



## FLORIDA KEYS – FAST FACTS

### **Brief History of the Florida Keys**

Residents of Florida Keys share a diverse ancestry that is perhaps responsible for the liberal attitudes prevalent there today. Indians, pirates, farmers, fishermen, amongst others, have all left their distinct mark on the Keys.

Since they were for a long time accessible only by boat, the Florida Keys were only sparsely populated until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This changed with the completion of Henry Flagler's Overseas Railway in the early 1910s. Flagler, a major developer of Florida's Atlantic coast, extended his Florida East Coast Railway down to Key West with an ambitious series of over-sea railroad trestles. The railroad reached Key West in 1912, and remained a lifeline of commerce for the area until the labor Day hurricane of 1935 destroyed much of it.

Built on the remaining roadbed today is one of the longest bridges in the world, the Seven Mile Bridge. This impressive construction connects Vaca Key (Marathon) in the Middle Keys to Bahia Honda in the Lower Keys. True to its name, it is seven miles or about 11km long, and passes Pigeon Key, where a section of the old bridge allows access to the small island.

In 1982 the US border patrol established a series of roadblocks, stopping vehicles coming from the Keys onto mainland USA. As a tongue-in-cheek protest some residents of Key West staged a secession from the USA, and declared the "Conch Republic" a micronation in its own right. Although never a real secessionist movement many in Key West continue to identify with it, and celebrate Conch Independence Day annually on April 23.

Ernest Hemingway established his first American home in Key West. He fished in the Dry Tortugas waters and drank in the famous bar Sloppy Joe's. The bar is now well known for its annual Hemingway lookalike competition.

### **Climate**

Wherever you are right now, chances are the weather is better in the Florida Keys. That's true even on a summer day. The hottest it's ever been in Key West is 97° F (36° C), and that was way back in 1880. At the peak of summer, the average high is 89° F (32° C). We don't have any super-highways or urban sprawl to radiate the sun's heat. Not only that, but our islands are surrounded by cooling ocean waters.

Wise Floridians from the mainland flock to the Keys on steamy weekends because the air is usually a few degrees cooler here. The water temperature might be in the mid-80s (30° C) but the sea is nevertheless refreshing for swimming, snorkelling or diving. In the winter, cold fronts can bring frost to mainland Florida, but you can be sure there will be no frost here. The all-time record low for Key West is 41° F (5° C) set in 1981.

During these winter months, it almost never rains. By late May, however, the season's first thundershowers start popping up. Rarely do they stick around long enough to spoil an entire day. You might be wondering about our hurricane season. Thankfully, direct hits are rare for us. The last major hurricane to strike the Keys was hurricane Georges in September 1998. The hurricane season peaks in mid-September and technically runs through November. Storms are almost unheard of after late October.

#### Average Water Temps for Key West

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
° F	69	70	75	79	83	86	87	87	86	82	76	72
° C	21	21	24	26	28	30	31	31	30	28	24	22

#### Average High Air Temps for Key West

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
° F	75	75	79	82	85	88	89	89	88	84	80	76
° C	24	24	26	28	29	31	32	32	31	29	27	24

#### Average Low Air Temps for Key West

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
° F	65	66	69	72	76	79	80	79	79	76	71	67
° C	18	19	21	22	24	26	27	26	26	24	22	21

All-Time Record High for Key West 97° F (36° C) July, 19, 1880

All-Time Record Low for Key West 41° F (5° C) Jan. 13, 1981

#### Average Rainfall

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
inches	2.0	1.8	1.7	1.8	3.5	5.1	3.6	5.0	5.9	4.4	2.9	2.0
cm	5.1	4.6	4.3	4.6	8.9	12.9	9.1	12.7	14.9	11.2	7.4	5.1

The Keys are in the subtropics between 24 and 25 degrees north latitude. The climate and environment are closer to that of the Caribbean than South Florida.

The Upper Keys islands are remnants of large coral reefs, which became fossilized and exposed as sea level declined. The Keys has the third largest coral reef in the world, behind the Great Barrier Reef, and New Caledonia. The Lower Keys are composed of sandy-type accumulations of limestone grains produced by plants and marine organisms. The natural habitats of the Keys are upland forests, inland wetlands and shoreline zones.

