grow farthest inland and actually sweat out the salt they absorb through air and water to keep healthy.

The other tree worth a mention here isn’t a mangrove. The lignum vitae, which is limited to the Keys in the US, is just as cool. Its sap has long been used to treat syphilis, hence the tree’s Latin name, which translates to ‘tree of life.’
serves a menu of creative South Florida-inspired goodness. Snapper stuffed with crabmeat comes after an appetizer of conch sliders (miniburgers) jerked in Caribbean seasoning. Save room for the chicken wings, an amazing blend of hot, sweet and plain delicious. The $5 lunch specials are great deal.

Drinking & Nightlife

Hurricane Bar
(305-743-2200; MM 49.5 bayside; 11am-12am)
The staff is sassy and warm. The drinks will kick your ass out the door and have you back begging for more. Locals, tourists, mad fishermen, rednecks and the odd journalist saddle up for endless Jägerbombs before dancing the night away to any number of consistently good live acts. It’s the best bar before Key West, and it deserves a visit.

Island Fish Company Bar
(305-743-4191; MM 54 bayside; 11:30am-10pm)
The Island has a friendly staff pouring strong cocktails on a sea-breeze-kissed tiki island overlooking Florida Bay. Chat with your friendly Czech or Georgian bartender – tip well, and they’ll top up your drinks without you realizing it. The laid-back, by-the-water atmosphere is quintessentially Keys.

Brass Monkey Bar
(305-743-4028; Marathon, MM 52; 10am-4am)
When Colonel Kurtz whispered, ‘The horror, the horror,’ in Apocalypse Now he was probably thinking about the night he got trashed in this scuzziest of dives, frequented by off-the-clock bar- and waitstaff in Marathon.

Information

Fisherman’s Hospital (305-743-5533; www.fishermanshospital.com; 3301 Overseas Hwy) Has a major emergency room.

Marathon Visitors Center Chamber of Commerce (305-743-5417, 800-262-7284; www.floridakeysmarathon.com; MM 53.5 bayside; 9am-5pm) Sells Greyhound tickets.

Getting There & Away

You can fly into the Marathon Airport (305-289-6060; MM 50.5 bayside) or go Greyhound, which stops at the airport.

LOWER KEYS

The people of the Lower Keys vary between winter escapees and native Conchs. Some local families have been Keys castaways for generations, and there are bits of Big Pine that feel more Florida Panhandle than Overseas Hwy. It’s an odd contrast, the islands get at their most isolated, rural and quintessentially ‘Keez-y’ before opening onto (relatively) cosmopolitan, heterogeneous (yet strongly homosexual) Key West.

Big Pine, Bahia Honda & Looe Keys

Big Pine is home to endless stretches of quiet roads, Key West employees who found a way around astronomical real-estate rates, and packs of wandering Key deer. Bahia Honda has everyone’s favorite sandy beach, while the coral-reef system of Looe offers amazing reef-diving opportunities.

Sights & Activities

Bahia Honda State Park (305-872-3210; www.bahiahondapark.com; MM 36.8; car/motorcycle/cyclist $5/4/2; 8am-sunset) This park, with its long, white-sand (and seaweed-strewn) beach, named Sandspur Beach by locals, is the big attraction in these parts. As Keys beaches go, this one is probably the best natural stretch of sand in the island chain, but we wouldn’t vote it best beach in the continental USA (although Condé Nast did...in 1992). As a tourist, the more novel experience is walking on the old Bahia Honda Rail Bridge, which offers nice views of the surrounding islands.

You can also check out the nature trails (oooh, butterflies!) and science center, where helpful park employees help you identify stone crabs, fireworms, horseshoe crabs and comb jellies. The park concession offers daily 1½-hour snorkeling trips at 9:30am and 1:30pm (adult/child $30/25). Reservations are a good idea in high season.

Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary (305-809-4700; floridakeys.noaa.gov) Looe (pronounced ‘loo’) Key, located five nautical miles off Big Pine, isn’t a key at all but a reef, part of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. This is an area of some 2800 sq nautical miles of ‘land’ managed by the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration. The reef here can only be visited

168
KEY DEER

While we can’t guarantee you’ll see one, if you head down the side roads of Big Pine Key, there’s a pretty good chance you’ll spot the Key deer, a local species roughly the size of a large dog. Once mainland dwellers, the Key deer were stranded on the Keys during the formation of the islands. Successive generations grew smaller and had single births, as opposed to large litters, to deal with the reduced food resources in the archipelago. While you won’t see thundering herds of dwarfish deer, the little cuteballs are pretty easy to spot if you’re persistent and patient. In fact, they’re so common you need to pay careful attention to the reduced speed limits. Note: speed limits drop further at night, because cars are still the biggest killer of Key deer.

To visit the official Key deer refuge (although the deer can be spotted almost anywhere on Big Pine) take Key Deer Blvd (it’s a right at the lights off the Overseas Hwy at the southern end of Big Pine) north for 3.5 miles from MM 30.5.

through a specially arranged charter-boat trip, best arranged through any Keys diving outfit, the most natural one being Looe Key Dive Center (305-872-2215; www.diveflakeys.com; snorkel/dive $40/70).

The marine sanctuary is named for an English frigate that sank here in 1744, and the Looe Key reef contains the 210ft MV Adolphus Busch, used in the 1957 film Fire Down Below and then sunk (110ft deep) in these waters in 1998.

National Key Deer Refuge Headquarters

The headquarters also administers the Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge – 200,000 acres of open water and mangrove islands north of the main Keys that is only accessible by boat. There’s no tourism infrastructure in place to get out here, but you can inquire about nautical charts and the heron themselves at the office.

Blue Hole

This little pond (and former quarry) is now the largest freshwater body in the Keys. That’s not saying much, but the hole is a pretty little dollop of blue (well, algal green) surrounded by a small path and information signs. The water is home to turtles, fish and wading birds. A quarter mile further along the same road is Watson’s Nature Trail (less than 1 mile long) and Watson’s Hammock, a small Keys forest habitat.

Apparently people have taken to (illegally) feeding the wildlife here; please don’t follow in their footsteps.

No Name Key

Perhaps the best-named island in the Keys, No Name gets few visitors, as it’s basically a residential island. It’s one of the most reliable spots for Key deer watching. From Overseas Hwy, go on to Watson Blvd, turn right, then left onto Wilder Blvd. Cross Bogie Bridge and you’ll be on No Name.

Veterans Memorial Park & Beach

This small park has covered picnic tables and good access to the mudflat and mangrove habitat that makes up most of the Keys’ coastline. The views onto the ocean are pristine.

