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

FLORIDA KEYS — The Florida Keys, the continental United States' southernmost island chain, is characterized by a balmy subtropical climate, breathtaking natural beauty and a uniquely laid-back atmosphere that seems to be a world away from big cities and theme parks.

Beginning just south of Miami, 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 and museums, historical and cultural offerings, flora, fauna, restaurants with local seafood and other specialties, fishing, diving, watersports and boutique-type shopping experiences.

The islands are connected by the Florida Keys Overseas Highway's 42 bridges — one almost seven miles long — over the Atlantic Ocean, Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

Visitors to the Keys will find vistas of blue sea and sky, edged with tall palm trees and olive green mangroves. Sharing this eco-paradise are white herons, roseate spoonbills, pelicans, sea gulls, ospreys and countless underwater creatures including sea turtles.

The coastal waters of the entire 125-mile-long island chain, including its shallow-water flats, mangrove islets and coral reefs, are designated the [Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary](#), which protects the continental United States' only living barrier coral reef.

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, now incorporated within the National Marine Sanctuary. These protected areas feature more than 50 varieties of delicate corals and more than 600 species of fish.

Pennekamp, located at mile marker 102.5, offers a variety of water-related activities including scuba, snorkeling and glass-bottom boat excursions to the coral reef. Key Largo also boasts a number of off-park dive charter companies that conduct dive trips. A few even feature underwater weddings, where the entire wedding party gets wet as the happy couple ties the knot.

Newlyweds can choose to remain submerged for their honeymoon at an underwater hotel in Key Largo, spending the night with full amenities among the marine life of the Keys.

Key Largo also is home to the Spiegel Grove, a retired U.S. Navy ship that is one of the world's largest vessels 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.

The Keys boast more sport-fishing world records than any other fishing destination on the planet, according to the International Game Fish Association. Here anglers can find sailfish, marlin, dolphin (the fish, not the mammal), kingfish, snapper, barracuda and grouper in the ocean. Tarpon, bonefish, permit, redfish and other species thrive in the shallow coastal waters.

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 world's second oldest marine mammal facility, 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 Native American village. Attractions include an intriguing museum, the historic Adderley House and several nature trails. Among them is one that passes by the [Marathon Wild Bird Center](#), a rescue and rehabilitation center for sick or injured birds.

In addition, Marathon features [Dolphin Research Center](#), one of several Keys facilities that provides 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 with 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 world's longest segmental bridges, 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 and accessible by ferry from a visitor center near the Faro Blanco Lighthouse.

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 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](#) is a prime example of the Lower Keys' natural 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 and 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's been said that the unique architecture and laid-back atmosphere of this small, 2-by-4-mile island probably have nurtured and inspired 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, also the subject of a [museum](#). 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 world-renowned shipwreck salvager who died in 1998, led efforts to recover 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 fresh local seafood such as shrimp, Florida spiny 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 an ideal 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 a wide variety of concerts.

And when their Keys experience concludes, visitors can fly from Key West International Airport directly to domestic or international hubs via Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando and other Florida cities. Nonstop flights also are available to and from a number of major U.S. cities. For information on airlines serving Key West, see keywestinternationalairport.com.

Florida Keys Marathon International Airport, located at mile marker 52 bayside, is served by several charter airlines and is home to full-service fixed-base operators offering private and charter aircraft accessibility.

Florida Keys visitor information: fla-keys.com or 1-800-FLA-KEYS

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