The climate is subtropical and the Keys are the only frost-free place in Florida. There are two main "seasons": hot, wet, and humid from about June through October, and somewhat drier and cooler weather from November through May. Many plants grow slowly or go dormant in the dry season.

The Keys have distinctive plant and animals species, some found nowhere else in America, as the Keys define the northern extent of their ranges. The climate also allows many imported plants to thrive. Some plants that seem to define the Keys are not native, including coconut palm, mango trees, bougainvillea, hibiscus, and Papaya.

### **Tropical cyclones / Hurricanes**

A hurricane is a tropical storm with sustained winds of at least 74 mph. Hurricane season in the Florida Keys is June 1 to November 30. The Keys are regularly threatened by tropical storms and hurricanes, leading to evacuations to the mainland.

The Keys evacuation procedure relies primarily on the two-lane US Highway 1 that runs the length of the Keys, from Key West to Miami. Estimates for the time of a total evacuation of the Keys range from 12-24 hours. The increase in evacuation efficiency was indicated in the increase to building permit allocation in the Keys in 2005, which followed the local government's reduction of time estimates for total evacuation.

The Florida Keys government work closely with the National Hurricane Centre in Miami, to develop evacuation zones and timings. The NHC alerts communities about the threat of hurricanes in two ways. The first is a hurricane watch, which is issued for a coastal area when there is a threat of hurricane conditions within 24 to 36 hours. The second is a hurricane warning, which is issued when hurricane conditions are expected over a coastal area in 24 hours or less. Watches and warnings are issued in a similar fashion for tropical storms. When issuing these watches and warnings, the NHC must consider conflicting societal impacts, but safety of people in the area is of paramount importance. Computer models that predict the track of a hurricane are improving all the time, and the NHC is at the cutting edge of the technology for monitoring and predicting weather conditions. Up to the minute information is available of the NHC website, [www.nhc.noaa.gov](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov)

### **Scenery**

The Florida Keys are an archipelago or cluster of about 1700 islands in the extreme southeast of the United States. The Keys extend from the south-eastern Florida peninsula near Miami, run south and then curve west to Key West, and out to the uninhabited Dry Tortugas. The islands lie in the Florida Straits, dividing the Atlantic Ocean to the east from the Gulf of Mexico to the west, and creating Florida Bay. At the nearest point, the southern tip of Key West is just 90 miles (145 km) from Cuba.

No natural part of the Florida Keys is higher than 20 feet above sea level, so the spectacular sunsets can be appreciated from anywhere on the islands. The tropical waters offer excellent opportunities for diving, snorkelling, sailing, fishing and other water-based activities.

### **Key Largo**

From mainland Florida, Key Largo is the first of the Florida Keys, and bills itself as the 'Dive Capital of the World'. It is sandwiched between the watery wilderness of the Everglades National Park to the West and the fish covered coral formations of America's only living coral barrier reef to the East. The Everglades make Key Largo a premier destination with kayakers, birders and other eco-tourists., whereas the coral reef attracts those keen on scuba diving and game-fishing.

### **Islamorada**

With seas brimming with the world's most sought after game fish (including sailfish, tuna, permit tarpon, and bonefish), it is no surprise that Islamorada bills itself as the 'Sportfishing Capital of the World'. Others may prefer the company of dolphins, or just to watch their acrobatic displays from the shore.

### **Marathon**

A quaint tropical city at the heart of the Florida Keys, Marathon is perhaps the ideal destinations for those wishing to make visits to the whole of the Florida Keys. Marathon boasts a modern airport, luxury accommodation, numerous restaurants and extensive shopping facilities. Some of the waters have been set aside purely for eco-tourism and fish viewing by divers and snorkelers. Marathon is home to the Dolphin Research Centre and the Turtle Hospital, which are working to preserve two of Florida's most famous marine creatures. Marathon is rich in history, and there are plenty of museums for those looking to learn.