Big Pine Flea Market

This market, which attracts folks from across the Keys, rivals local churches for weekly attendance. You know how we keep harping on about how weird Keys residents are? Well, imagine rummaging through their closets and seeing their deepest, darkest secrets – on sale for 50¢?!

Strike Zone Charters

Runs snorkeling ($38) and diving trips ($48) aboard glass-bottom boats, in which you can explore the thousands of varieties of colorful tropical fish, coral and sea life in the Looe Key sanctuary. Get open water PADI certification for $395.
Sleeping

★ Bahia Honda State Park Campground  CAMPGROUND $  (305-872-2353; www.reserveamerica.com; MM 37, Bahia Honda Key; sites/cabins $38.50/122.50;  P) 🌊 Bahia Honda has the best camping in the Keys. There’s nothing quite like waking up to the sky as your ceiling and the ocean as your shower (Ow! Damned sand flies. OK, it’s not paradise…). The park has six cabins, each sleeping six people, and 200 sites a short distance from the beach. Reserve well in advance.

Barnacle Bed & Breakfast  B&B $$  (305-872-3298; www.thebarnacle.net; 1557 Long Beach Dr, Big Pine Key; r $165-235;  P ⭐️) The Barnacle welcomes you into its atrium with the promise of fresh ocean breezes. Wander around the pool and Jacuzzi, past the swinging hammocks, and into highly individualized rooms that all share a lovingly mad design sense. Tropical knickknacks and big windows that let in lots of Keys sunlight are standard. Meals should be enjoyed on the deck, which overlooks the sea.

Parmer’s Resort  HOTEL $$$  (305-872-2157; www.parmersresort.com; 565 Barry Ave, Little Torch Key, off MM 28.5 bayside; r winter $159-304, summer $99-209;  P ⭐️) Appearing deceptively small from the outside, this 5-acre property takes up a nice chunk of Little Torch Key and fills it with inviting rooms that overlook local waterways and channels. The rooms are spacious, although you’d be mad not to step outside them and enjoy a bit of the sea on a lovely stretch of Long Beach Dr. It’s a green lodge and vegetarian B&B is isolated around the pool and Jacuzzi, past the swing- ing hammocks, and into highly individualized rooms that all share a lovingly mad design sense. Tropical knickknacks and big windows that let in lots of Keys sunlight are standard. Meals should be enjoyed on the deck, which overlooks the sea.

★ Deer Run Bed & Breakfast  B&B $$$  (305-872-2015; www.deerrunfloridabb.com; 1997 Long Beach Dr, Big Pine Key, off MM 33 oceanside; r $255-375;  P ⭐️⭐️) This state-certified green lodge and vegetarian B&B is isolated on a lovely stretch of Long Beach Dr. It’s a garden of quirky delights, complemented by love-the-earth paraphernalia, street signs and four simple but cozy rooms. The helpful owners will get you out on a boat or into the heated pool for relaxation while they whip up delicious vegetarian meals.

Little Palm Island Resort & Spa  RESORT $$$  (305-515-3019, 800-343-8567; www.littlepalmin- island.com; packages from $890;  P ⭐️⭐️⭐️) How do you get here? By boat or by plane, accompanied by a big wad of money. If you can afford to get here you can afford to spoil yourself, and this exclusive island, with its Zen gardens, blue lagoons and general Persian Empire air of decadent luxury, is very good at spoiling you.

Eating

No Name Pub  PIZZERIA $  (305-872-9115; N Watson Blvd, Big Pine Key, off MM 30.5 bayside; mains $7-18; 11am-11pm;  P ⭐️) The No Name’s one of those off-the-track places that everyone seems to know about. It feels isolated, it looks isolated, yet somehow, the tourists are all here – and this doesn’t detract in the slightest from the kooky ambience, friendly service, excellent locally brewed beer and primo pizzas served up at this colorful semidive.

Note: the name of this place implies that it is located on No Name Key, but it is on Big Pine Key, just over the causeway.

Coco’s Kitchen  DINER $  (Big Pine Key Shopping Center, MM 30.5 bayside; mains & sandwiches $10.50; 7am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat;  P ⭐️) Enter through the oddly mirrored storefront into this tiny luncheonette, where local fishers join shoppers from the Winn Dixie next door for diner fare and local gossip. Serves a good mix of American standards and Cuban diner fare such as picadillo (ground beef cooked in Cuban spices).

Good Food Conspiracy  VEGETARIAN $  (305-872-3945; Big Pine Key, MM 30 oceanside; mains under $10; 9:30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm;  P ⭐️) Rejoice, health-food nuts: all the greens, sprouts, herbs and tofu you’ve been dreaming about during that long, fried-food-studded drive down the Overseas are for sale in this friendly little macrobiotic organic shop. There is a good smoothie and fresh-juice bar on site. Note the big pink adent luxury, is very good at spoiling you.

Information

Lower Keys Chamber of Commerce  (305-872-2411; www.lowerkeyschamber.com; MM 31 oceanside; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) Stocked with brochures and tourist information.

Sugarloaf & Boca Chica Keys

This is the final stretch before the holy grail of Key West. There’s not much going on – just bridges over lovely swathes of teal and turquoise, a few good eats and a thoroughly batty roadside attraction.
This lowest section of the Keys goes from about MM 20 to the start of Key West.

**Sights**

**Perky's Bat Tower**
(Sugarloaf Key, MM17) It resembles an Aztec-inspired fire lookout, but this wooden tower is actually one real-estate developer’s vision gone utterly awry. In the 1920s Richter C Perky had the bright idea to transform this area into a vacation resort. There was just one problem: mosquitoes. His solution? Build a 35ft tower and move in a colony of bats (he’d heard they eat mosquitoes). He imported the flying mammals, but they promptly took off, leaving the tower empty.

**Sheriff’s Animal Farm**
(305-293-7300; 5501 College Rd, Stock Island; h 1-3pm second & fourth Sun of the month or by appt; p) Just before you hit Key West, you may be tempted to stop at this farm, located near the Monroe County Sheriff’s Office and Detention Center (no, really). This shelter for Monroe County animals that have been abandoned or given up is a lovely place to take the kids (call ahead to visit and farmer Jeanne Selander will be happy to show you around). There are tortoises, South American cavies (a kind of rodent), birds, llamas and an albino python.

