

Road Trippin' through the Florida Keys: America's Caribbean

Story & Photos by
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My destination? The Florida Keys, the southernmost island chain in the continental U.S. My goal? To experience the best the Keys has to offer, from bottom to top.

My focus? Activities on, around, and under the turquoise waters surrounding the Keys, with a smattering of history thrown into the mix, and, of course, sampling as many varieties of seafood and Key lime pie as possible.

While many visitors to the Keys fly into Miami, rent a car and start their journey south, I flew into Key West International Airport where I met a group of friends to begin a brief exploration of the irreverent “capital” of the Conch Republic, where about a third of the island chain’s population is concentrated. Our road trip would take us north to Key Largo and cover 108 miles, before we made our way to Miami International Airport and our flights home.

DAYS 1 & 2 – Key West

The Key Lime Inn, one of six historic inns in the center of Old Town, just two blocks from Duval Street, was an ideal location for my first visit to the most southern point in the continental U.S.

My late afternoon arrival gave me just enough time to settle into my cozy cottage and change clothes for a casual dinner at The Stoned Crab at Ibis Bay Resort, which features fresh-off-the-boat stone crab, Key West pink shrimp and local fish.

We skipped dessert to take a nighttime guided tour of Ibis Bay on stand-up paddleboards or clear-bottom kayaks, the first of many water-based activities we sampled.

Breakfast at Blue Heaven in the historic Bahamas Village neighborhood was the perfect place to begin our first full day in Key West. Dishes like lobster eggs Benedict and shrimp and grits are served up in the same building that hosted cock fighting, gambling and boxing matches refereed by Ernest Hemingway.

Before hitting the high points of this unconventional city, we headed to Fort Zachary State Park where we first checked out the beach, then toured Fort Zachary, one of a series built in the mid-1800s to defend the nation’s southeastern coastline.

At the top of my list of “must-sees” was the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum, where 40 to 50 polydactyl cats, which appear to have a thumb on



The southern tip of the Continental U.S.A

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Inside Ernest Hemingway's studio in Key West

their paw, can be found inside the house and roaming the grounds. All are descendants of Hemingway's six-toed cat, Snowball.

After learning about the author's storied life and the time he spent in Key West throughout the 1930s from one of the knowledgeable guides, I walked across the street to explore the Key West Lighthouse, built in 1825 after the U.S. Navy established a base in Key West. Visitors who climb its 88 steps to the top are rewarded with views stretching to the sea.

From there, I boarded Old Town Trolley Tours' Hop on Hop off bus, which makes 13 stops covering Key West's major landmarks, to continue my sightseeing.

I hopped off at Mel Fisher's Maritime Museum where some of the \$450 million in gold and silver bars and coins, emeralds, and other jewels he recovered from the 17th century Spanish galleons the Atocha and the Santa Margarita in 1985 are on display.



Faro Blanco Lighthouse in Marathon

A major photo stop is at Mile Marker 0, site of the oversized buoy marking the Southernmost Point in the continental U.S. While Miami is 150 miles northeast, from here it is only 90 miles to Cuba.

Dinner at Hogfish Bar & Grill on nearby Stock Island was on the agenda that evening, where we sampled the Keys delicacy, hogfish, a diver-caught mild-flavored fish, prepared in several ways.

We made sure we were in Mallory Square for sunset, a tradition no visitor to Key West should miss. Street performers, musicians and vendors selling everything from sea sponges to shell jewelry contribute to the offbeat atmosphere. My travel companions and I gathered along the waterfront with

hundreds of tourists and locals to watch for the fleeting phenomena of light refraction known as the "green flash" as the sun slipped below the horizon.

Day 3 – Bahia Honda State Park and Marathon Key

Our first destination off the Overseas Highway was at Mile Marker 37 — Bahia Honda State Park — where we enjoyed a two-hour yoga and meditation session on paddleboards at the park's Loggerhead Beach, led by Serenity Eco Therapy's owner, "Mermaid" Sarah. If mastering yoga postures on the board doesn't excite, try renting a kayak or booking a snorkeling tour at the park's concession.

We crossed the famous Seven Mile Bridge to arrive at Grassy Key Outpost at Mile Marker 58 near Marathon for lunch. Its gourmet menu items, wine, beer and provisions have been the "go-to oasis" in the Middle Keys for generations. Jimmy Buffet, President Truman and famed angler Zane Grey are among the luminaries it has hosted over the years.

While the guys in our group headed to Otherside Boardsports, at Mile Marker 59.3, to try wakeboarding or kiteboarding at Cable Park, a seven-acre saltwater tidal lake, the gals chose to tour The Turtle Hospital in Marathon at Mile Marker 48.5. Opened in 1986, more than 1,500 injured or ill sea turtles have been rescued and rehabbed at the facility.

We checked into our evening's lodging, the Faro Blanco Resort and Yacht Club, Mile Marker 48.2 in Marathon, where we dined bayside on Florida lobster and Key lime pie overlooking the Faro Blanco lighthouse, a landmark

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Sunset at Mallory Square in Key West

since the 1950s. The Hyatt Place-affiliated resort includes 125 rooms and suites and a 74-slip marina, where charter fishing and dive excursions can be arranged.

Day 4 – Big Pine Key and Islamorada

Our Keys road trip was timed to coincide with the 32nd Annual Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival, held the Saturday following July 4th. Hundreds of snorkelers and divers converge in boats on Looe Key Reef, off Big Pine Key, to explore the world's third-largest living barrier reef while enjoying a unique sub-sea concert staged by local radio station WWUS 104.1 FM. Thanks to speakers suspended under the boats, my diving companions and I could hear music while swimming among the fish.

Amara Cay Resort, a 110-suite beachfront resort in Islamorada, was home for our last two nights in the Keys. We were happy to stay on-site that evening for Italian cuisine with a tropical twist at Oltremare Ristorante.

Day 5 - Islamorada



Key lime pie at Sundowners restaurant

The next morning, we boarded a 65-foot deep-sea vessel at Robbie's Marina, Mile Marker 77.5, in Islamorada -- known as the Sport Fishing Capital of the World -- for a half-day of party boat fishing, which included bait, tackle and fishing license. Afterward, our catch was filleted and delivered to the marina restaurant's kitchen, where it was prepared and served with two side dishes of our choice.

For our last night in the Keys, we chose to go a bit more gourmet. Chef Michael's, on Islamorada at Mile Marker 81.7, features at least 10 different types of fish, all caught that day, including its specialty, hogfish.

Day 6 – Key Largo

We couldn't leave the Keys without stopping by John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park in Key Largo, Mile Marker 102.5. It is the first undersea park in the U.S., created in 1963 and was made a National Marine Sanctuary in 1975.

We walked through the 30,000-gallon saltwater aquarium in the visitor center before boarding the park's 65-foot, glass-bottom catamaran, Spirit of Pennekamp, for a 2 hour excursion to the coral reef.

Before heading to Miami International Airport, we had time for a quick lunch at Sundowner's in Key Largo, ending our road trip with one last sweet memory. Key lime pie, of course!

To learn more, visit Fla-Keys.com.

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Check out Joseph's U.S. adventures airing now on Public Television stations throughout the U.S. and Canada.