



Laid back and Legendary

First-time visitors to the Florida Keys comment almost immediately on the island chain's laid-back atmosphere that is unique and a world away from big cities and theme parks. It's the kind of ambiance that lured famed novelist Ernest Hemingway to reside in Key West from 1929 to 1939. The subtropical island's lush environment and colourful residents provided Hemingway substantial creative inspiration. Key West was his home when he created some of his most famous works including "For Whom the Bell Tolls," "To Have and Have Not" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro". Hemingway's former residence, inhabited by descendants of his six-toed cats, today is a public museum that honours his literary prowess and the affection he had for his Key West lifestyle.

A necklace of islands that begins just south of Miami, the Florida Keys are connected by the Overseas Highway's 43 bridges — one almost seven miles long — over the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. The area is divided into five regions including Key Largo, Islamorada, Marathon, Big Pine Key and Key West. Each region has its own special flavour, attractions including historic museums, flora, fauna, seafood restaurants, fishing, diving, water sports and unique, boutique-type shopping experiences.

Vistas of the Keys are dominated by emerald-green lagoons, deep-blue 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 gave its name to 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 see the African Queen, the actual boat Bogart 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 — and the adjacent Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary. These two refuges, part of the Keys' marine sanctuary, feature 55 varieties of delicate corals and almost 500 different species of fish.

Pennekamp Park, located at mile marker 102.5, is open from 8 a.m. to dusk and offers a variety of water-related activities including scuba, snorkelling and glass-bottom boat excursions to the coral reef. Key Largo also boasts a number of off-park dive charter companies that conduct dive strips — and a few even feature underwater weddings, where the entire wedding party gets wet as bride and groom tie the knot. After the wedding reception, newlyweds can choose to remain submerged for their honeymoon at an underwater motel in Key Largo, where anyone can spend the night with full amenities among the marine life of the Keys.

Islamorada

Islamorada is the centrepiece of a group of islands called the “purple isles.” Spanish explorers named the area “morada,” the Spanish word for purple — either for the violet sea snail, *Janthina janthina*, found on the seashore here, or for the purple bougainvillea flowers found 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 boats and shallow-water “backcountry” boats.

Numerous celebrities and even former President George Bush visit Islamorada annually to compete in a number of celebrity fund-raising fishing tournaments. The Keys boast more sport fishing world records than any other fishing destination in the world, according to the International Game Fish Association. Anglers can find sailfish, marlin, dolphin (the fish, not the mammal), kingfish, snapper, barracuda and grouper in the ocean. Tarpon, bonefish, redfish and other species can be found in shallow coastal waters.

Marathon

Home to the Seven Mile Bridge, Marathon is the heart of the Florida Keys and is centrally located between Key Largo and Key West. Marathon also is home to Crane Point Hammock, a 63.5-acre land tract that is one of the most important historical and archaeological sites in the Keys. Crane Point contains evidence of pre-Columbian and prehistoric Bahamian artefacts, and was once the site of an entire Indian village. The Museums of Crane Point include the Museum of Natural History of the Florida Keys and the Florida Keys Children’s Museum.

Marathon also features the Dolphin Research Center (DRC), one of five Keys facilities that provide visitors an opportunity to swim and interact with the intelligent mammals. Reservations for the special dolphin encounter programs at DRC and other facilities — including Dolphins Plus and Dolphin Cove in Key Largo, Theater of the Sea in Islamorada and Hawk’s Cay Resort — must be made in advance and there are strict guidelines regarding the interaction session.

Marathon is accessible by air with Florida Coastal Airlines providing service to and from Miami and Key West. Florida Keys Marathon Airport also features a large general aviation facility for private pilots.

A drive across Seven Mile Bridge (actually 6.79 miles long), the longest segmental bridge 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 old Seven Mile Bridge, that is accessible from a visitor centre at the west end of Marathon. Pigeon Key once housed the workers who built Henry Flagler’s railroad in the early 1900s. While the rest of the Keys have evolved with the years, this tiny key has essentially remained unchanged and is now a national historic treasure complete with a museum chronicling the construction of the Seven Mile Bridge.

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 was named one of the top 10 in the United States by several travel studies, is a prime example of the Lower Keys’ pristine beauty.

Big Pine Key is noted for the Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary, rated by many as among the most spectacular shallow-water dive experiences to be found. Just to the west of Looe Key, the 210-foot island freighter Adolphus Busch Senior rests on the bottom of the ocean as an artificial reef providing additional habitat for marine species as well as another site for divers.

Big Pine Key also is 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 the unique flora and fauna of this 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 20th-century attractions. The ambiance of continental America's southernmost city — which is situated closer to Cuba than Miami — is embedded in its quaint, palm-studded streets, historic hundred-year-old gingerbread mansions and a relaxed citizenry of self-styled "Conchs" (pronounced konks).

It has been said that the idiosyncratic architecture and the laid-back atmosphere of this small, two-by-four-mile island probably have nurtured the talents of more writers per capita than any other city in the country. More than 100 published authors reside, full- or part-time, in Key West, and the island is noted for its artistic community with a number of galleries exhibiting artwork in varying styles and mediums.

Key West is home to other treasures as well. Long-time resident Mel Fisher, a legendary treasure hunter who died in December 1998, recovered more than \$400 million in gold and silver from the ship *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, a 17th-century Spanish galleon which sank 45 miles west of Key West. Fisher, who spent 16 years of his life searching for the shipwreck, established the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society Museum where visitors may view, touch and even buy some of the riches of the *Atocha* and *Santa Margarita*.

At day's end in Key West, visitors gather at Mallory Square to experience the daily "sunset celebration" — a tradition that Key Westers share with visitors. While musicians, jugglers, mimes and other performers provide entertainment, the sun sinks slowly below the horizon as sunset cruise boats sail by in Key West Harbour.

Dining opportunities in the island city are as enticing as the sunset. Cuisine choices are varied and unique, but most restaurants feature great area seafood such as shrimp, Florida lobster, conch chowder, local fish and stone crab claws. Key lime pie is a heavenly end to an exquisite meal.

The nightlife in Key West can be exciting and diverse. 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. For more culturally oriented visitors, theatre is available at several playhouses and the Key West Symphony offers periodic concerts.

When your Keys experience concludes, you can fly from (and to as well) Key West International Airport directly back to international hubs in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, Tampa, and Atlanta Georgia. Airlines serving Key West are American Eagle, USAirways, Delta/ASA/ComAir, Continental Connection/Gulfstream or Cape Air.

For further information please visit www.fla-keys.co.uk

- ENDS -

Media Enquiries:

Sarah Shenston/ Kate Burgess at KBC PR & Marketing on 01825 76 36 33
Sarah.shenston@kbc-pr.com / kate.burgess@kbc-pr.com.