**Sleeping**

**Sugarloaf Lodge**
(305-745-3211, 800-553-6097; www.sugarloaf-lodge.net; Sugarloaf Key, MM 17; r $120-170; p) The 55 motel-like rooms are nothing special, though every single one has a killer bay view. There is also an on-site restaurant, a tiki bar, a marina and an airstrip, from which you can charter a seaplane tour or go skydiving.

**Eating**

**Baby’s Coffee**
(305-744-9866; MM 15 oceanside; 7am to 6pm Mon-Fri, 7am to 5pm Sat & Sun) This very cool coffeehouse has an on-site bean-roasting plant and sells bags of the aromatic stuff along with excellent hot and cold java brews – many locals consider this to be some of the best coffee in the islands. Other essentials are sold, from yummy baked goods to Dr Bronner’s liquid soap.

**Mangrove Mama’s**
(305-745-3030; MM 20 oceanside; lunch $10-15, dinner $15-29; 11:30am-3:30pm & 5:30-10pm; p) This groovy roadside eatery serves Caribbean-inspired seafood – coconut shrimp, spicy conch stew, lobster – best enjoyed on the backyard patio and accompanied by a little live reggae.

**KEY WEST**

The Keys, like any frontier, have always been defined by two ‘E’s’: edge and eccentric. And when it came to the far frontier, the very edge, the last outpost of America – out here, only the most eccentric would dare venture. And thus, Key West: the most beautifully strange (or is it strangely beautiful?) island in the US. This place is seriously screwy, in a (mostly) good way. There’s no middle separating the high and low brow, that’s for sure. On one side of the road, literary festivals, Caribbean villas, tropical noir and expensive art galleries. On the other, an S&M fetishist parade, frat boys vomiting on their sorority girlfriends and ‘I Love to Fart’ T-shirts (seriously).

Where the other Keys are a bit more country-fried, Key West, a historical haven for homosexuals and artists, remains a little more left of center. The locals revel in their funky nonconformity here, probably because weirdness is still integral to the Key West brand. But past these idiosyncrasies is simply a beautiful tropical island, where the moonflowers bloom at night and the classically Caribbean homes are so sad and romantic it’s hard not to sigh at them.

**Sights**

**Mallory Square**
(305-293-7300; 5501 College Rd, Stock Island; 1-3pm second & fourth Sun of the month or by appt; p) Take all those energies, subcultures and oddities of Keys life and focus them into one torchlit, family-friendly (but playfully edgy), sunset-enriched street party. The child of all these raucous forces is Mallory Sq, one of the greatest shows on Earth. It all begins as the sun starts to set, a sign for the madness that it’s OK to break out. Watch a dog walk a tightrope, a man swallow fire, British acrobats tumble and sass each other. Have a beer. And a conch fritter. And wait for the sun to dip behind the ocean and for the carnival to really get going.

**Duval Street**
Key West locals have a love-hate relationship with the most famous road in Key West (if not the Keys). Duval, Old Town Key West’s main drag, is a miracle mile of booze, tacky everything and awful behavior. But it’s fun. The ‘Duval Crawl’ is one of the wildest pub
crawls in the country. The mix of neon drink, drag shows, T-shirt kitsch, local theaters, art studios and boutiques is more charming than jarring.

**Hemingway House**

(305-294-1136; www.hemingwayhome.com; 907 Whitehead St; adult/child $13/6; 9am-5pm) Key West's biggest darling, Ernest Hemingway, lived in this gorgeous Spanish colonial house from 1931 to 1940. Papa moved here in his early 30s with wife No 2, a Vogue fashion editor and (former) friend of wife No 1 (he left the house when he ran off with wife No 3). *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and *The Green Hills of Africa* were produced here, as well as many six-toed cats, whose descendents basically run the grounds.

**Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center**

(305-809-4750; http://eco-discovery.com/ecokw.html; 35 east Quay Rd; h 9am-4pm Tue-Sat; ☑) So, you've been making your way down the Keys, thinking, Gosh, could there be a place that ties all the knowledge of this unique ecological phenomenon into one fun, well-put-together educational exhibit? OK, maybe those weren't your exact thoughts, but this is exactly what you get at this excellent center. This place does a marvelous job of filling in all the wild details of the natural Keys. The kids love it.

**Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park**

(305-292-6713; www.floridastateparks.org/fort-taylor; Truman Annex; per car/motorcycle/pedestrian & cyclist $6/4/2; ☑8am-sunset) 'America's Southernmost State Park,' this park is oft-neglected by authorities and visitors, which is a shame. The actual fort walls are still standing, and within the compound those most-blessed of nerds – historical re-enactors – sometimes act out scenes of pirate and Civil War battles. The beach here is the best one Key West has to offer – it's got white sand to lounge on, water deep enough to swim in and tropical fish under the waves.

**Key West Cemetery**

(cnr Margaret & Angela Sts; ☑7am - 6pm; ☑) A darkly alluring Gothic labyrinth beckons at the center of this pastel town. Built in 1847, the cemetery crowns Solares Hill, the highest point on the island (with an elevation of 16ft). Some of the oldest families in the Keys rest in peace – and close proximity – here. With body space at a premium, mausoleums stand practically shoulder to shoulder. Island quirkiness penetrates the gloom: sea-shells and macramé adorn headstones with inscriptions like, 'I told you I was sick.'

Get chaperoned by a guide from the Historic Florida Keys Foundation, with guided tours for $10 per person at 9:30am on Tuesday and Thursday; departs from the main gate at Margaret and Angela Sts.

**Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory**

(305-296-2988; www.keywestbutterfly.com; 1316 Duval St; adult/4-12yr $12/8.50; ☑9am-5pm; ☑) This vast domed conservatory lets you stroll through a magic garden of flowering plants, colorful birds and up to 1800 fluttering butterflies, all live imports from around the globe.

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**THE CONCH REPUBLIC: ONE HUMAN FAMILY**

Conchs (pronounced ‘conk’ as in ‘bonk,’ not ‘contsh’ as in ‘bunch’) are people who were born and raised in the Keys. It’s a rare title to achieve. Even transplants can only rise to the rank of ‘freshwater Conch.’ You will hear reference to, and see the flag of, the Conch Republic everywhere in the islands, which brings us to an interesting tale.

In 1982 US border patrol and customs agents erected a roadblock at Key Largo to catch drug smugglers and illegal aliens. As traffic jams and anger mounted, many tourists disappeared. They decided they’d rather take the Shark Valley Tram in the Everglades, thank you very much. To voice their outrage, a bunch of fiery Conchs decided to secede from the USA. After forming the Conch Republic, they made three declarations (in this order): secede from the USA; declare war on the USA and surrender; and request $1 million in foreign aid. The roadblock was eventually lifted, and every February, Conchs celebrate the anniversary of those heady days with nonstop parties, and the slogan 'We Seceded Where Others Failed'.

