

Florida Keys & Key West ... Laid-Back and Legendary

FLORIDA KEYS — First-time visitors to the Florida Keys comment almost immediately on the island chain's unique laid-back atmosphere that seems to be a world away from big cities and theme parks.

A necklace of islands that begins just south of Miami, the Florida Keys are connected by the Overseas Highway's 42 bridges — one almost seven miles long — over the Atlantic Ocean, Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. In 2009, the famed highway was designated an All-American Road, the highest recognition possible under the National Scenic Byways program established by the United States Congress.

The Florida Keys are divided into five regions: Key Largo, Islamorada, Marathon, Big Pine and the Lower Keys, and Key West. Each region has its own special flavor, attractions including historic museums and cultural offerings, flora, fauna, restaurants featuring local seafood and other specialties, fishing, diving, watersports and boutique-type shopping experiences.

Vistas of the Keys are dominated by emerald-green harbors, turquoise seas, nodding palms, rustling pines and olive-green mangroves. Sharing this eco-paradise are white herons, roseate spoonbills, pelicans, sea gulls, ospreys and countless underwater creatures.

The coastal waters of the entire 125-mile island chain, including its shallow water flats, mangrove islets and coral reefs, have been designated the [Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary](#).

Key Largo

The longest island of the Keys chain, [Key Largo](#) shares its name with the famous movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall — portions of which were filmed there. Bogart's Key Largo connection still is evident today as visitors can take a ride on the [African Queen](#), the actual boat he skippered in the movie of the same name.

But Key Largo's star attraction is [John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park](#), the first underwater preserve in the United States, incorporated within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. These protected areas feature more than 50 varieties of delicate corals and more than 600 species of fish.

Key Largo also is home to the Spiegel Grove, a retired U.S. Navy ship that is one of the largest vessels in the world ever purposely scuttled to create an artificial reef.

Islamorada

[Islamorada](#) is the centerpiece of a group of islands called the "purple isles." Legend says Spanish explorers named the area from "morado," the Spanish word for purple — either for the janthina janthina, a violet sea snail found in the subtropical waters, or for the purple bougainvillea flowers in the area.

Known as the Sport-Fishing Capital of the World, Islamorada is heralded for its angling diversity and features the Keys' largest fleet of offshore charter and shallow-water "backcountry" boats.

Numerous high-profile figures, including past U.S. presidents and British royalty, have visited Islamorada to take part in the world's best sport fishing and to compete in acclaimed fund-raising fishing tournaments.

Islamorada also is known for [Theater of the Sea](#), the second oldest marine mammal facility in the world, and the popular [Morada Way Arts & Cultural District](#).

Marathon

Home to the Seven Mile Bridge, [Marathon](#) is a renowned boating and family destination and is centrally located at the heart of the Florida Keys between Key Largo and Key West.

Marathon also is home to [Crane Point](#), a 63-acre land tract that is one of the most important historical and archaeological sites in the Keys. This ecological and cultural treasure contains evidence of pre-Columbian and prehistoric Bahamian artifacts, and was once the site of an entire Indian village. Attractions include an intriguing museum, the historic Adderley House and a series of nature trails.

In addition, Marathon features [Dolphin Research Center](#), one of five Keys facilities that provide visitors an opportunity to swim and interact with the intelligent mammals. Marathon also features [The Turtle Hospital](#) a veterinary center dedicated solely to treating sea turtles that is open to the public for tours.

And while it is discouraged to feed marine life in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, visitors can swim and feed the fishes at [Florida Keys Aquarium Encounters](#) in Marathon.

A drive across the modern-day Seven Mile Bridge, (actually 6.79 miles long), one of the longest segmental bridges in the world, leads to the Lower Keys. But visitors shouldn't pass up the chance to explore [Pigeon Key](#), a small island below the middle of the historic Old Seven Mile Bridge, that is accessible by ferry from a visitor center at the west end of Marathon.