### **Lower Keys**

If you want a real break for the bustle of overcrowded cities, then the Lower Keys are the place for you. The Lower Keys, including Big Pine Keys, is connected to Marathon by the famous seven mile bridge. Bahia Honda was voted Best Beach in the USA by Dr Beach ([www.drbeach.org](http://www.drbeach.org)), and stands in the esteemed hall of fame with other beaches (mostly from Hawaii) that have also done so. Big Pine Key serves as home to some 300 tiny Key Deer, a rare white tail deer that roams the unspoiled tropical wilderness in peace.

### **Key West**

This is the Southernmost of the Florida Keys at a mere 90 miles from Cuba. Key West is rich in history, with property titles dating back to the Kings of Spain. The Sunset Celebration at Mallory Dock, always attracts a large crowd, as do the street artists and entertainers that continue the excitement after the sun has slipped below the horizon. Ernest Hemingway is one amongst many famous residents from Key West's history, and the sea-faring tradition that dominates his literature also dominate aspects of the Key , in particular the renovated Historic Seaport district. Key West has a major gay scene, and stages the extravagant Fantasy Fest in October.

### **Dry Tortugas**

70 miles further west from Key West, and accessible only by seaplane or ferry, Dry Tortugas is a cluster of islands in the heart of the Gulf of Mexico. The area is famous for its marine and bird life, and its legends of pirates and sunken gold. As well as the sheer beauty of the unspoiled natural habitat of the islands, the Dry Tortugas are also steeped in history. The majestic Fort Jefferson, a 19<sup>th</sup> century coastal fort, dominates the island, and is open for exploration during daylight hours.

<b>Florida Keys</b>	
<b>Upper Keys</b>	Key Largo, Islamorada, Tavernier, Plantation Key, Matecumbe Key
<b>Middle Keys</b>	Craig Key, Fiesta Key, Long Key, Conch Key, Duck Key, Grassy Key, Deer Key, Key Vaca, Boot Key, Pigeon Key
<b>Lower Keys</b>	Bahia Honda, West Summerland Key, No Name Key, Big Pine Key, Torch Key, Little Torch Key, Ramrod Key, Summerland Key, Cudjoe Key, Sugarloaf Key, Saddlebunch Keys, Big Coppitt Key, Boca Chica Key, Key Haven, Key West
<b>Outlying islands</b>	Dry Tortugas, Marquesas Keys

### **Nature and Wildlife**

To protect the area's ecosystem, in 1990 Congress established the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, covering nearly 3,000 square nautical miles of coastal waters. Both on land and in water, the Keys' fragile environments support rich and diverse biological communities.

Over 30 state and federally listed animal species can be found in the habitats protected by the Florida Keys Wildlife and Environmental Area, many of which cannot be found elsewhere.

### ***The Turtle Hospital***

Found in Marathon, this is the only state-certified veterinary in the world for sea-turtles. Relying on the work of local volunteers, the turtle hospital caters for all varieties of ailments, nursing injured turtles back to health and releasing them back into the wild as soon as possible. The hospital offers guided tours and explanations of their work to visitors. [www.theturtlehospital.org](http://www.theturtlehospital.org)

### ***The Dolphin Research Centre***

The DRC is a not-for-profit education and research facility based in Grassy Key. The facility is home to a family of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins and California sea-lions, and is open to the public seven days a week. The experience includes interaction with dolphins, and an opportunity to swim and play with them. There are a variety of programmes which offer different levels of interaction and experiences to cater for all demands.

### ***Theater of the Sea***

This is one of the oldest marine mammal facilities in the world. The lagoon was originally a quarry that supplied rock for the Flagler railroad, and was established as a park in 1946. The park offers a variety of interactive programmes to visitors, including swimming with dolphins, sea lions or stingrays. For non-swimmers or children the park has a shallow pool in which it is possible to meet the animals.

[www.theaterofthesea.com](http://www.theaterofthesea.com)

### **Romance Rating**

Florida Keys has all the ingredients for a perfect romantic honeymoon.

**Seclusion:** Many of the islands are secluded and offer the intimacy that many newlyweds desire of a honeymoon. Beaches are not crowded, and many resorts are specifically geared at couples looking for seclusion and romance, for example Cheeca Lodge and Spa or Little Palm Island.