Today the whole Conch Republic thing is largely a marketing gimmick, but that doesn’t detract from its official motto: ‘One Human Family.’ This emphasis on tolerance and mutual respect has kept the Keys’ head and heart in the right place, accepting gays, straights, and peoples of all colors and religions.
Nancy Forrester’s Secret Garden  GARDEN
(www.nfsgarden.com; 518 Elizabeth St; admission adult/child $10/5; 10am-3pm) Nancy, a local artist and fixture of the Keys community, invites you to join lunch (but no cell phones!) into her oasis of lush palms, orchids and chatty rescued parrots and macaws. Although the place is called a secret garden, Nancy considers it to be a piece of art in and of itself – the last acre of undeveloped (although tended and cared for by human hands) natural space within the heart of Key West. Children are welcome and seem to love the local bird life.

Museum of Art & History at the Custom House  MUSEUM
(305-295-6616; www.kwahs.com/customhouse; 281 Front St; adult/child $9/5; 9:30am-4:30pm) There is an art at the end of the road, and you’ll find the best at this museum, which is worth a look-see if only for its gorgeous home – the grand Customs House, long abandoned until its impressive renovation in the ’90s. The permanent display includes massive portraits and some of the best showcases of international (particularly Caribbean) art in the region.

Fort East Martello Museum & Gardens  MUSEUM
(305-296-3913; www.kwahs.com/martello.htm; 3501 S Roosevelt Blvd; adult/child $9/5; 9:30am-4:30pm) This old fortress was built to resemble an old Italian Martello-style coastal watchtower (hence the name), a design that quickly became obsolete with the advent of the explosive shell. Now the fort serves a new purpose: preserving the old. There’s historical memorabilia, artifacts, the folk art of Mario Sanchez, and ‘junk’ sculptor Stanley Papio, who worked with scrap metal and a genuinely creepy haunted doll.

The most haunted thing in Key West, ‘Robert the doll’ is a terrifying child’s toy from the 19th century who reportedly causes much misfortune to those who question his powers. Honest, he looks like something out of a Stephen King novel; see www.roberthedoll.org for more information.

Studies of Key West  GALLERY
(TSKW; 305-296-0458; www.tskw.org; 600 White St; 10am-6pm) This nonprofit showcases about a dozen artists’ studios in a gallery space located in the old Armory building, which includes a lovely sculpture garden. Besides its public visual-arts displays, TSKW hosts readings, literary and visual workshops, concerts, lectures and community discussion groups. Essentially, it has become the accessible heart of this city’s enormous arts movement, and offers a good point-of-entry for visitors who want to engage in Key West’s creative scene but don’t have a clue where to start.

Little White House  HISTORIC BUILDING
(305-294-9911; www.trumanlittlewhitehouse.com; 111 Front St; adult/child 5-12yr/senior $16/5/14; 9am-4:30pm, gardens 7am-6pm) While we were first tempted here by the prospect of a Lego-sized model of the presidential digs, this is in fact the spot where ex-president Harry S Truman used to vacation when he wasn’t molding post-WWII geopolitics. It’s lushly luxurious and open only for guided tours, although you are welcome to walk around the surrounding botanical gardens for free. Plenty of Truman’s possessions are scattered about, but the real draw is the guides, who are intensely intelligent, quirky and helpful.

San Carlos Institute  HISTORIC BUILDING
(305-294-3887; www.institutosancarlos.org; 516 Duval St) Founded in 1871 by Cuban exiles, the San Carlos is a gorgeous building constructed in classical Spanish mission style. The current structure dates from 1924. The interior is spackled with Cuban tile work, Italian marble and statues of Cuban luminaries, including Jose Marti, who spoke here and dubbed the building ‘La Casa Cuba.’ Today the building serves as library, art gallery, lecture hall and theater; it is only open during events, but these occur often.

Bahama Village  NEIGHBORHOOD
Bahama Village was the old Bahamian district of the island, and in days past had a colorful Caribbean feel about it, which is resurrected a bit during the Goombay Festival (p178). But today the village is pretty gentrified; many areas have been swallowed into a sort of pseudo-Duval periphery zone, but some retain Caribbean charm. At the Office of the Secretary General of the Conch Republic (305-296-0213; www.conchrepublic.com; 613 Simonton St) you can see all manner of Conch Republic tat – flags, souvenirs and such.

Casa Antigua  HISTORIC BUILDING
(314 Simonton St; 10am-6pm) This was technically Hemingway’s first house in Key West and where he wrote A Farewell to Arms, but it isn’t all that notable, except for a lush garden in the back and a very kitschy ‘guided tour’. For $2, they’ll let you into a peaceful green area out the back, where a recorded...
tape lays down the history of the Casa at the volume God uses whenever he says anything that begins with ‘Let there be.’

Strand Building

(527 Duval St) The historic Strand Theater was one of Key West’s great old-time movie houses, and it was used as a theater in the 1993 film *Matinee*. Today it’s a Walgreens pharmacy, but the exterior is as romantic as ever.

**Key West Lighthouse**

(305-294-0012; www.kwahs.org/visit/lighthouse-keepers-quarters; 938 Whitehead St; adult/
student over 7yr/senior $10/5/9; ☀ 9:30am-4:30pm) You can climb up 88 steps to the top of this lighthouse, built in 1846, for a decent view. But honestly, it’s just as enjoyable to gaze up at the tower from the leafy street below.

**Southernmost Point**
(cnr South & Whitehead Sts) The most photographed spot on the island, this red-and-black buoy isn’t even the southernmost point in the USA (that’s in the off-limits naval base around the corner). This is the most overrated attraction in Key West.

**Activities**

**Beaches**
Key West is not about beach going. In fact, for true sun ‘n’ surf, locals go to Bahia Honda whenever possible. Still, the three city beaches on the southern side of the island are lovely and narrow, with calm and clear water. **South Beach** is at the end of Simon-ton St. **Higgs Beach**, at the end of Reynolds St and Casa Marina Ct, has barbecue grills, picnic tables and a big crowd of gay sunbathers. **Smathers Beach**, further east off Roosevelt Blvd, is more popular with jet-skiers, parasailers, teens and college students. The best local beach, though, is at Fort Zachary Taylor; it’s worth the admission to enjoy the white sand and relative calm.

**Boating**
Check www.charterboatkeywest.com for a directory of the many fishing and cruising charters offered in Key West.