Pigeon Key once housed the workers who built Henry Flagler's Florida Keys Over-Sea Railroad in the early 1900s. While the rest of the Keys have evolved through the years, this tiny island has remained essentially unchanged and is now a national historic treasure complete with a museum chronicling the railroad's construction.

Big Pine Key and the Lower Keys

The sheer sweep of the Straits of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico is readily seen from the Bahia Honda Bridge. [Bahia Honda State Park](#), whose beach repeatedly has been named one of the top 10 in the United States by travel studies, is a prime example of the Lower Keys' pristine beauty.

The Lower Keys are noted for Looe Key Reef, rated by many as among the most spectacular shallow-water dive sites. To the west of Looe Key, the 210-foot island freighter Adolphus Busch Sr. rests on the ocean floor as an artificial reef, providing additional habitat for marine species as well as an intriguing site for divers.

[Big Pine Key](#) also features a national refuge for miniature [Key deer](#), tropical forest and even a few alligators. Popular nature tours, many by kayak, offer unforgettable opportunities to view migratory and wading birds and the unique flora and fauna of this tranquil natural area of the Keys.

Key West

[Key West](#) is the final stop on the Overseas Highway, where the land ends and meets the sea amid 19th-century charm and contemporary attractions. Continental America's southernmost city, situated closer to Cuba than to Miami, is characterized by quaint palm-studded streets, century-old mansions and a relaxed citizenry of self-styled "conchs" (pronounced *konks*).

It has been said that the idiosyncratic architecture and laid-back atmosphere of this small, 2-by-4-mile island probably have nurtured the talents of more writers per capita than any other city in the country. Chief among them are legendary talents Ernest Hemingway, whose home is a [museum](#), and Tennessee Williams, subject of a permanent [exhibit](#). Literally scores of published authors reside in Key West either full- or part-time, and the island's flourishing artistic community is evidenced by the many galleries exhibiting artwork in varying styles and mediums.

Key West is home to other treasures as well. Longtime resident Mel Fisher, a legendary treasure hunter who died in 1998, recovered approximately \$450 million in gold and silver from the Nuestra Señora de Atocha, a 17th-century Spanish galleon that sank 35 miles southwest of Key West. Fisher, who spent 16 years searching for the shipwreck, established the [Mel Fisher Maritime Museum](#) where visitors can view and learn about the riches of the Atocha and other area shipwrecks including the galleon Santa Margarita.

At day's end in Key West, crowds gather at Mallory Square to experience the nightly ["sunset celebration,"](#) a tradition that locals share with visitors. While musicians, jugglers, acrobats and other performers provide entertainment, the sun sinks slowly below the horizon as sunset cruise boats sail by in Key West Harbor.

Dining opportunities in the island city are as enticing as the sunset. Key West's culinary influences and offerings are diverse, but most restaurants feature great local seafood such as shrimp, Florida lobster, fish and stone crab claws, considered a renewable resource because of the crabs' ability to re-grow harvested claws. Some species, such as stone crab claws and lobster, are subject to seasonal harvest restrictions. A slice of Key lime pie, the Keys' signature dessert, is a heavenly end to a meal.

The nightlife in Key West can be lively and exciting. The "Duval Crawl" is a popular phrase used to describe fun-seekers' evening jaunts up and down the island's main street to sample numerous taverns and entertainment offerings including live music and popular drag shows.

For more culturally oriented visitors, theater is available at several playhouses, and diverse musical organizations offer periodic concerts.

And when their Keys experience concludes, visitors can fly from Key West International Airport directly to domestic or international hubs including Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, other Florida cities, Atlanta and Charlotte, N.C. year-round. Roundtrip, direct flights also are normally available to several northeastern cities during the winter and spring. For information on airlines serving Key West, see keywestinternationalairport.com.

Florida Keys Marathon Airport, located at MM 52 bayside, is served by several charter airlines and is home to two full-service fixed-base operators that offer private and charter aircraft accessibility.

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