**Sunsets:** Spectacular, the perfect end to the perfect day for newlyweds.

**Facilities:** Unlike many secluded tropical destinations, the quality of facilities and of service does not suffer in the Florida Keys as a result of its remoteness. Facilities are superb for holidays and for wedding planning.

### **Currency**

Local currency is the United States Dollar (\$).

### **Time Difference**

Florida is 5 hours behind GMT

## Getting There

- From the UK there are no direct flights to the Florida Keys, but all must go through one of the major US gateway airports, of which the most convenient is Miami International Airport (MIA).
- Miami is c. 4500 miles from the UK.
- Flights to Miami are available from London or Manchester, and take approximately 9 hours.
- Direct flights are available with British Airways, American Airlines, Continental Airlines, Virgin Atlantic and United Airlines.
- From Miami flights are available to Key West International Airport (EYW).
- Key West, at the far West of the Florida Keys, is only 150 miles from Miami, so many it is as convenient to fly direct to Miami and to drive through the Keys from there.
  
- Car hire is widely available with major companies. [www.dollar.com](http://www.dollar.com), [www.hertz.com](http://www.hertz.com).
- Hiring a car is probably the best way to get around in the Keys, as it affords you the freedom to visit the whole extent of the keys from a central base.
- Prices range upwards from about £150 per week.  
*Car hire rules and requirements:*
  - All drivers need to be in possession of a full valid drivers licence (copies are not accepted).
  - All drivers must be at least 21 years of age or over.
  - Licence must be carried at all times whilst driving, and if not a photo licence then must be accompanied by a passport.

## Getting Around

- Highway US 1 stretches between Key West and Miami, offering a mostly two-lane, high grade road throughout the Keys.
- The Highway includes the famous 7 Mile Bridge at Marathon.
- Roads are generally in good condition.
- Public transport is good, and there are many coach services that run between Miami and Key West. There are various drop off / pick up points along the way, but a coach trip from Key West to Miami will take approximately 3 hrs 30 mins, and will cost about \$60. For more info, see [www.transfloridian.com](http://www.transfloridian.com), [www.floridakeysshuttle.com](http://www.floridakeysshuttle.com), [www.greyhound.com](http://www.greyhound.com).

City	Mile Marker	Approx. Miles from Miami
Key Largo	90 - 118	58
Islamorada	63 – 90	76
Marathon	47 - 63	111
Big Pine Key	4 - 47	128
Key West	0 - 4	159

## Health Issues

The Water is safe to drink.

There are no compulsory or advised vaccinations.

## Nightlife

Key West is a hive of activity at night, with many differing bars and restaurants. **Sloppy Joe's** (one of Hemingway's favourites) is a good place to go to breath in the keys atmosphere and listen to

some live music. **Schooner Wharf** "A last little piece of Key West". located on the Historic Seaport also offers great views and good music.

### **Food and wine**

- The Florida Keys offer a fantastic variety of restaurants, but with the bounty of fresh seafood available it's not surprising that the cuisine of the Keys is largely built around the catch of the day.  
- Local specialities include the "Conch" – a large mollusc with a flaring pink shell; Stone Crab Claws; Key West Pink Shrimp; catch of the day from amongst Yellowtail, Snapper, Grouper, Yellowfin Tuna, and Dolphin (the fish not the mammal). Also the famous Key Lime Pie, made from the small, yellow and bracingly tart key limes.

All along the keys there are a vast variety of restaurants, be it casual 'Keys' dining or enjoying some more refined establishments.

### **Further information**

Tourist board website details, [www.fla-keys.co.uk](http://www.fla-keys.co.uk)

Other general sites:

[www.floridakeys.com](http://www.floridakeys.com)

[www.thefloridakeys.com](http://www.thefloridakeys.com)

[www.florida-keys.fl.us](http://www.florida-keys.fl.us)

[www.keysdirectory.com](http://www.keysdirectory.com)

[www.keystravel.info](http://www.keystravel.info)

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For press enquiries please contact:

Lisa Cooper / Kate Burgess-Craddy

KBC PR & Marketing Ltd

01825 763636

[lisa.cooper@kbc-pr.com](mailto:lisa.cooper@kbc-pr.com) / [kate.burgess@kbc-pr.com](mailto:kate.burgess@kbc-pr.com)

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