**🌟 Jolly Rover**
(CRUISE (☎ 305-304-2235; www.schoonerjollyrover.com; cnr Greene & Elizabeth Sts, Schooner Wharf; cruise $45) This outfit has a gorgeous, tanbark (reddish-brown) 80ft schooner that embarks on daily sunset cruises under sail. It looks like a pirate ship and has the cannons to back the image up.

**Reelax Charters**
(KAYAKING (☎ 305-304-1392; www.keyskayaking.com; MM 17 Sugarloaf Key Marina; all inclusive kayak trips $240) Get your paddle on and slip silently into the surrounding mangroves and mudflats of the Lower Keys with Andrea Paulson. Based on Sugarloaf Key.

**Diving & Snorkeling**
The diving is better in Key Largo and Biscayne National Park, but there is some decent wreck diving near Key West.

The website of the **Keys Association of Dive Operators** (www.divekeys.com; 3128 N Roosevelt Blvd) is a clearing house for information on diving opportunities in the islands; it also works on enhancing local sustainable underwater activities by creating artificial reefs and encouraging safe boating and diving practices.

**Captain’s Corner**
(DIVING (☎ 305-296-8865; 631 Greene St; snorkel/scuba from $40/75) This dive outfit leads snorkeling and scuba trips to local reefs and wrecks.

**Dive Key West**
(DIVING (☎ 305-296-3823; www.divekeywest.com; 3128 N Roosevelt Blvd; snorkel/scuba from $60/75) Largest dive facility on the island. Wreck-diving trips cost $135 with all equipment and air provided.

**✈️ Tours**
Worth noting is Sharon Wells’ Walking & Biking Guide to Historic Key West, a booklet of self-guided walks available free at inns and businesses around town, written by a local. See www.walkbikeguide.com.

**Old Town Trolley Tours**
(TOUR (☎ 888-910-8687; www.trolleytours.com/key-west; adult/child under 13yr/senior $30/free/27; ☀ tours 9am-4:30pm; ☀) These tours are a great introduction to the city. The 90-minute, hop-on, hop-off narrated tram tour starts at Mallory Sq and makes a loop around the whole city, with nine stops along the way. Trolleys depart every 15 to 30 minutes from 9am to 4:30pm daily. The narration is hokey, but you’ll get a good overview of Key West history.

**Conch Tour Train**
(TOUR (☎ 305-294-5161; www.conchtourtrain.com; adult/child under 13yr/senior $30/free/27; ☀ tours 9am-4:30pm; ☀) Run by the same company as Trolley Tours, this one seats you in breezy linked train cars with no on/off option. Offers discounted admission to sights such as the Hemingway House.

**Historic Key West Walking Tour**
(WALKING TOUR (☎ 800-844-7601; www.trustedtours.com; 1 Whitehead St; adult/child $18/9) A walking tour that takes in some of the major architecture and historical sights of the island. Takes about two hours. You need to book in advance.

**Key West Ghost & Mysteries Tour**
(TOUR (☎ 305-292-2040; www.keywestghostandmysteries.com; tours depart from Duval & Caroline; adult/child $18/10; ☀ tours 9pm) A playfully
creepy ghost tour that’s as family friendly as this sort of thing gets – in other words, no big chills or pop-out screaming.

**Original Ghost Tours**
(305) 294-9255; www.hauntedtours.com; adult/child $15/10; 8pm & 9pm) Stories about souls who inhabit locations that include about half the bars and hotels on the island.

**Festivals & Events**

Contact the **Key West Art & Historical Society** (305-295-6616; www.kwahs.com) to get the skinny on upcoming studio shows, literary readings, film festivals and the like.

**Key West Literary Seminar**
(www.kwls.org) Now in its 23rd year, draws top writers from around the country each January (although it costs hundreds of dollars to attend).

**Robert Frost Poetry Festival**
Held in April. Contact the Studios of Key West (p173) for details.

**Hemingway Days Festival**
(www.flakey.com/hemingwaymedia) Held in late July, brings parties, a 5km run and an Ernest look-alike contest.

**WomenFest**
(www.womenfest.com) Nothing says dignified sexiness like this festival, held in early September, which attracts thousands of lesbians who just want to party.

**Fantasy Fest**
(www.fantasyfest.net) You gotta see this festival held throughout the week leading up to Halloween. It’s when all the inns get competitive about decorating their properties, and everyone gets decked out in the most outrageous costumes they can cobble together (or decked down in daring body paint).

**Goombay Festival**
(www.goombay-keywest.org) Held during the same out-of-control week as Fantasy Fest, this is a Bahamian celebration of food, crafts and culture.

**Parrot Heads in Paradise Convention**
(www.phip.com/motm.asp) This festival in November is for, you guessed it, Jimmy Buffett fans (rabid ones only, naturally).

**Sleeping**

There’s a glut of boutique hotels, cozy B&Bs and four-star resorts here at the end of the USA, so sleepers won’t want for accommodations. Although some options are more central than others, the fact is that any hotel in Old Town will put you within walking distance of all the action. Most hotels in Key West are gay friendly.

**Caribbean House**
(305-296-0999; www.caribbeanhousekw.com; 226 Petronia St; summer $89, winter $119-139; $) This is a cute, canary-yellow Caribbean cottage in the heart of Bahama Village. The 10 small, brightly colored guest rooms aren’t too fancy, but it’s a happy, cozy bargain.

**Key West Youth Hostel & Seashell Motel**
(305-296-5719; www.keywesthostel.com; 718 South St; dm from $54, motel r from $95; $) This isn’t our favorite hostel, but it’s about the only youth-oriented budget choice on the island. That said, both dorms and motel rooms are overpriced.

**Mango Tree Inn**
(305-293-1177; www.mangotree-inn.com; 630 Southard St; $150-200; $) This down-to-earth B&B offers a courtyard pool and elegant accommodation in a number of airy rooms, each decorated with swathes of tropical-chic accoutrement, from rattan furniture to flowering hibiscus. Rates are a deal for this kind of downtown proximity.

**Seascape Tropical Inn**
(305-296-7776; 800-765-6438; www.seascape-tropicalinn.com; 420 Olivia St; r $184-250; $) Had this B&B existed back in the day, Hemingway could have stumbled into it after one of his epic drinking binges – it’s within spitting distance of his old house. Now you can crash in one of six rooms, appointed with cool, airy interiors and warm accents like floral comforters and high-thread-count sheets.

**Old Town Manor**
(305-292-2170; www.oldtownmanor.com; 511 Eaton St; $185-275; $) While it bills itself as a B&B (and breakfast is included), the Old Town feels more like a boutique operation that offers a wide variety of rooms – 14, to be exact, spread amid lush gardens. The digs come in the usual tropically inspired palette, but they’re a little more subdued than the Keys norm. Service is friendly and on point.

**L’Habitation**
(305-293-9203; www.lahabitation.com; 408 Eaton St; r $159-199; $) A beautiful, classical Keys cottage with cute rooms kitted
out in light tropical shades, with lamps that look like contemporary art pieces and Skittles-bright quilts. The friendly bilingual owner welcomes guests in English or French. The front porch, shaded by palms, is a perfect place to stop and engage in Keys people-watching.

Avalon Bed & Breakfast

B&B $$

(305-294-8233, 800-848-1317; www.avalonbnb.com; 1317 Duval St; r low season $109-229, high season $189-289; ) A restored Victorian house on the quiet end of Duval blends attentive service with stately old ceiling fans, tropical lounge-room rugs and black-and-white photos of old-timey Key West. Music the cat likes to greet guests at reception.

Southernmost Inn

B&B $$

(305-292-1450, 800-749-6696; www.thesouthernmostinn.com; 525 United St; r incl breakfast $161-318; ) Southernmost Inn is one of the best low-key lesbian resorts in the country, an intimate garden of tropical relaxation and enticing rooms scattered across a few cottages. A clothing-optional backyard pool bar is the perfect spot for alfresco happy hour, or to enjoy your breakfast.

Chelsea House

HOTEL $$

(305-296-2211; www.historickeywestinn.com/the-inns/chelsea-house; 707 Truman Ave; r low season $150-210, high season from $250; ) This perfect pair of Victorian mansions beckons with large, vaulted rooms
and big, comfy beds, with the whole shebang done out in floral (but not dated) chic. The old-school villa ambience clashes – in a nice way – with the happy vibe of the guests and the folks at reception.

★ Tropical Inn  
**BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$$**  
(305-294-5349; www.tropicalinn.com; 812 Duval St; r $175-360; P ♥♥♥ ) The Tropical Inn has excellent service and a host of individualized rooms spread out over a historic home property. Each room comes decked out in bright pastels and shades of mango, lime and seafoam. A delicious breakfast is included and can be enjoyed in the jungly courtyard next to a lovely sunken pool. Two attached cottages offer romance and privacy for couples.

Curry Mansion Inn  
**HOTEL $$$**  
(305-294-1894; www.currymansion.com; 511 Caroline St; r winter $240-365, summer $205-310; P ♥♥♥ ) In a city full of stately homes, the Curry Mansion is especially handsome. It has all the elements of an aristocratic American home, from plantation-era Southern colonnades to a New England–style widow’s walk and, of course, bright Floridian rooms with canopy beds. Enjoy bougainvillea and breezes on the veranda.

Mermaid & the Alligator  
**GUESTHOUSE $$$**  
(305-294-1894; www.kwmermaid.com; 729 Truman Ave; r winter $278-348, summer $188-248; P ♥♥♥ ) It takes a real gem to stand out amid the jewels of Keys hotels, but this place, located in a 1904 mansion, more than pulls off the job. Each of the nine rooms is individually designed with a mix of modern comfort, Keys Colonial ambience and playful laughs.

La Mer & Dewey Hotel  
**BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$$**  
(305-296-6577, 800-354-4455; www.southernmostresorts.com/lamer; 504 South St; r from $400; P ♥♥♥ ) Nineteen rooms are spread across two historic homes, one Victorian, the other fashioned like an old-school Keys cottage. Inside, rooms come equipped with a mix of European twee antiques and sleek, modern amenities. Your porch looks out onto the Atlantic Ocean, whose breezes make for nice natural air-conditioning (not that you can’t crank up the air-con in your room).

Santa Maria  
**BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$$**  
(305-600-5165; www.santamariasuites.com; 1401 Simonton St; r $300-450; P ♥♥♥ ) The Santa Maria looks like it took a wrong turn on South Beach, Miami, and ended up in Key West. It’s an incredible deco edifice – the exterior should be studied by architecture students looking to identify the best of deco design, and the interior rooms call to mind a 1950s leisure lounge. The courtyard holds one of the finest hotel pools in Key West.

Gardens Hotel  
**HOTEL $$$**  
(305-294-2661, 800-526-2664; www.gardenhotel.com; 526 Angela St; r & ste low season $165-425, high season $325-665; P ♥♥♥♥ ) Would we be stating the obvious if we mentioned this place has really nice gardens? In fact, the rooms are located in the Peggy Mills Botanical Gardens, which is a longish way of saying ‘tropical paradise.’ Inside, Caribbean accents mesh with the fine design to create a sense of green-and-white-and-wood space that never stops massaging your eyes.

Lighthouse Court Inn  
**BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$$**  
(305-294-5229, 800-549-4430; www.historickeywestinns.com/the-inns/lighthouse-court; 902 Whitehead St; r from $250; P ♥♥♥♥ ) The rooms at the Lighthouse Court, which sits near the Hemingway House, may be the most handsomely appointed in town. They’re elegant in their simplicity, with the warm earth tones of hardwood floors set off by just the right amount of tropical breeziness and cool colors. Affiliated with Historic Key West Inns.

Silver Palms Inn  
**BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$$**  
(800-294-8783; www.silverpalmsinn.com; 830 Truman Ave; r from $319; P ♥♥♥♥ ) Royal blues, sweet teats, bright limes and lemon-yellow color schemes douse the interior of this boutique property, which also boasts bicycle rentals, a saltwater swimming pool and a green certification from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Overall, the Silver Palms offers more of a modern, large-hotel vibe with a candy-colored dose of Keys tropical attitude.

Cypress House  
**HOTEL $$$**  
(305-294-5229, 800-549-4430; www.cypresshousekw.com; 601 Caroline St; r $219-329; P ♥♥♥♥ ) This plantation-like getaway has wraparound porches, leafy grounds, a secluded swimming pool and spacious, individually designed bedrooms with four-poster beds. It’s lazy, lovely luxury in the heart of Old Town, and one of the most extensively renovated and converted mansions we’ve seen anywhere. We recommend
rooms in the Main House and Simonton House over the blander guest studios.

**Truman Hotel**  
**HOTEL $$$**  
(866-487-8626; www.trumanhotel.com; 611 Truman Ave; r low season $195-285, high season $240-365; P $) Close to the main downtown drag, these playful rooms have huge flat-screen TVs, kitchenettes, zebra-print throw rugs and mid-century modern furniture. The bouncy, fluff-erific beds will serve you well after the inevitable Duval Crawl (which is only steps from your door). Make sure to grab a drink by the courtyard pool at the bar, which looks as if it's carved from a sin- 

**Merlin Inn**  
**GUESTHOUSE $$$**  
(800-549-4430; www.historickeywestinns.com/the-inns/merlin-guesthouse; 811 Simonton St; r $179-$209; P $) Set in a secluded garden with a pool and elevated walkways, everything here is made from bamboo, rat-tan and wood. Throw in the rooms' high ceilings and exposed rafters, and this hotel oozes Colonial-tropical atmosphere. 

**Key Lime Inn**  
**HOTEL $$$**  
(800-549-4430; www.historickeywestinns.com; 725 Truman Ave; r from $240; P $) These cozy cottages are all scattered around a tropi-cal hardwood backdrop. Inside, the blissfully cool rooms are greener than a jade mine, with wicker furniture and tiny flat-screens on hand to keep you from ever leaving.

**Six Toed Cat**  
**AMERICAN $$**  
(305-292-3318; 823 Whitehead St; mains $8-16; 8:30am-5pm) Simple, fresh and filling breakfast and lunch fare is served here within spitting distance of the Hemingway House (p172) and the restaurant is indeed named for the author's six-toed felines. A lobster Bene-dict with avocado should satisfy the day's protein needs, but if you're here for lunch, don't miss the lovely fried shrimp sandwich. 

**Pierogi Polish Market**  
**EASTERN EUROPEAN $$**  
(305-292-0464; 1008 White St; mains $5-10; 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun; P $) The Keys have an enormous seasonal population of temporary workers largely drawn from Central and Eastern Europe. This is where those workers can revisit the motherland, via pierogis, dumplings, blinis (pancakes) and a great sandwich selection. Although it's called a Polish market, there's food here that caters to Hungarians, Czechs and Russians (among others). 

**Glazed Donuts**  
**BAKERY $$**  
(305-294-9142; 420 Eaton St; under $4; 7am-3pm; P $) Doughnuts make the world go round, and you'll find some excellent examples of the genre at this cute bakery. The flavors are as eccentric as Key West itself, and reflect seasonal ingredients; past examples include blood orange marmalade, mango his-biscus and (of course) piña colada. 

**Seven Fish**  
**SEAFOOD $$**  
(305-296-2777; www.7fish.com; 632 Olivia St; mains $17-20; 6-10pm Wed-Mon) This simple yet elegant, tucked-away spot is the perfect place for a romantic feast of homemade gnocchi or sublime banana chicken. All that said, the way to go here is to order the fresh fish of the day. The dining room might be the Zen-est interior in the islands. 

**Camille's**  
**FUSION $$**  
(305-296-4811; www.camilleskeywest.com; 1202 Simonton St; breakfast & lunch $4-13, dinner $15-25; 8am-3pm & 6-10pm; P $$) This healthy and tasty neighborhood joint is a locals' place where players on the high school softball team are served by friends from science class. For 20 years the homey facade of Camille's has concealed a sharp kitchen that makes a mean chicken-salad sandwich,
Point5 Lounge  
**FUSION $**
(305-296-0669; 915 Duval St; small plates $5-17; 5pm-midnight, to 2am Sat) Like stylish Nine One Five (p182) (which it sits above), Point5 is a good deal more sophisticated than the typical Duval St trough or frozen drink hall. It trades in fusion-style tapas with global influence, ranging from Asia (Vietnamese chicken rolls) to Europe (a cone of Belgian-style frites) to Key West shrimp. All, consequently, delicious.

Le Bistro/Croissants de France  
**FRENCH $**
(305-294-2624; 816 Duval St; mains $12-16; 7:30am-10pm) France comes to this lovely bistro, with predictably tasty results. *Galettes* (buckwheat crepes) are filled with scallops, shrimp and crab or smoked salmon and sour cream; sweet crepes come with grilled bananas, rum and almonds, or you can just enjoy a hearty cheeseburger or some brie and baguette. The setting perfectly seizes Key West's cozy-Caribbean-chic aesthetic.

El Siboney  
**CUBAN $**
(900 Catherine St; mains $8-16; 11am-9:30pm) This is a rough-and-ready Cuban joint where the portions are big and there's no screwing around with high-end embellishment or bells and whistles. It's rice, it's beans, it's shredded beef and roasted pork, it's cooked with pride, and it's good.

Café Solé  
**FRENCH $$$**
(305-294-0230; www.cafesole.com; 1029 Southard St; dinner $20-34; 5:30-10pm) Conch carpaccio with capers? Yellowtail fillet and foie gras? Oh yes. This locally and critically acclaimed venue is known for its cozy back-porch ambience and innovative menus, cobbled together by a chef trained in southern French techniques who works with island ingredients. The memory of the anchovies on crostini makes us smile as we type.

Nine One Five  
**FUSION $$$**
(305-296-0669; www.915duval.com; 915 Duval St; mains $18-34; 6pm-midnight) Classy Nine One Five certainly stands out from the nearby Duval detritus of alcoholic aggression and tribal band tattoos. Ignore all that and enter this immaculate, modern and elegant space, which serves a creative, New American-dips-into-Asia menu. It's all quite rich – imagine a butternut squash and stone crab claws with Dijon mayo and a macadamia-crusted yellowtail.

Blue Heaven  
**AMERICAN $$$**
(305-296-8666; http://blueheavenkw.homestead.com; 729 Thomas St; dinner $17-35; 8am-4pm, until 2pm Sun & 5-10:30pm daily) Proof that location is nearly everything, this is one of the quirkiest venues on an island of oddities. Customers (and a local chicken) flock to dine in the spacious courtyard where Hemingway once officiated boxing matches. This place gets packed with customers who wolf down Southern-fried takes on Keys cuisine. Restrooms are in the adjacent former brothel.

Cafe Marquesa  
**FUSION $$$**
(305-292-1244; 600 Fleming St; mains $32-43; 6-10pm) The Marquesa is as elegant as it gets in Key West, all white tablecloths, candle light and good food to boot. The mains are French-inspired with little Floridian and Asian twists, like ginger-and-coconut-crusted mahi-mahi and a rack of Australian lamb served over a bed of couscous.

**Drinking & Nightlife**

Basically, Key West is a floating bar. ‘No, no, it’s a nuanced, multilayered island with a proud nautical and multicultural history!’ bzzzt! Floating bar. Bars close around 3am.

**Green Parrot**
**BAR**
(www.greenparrot.com; 601 Whitehead St; 10am-4am) The oldest bar on an island of bars, this rogues’ cantina opened in the late 19th century and hasn’t closed yet. The owner tells you the parachute on the ceiling is ‘weighed down with termite turds,’ while defunct business signs and local artwork litter the walls and the city attorney shows off her new tattoo at the pool table.

Men: check out the Hieronymus Bosch-like painting *Proverbidioms* in the restroom, surely the most entertaining urinal talk-piece on the island.

**Porch**
**BAR**
(www.theporchkw.com; 429 Caroline St; 10am-2am Mon-Sat, noon-2am Sun) If you’re getting tired of the frat-boy bars on the Duval St strip, head to the Porch. It’s a friendly little artisan beer bar that’s more laid back (but hardly civilized) than your average Keys watering hole. The knowledgeable bartenders will trade jokes with you and point you in the right direction for some truly excellent brew.
**Garden of Eden** BAR
(224 Duval St; ☛ 12pm-4am) Go to the top of this building and discover Key West’s own clothing-optional drinking patio. Lest you get too excited, cameras aren’t allowed, most people come clothed, and those who do elect to go *au naturel* are often...erm...older.

**Captain Tony’s Saloon** BAR
([www.captonyssaloon.com](http://www.captonyssaloon.com); 428 Greene St; ☛ 10am-2am) Propagandists would have you believe the nearby megabar complex of Sloppy Joe’s was Hemingway’s original bar, but the physical place where the old man drank was right here, the original Sloppy Joe’s location (before it was moved onto Duval St and into frat-boy hell). Hemingway’s third wife (a journalist sent to profile Papa) seduced him in this very bar.

**Irish Kevin’s** BAR
(211 Duval St; ☛ 10am-2:30am) One of the most popular megabars on Duval, Kevin’s has a pretty good entertainment formula pinned down: nightly live acts that are a cross between a folk singer, radio shock jock and pep-rally cheerleader. The crowd consistently goes ape-poo for acoustic covers of favorites from around 1980 onward mixed with boozy, Lee Greenwood-esque patriotic exhortations.

Basically, this is a good place to see people do tequila shots, scream ‘Livin’ on a Prayer’ at the top of their lungs and then inexplicably sob into their Michelobs. It’s more fun than it sounds.

**Hog’s Breath** BAR
(400 Front St; ☛ 10am-2am) A good place to start the infamous Duval Pub Crawl, the Hog’s Breath is a rockin’ outdoor bar with good live bands and better cold Coronas.

**Entertainment**

**La Te Da** CABARET
([www.lateda.com](http://www.lateda.com); 1125 Duval St) While the outside bar is where locals gather for mellow chats over beer, you can catch high-quality drag acts – big names come here from around the country – upstairs at the fabulous Crystal Room on weekends. More low-key cabaret acts grace the downstairs lounge.

**Virgilio’s** JAZZ
([www.virgilioskeywest.com](http://www.virgilioskeywest.com); 524 Duval St) This bar-stage is as un-Keys as they come, and frankly, thank God for a little variety. This town needs a dark, candlelit martini lounge where you can chill to jazz and get down with some salsa, and Virgilio’s handsomely provides. Enter on Applerouth Lane.

**Red Barn Theatre** THEATER
( %305-296-9911; [www.redbarntheatre.org](http://www.redbarntheatre.org); 319 Duval St) An occasionally edgy and always fun, cozy little local playhouse.

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**GAY & LESBIAN KEY WEST**

Key West’s position at the edge of the USA has always attracted artists and eccentrics, and with them a refreshing dose of tolerance. The island had one of the earliest ‘out’ communities in the USA, and though less true than in the past, visiting Key West is still a rite of passage for many LGBT Americans. In turn, this community has had a major impact on the local culture. A great resource for local gay life in the area is The Key West Business Guild, which represents many gay-owned businesses; the guild is housed at the **Gay & Lesbian Community Center** ( %305-292-3223; [www.glcckeywest.org](http://www.glcckeywest.org); 513 Truman Ave), where you can access free internet on one of the few computers, plus pick up loads of information.

Gay nightlife, in many cases, blends into mainstream nightlife, with everybody kind of going everywhere these days. But the backbone of the gay bar scene can be found in a pair of cruisey watering holes that sit across the street from one another, **Bourbon St Pub** (724 Duval St) and **801 Bourbon Bar** ([www.801bourbon.com](http://www.801bourbon.com); 801 Duval St), and can be summed up in five words: drag-queen-led karaoke night. For a peppier scene that includes dancing and occasional drag shows, men and women should head to **Aqua** ( %305-294-0555; [www.aquakeywest.com](http://www.aquakeywest.com); 711 Duval St) while women will enjoy the backyard pool bar at the women’s inn Pearl’s Rainbow (p179).
Tropic Cinema  
(877-761-3456; www.tropiccinema.org; 416 Eaton St) Great art-house movie theater with deco frontage.

Waterfront Playhouse  
(305-294-5015; www.waterfrontplayhouse.com; Waterfront Playhouse, Mallory Sq) Catch high-quality musicals and dramas from the oldest-running theater troupe in Florida. The season runs November through April.

Shopping

Bright and breezy art galleries, excellent cigars, leather fetish gear and offensive T-shirts – Key West, what don’t you sell?

Montage  
(512 Duval St; 9am-10pm) Had a great meal or wild night at some bar or restaurant in the Keys? Well, this store probably sells the sign of the place (along with lots of Conch Republican tat), which makes for a nice souvenir.

Peppers of Key West  
(602 Greene St; 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) For a downright shopping party, you should bring your favorite six-pack with you into this store and settle in at the tasting bar, where the entertaining owners use double entendres to hawk seriously mouth-burning hot sauces, like their own Right Wing Sauce (use liberally).

Bésame Mucho  
(315 Petronia St; 10am-6pm, to 4pm Sun) This place is well stocked with high-end beauty products, eclectic jewelry, clothing and housewares.

Leather Master  
(415 Appleyouth Lane; 11am-10pm, to 11pm Fri & Sat, noon-5pm Sun) Besides the gladiator outfits, studded jockstraps and S&M masks, they do very nice bags and shoes here. Which is what you came for, right?

Frangipani Gallery  
(1102 Duval St; 10am-6pm) One of the best galleries of local artists’ work.

Haitian Art Co  
(305-296-8932; 605 Simonton St; 10am-7pm) Haitian arts and crafts.

Information

Bank of America  
(305-296-1204; 510 Southard St)