



nileGUIDE

ALL YOU NEED TO PLAN YOUR PERFECT TRIP



Bob Jagendorf

Learn To Dive In The Florida Keys

Florida Keys, 7 Days

Table of contents:

Guide Description 2

Itinerary Overview 3

Daily Itineraries 5

Florida Keys Snapshot 15

Guide Description



AUTHOR NOTE: The ocean is a world of color and quiet, exploration and discovery. One of nature's greatest wonders is a living coral reef, and the only one in the continental United States parallels the 126-mile length of the Florida Keys.

What better place to learn to scuba dive?

For entry-level, recreational diver certification, plan to allow three to five days for training.

Remember: once you're certified, you are certified for LIFE!

Itinerary Overview

things to do
restaurants
hotels
nightlife

Day 1 - Florida Keys

DAY NOTE: Okay, so you've decided to try a new sport - in one of the HOTTEST destinations for world-class diving. My suggestion: train at a location in the Middle Keys, to allow for day trips east and west of Marathon, around classtime.

Important considerations when researching professional dive operations include determining value versus price, asking what rental equipment is included in the cost and whether or not you receive personalized, one-on-one service and training. Cheaper price does not always mean the same quality experience. Scuba diving training is a sport for life, why would you scrimp on that?



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

Lush tropical resort spans 10 acres overlooking Florida Bay

Day 2 - Florida Keys

DAY NOTE: Crack open those books and launch yourself into an exciting new sport. Be one with the fishes!



Seven-Mile Bridge

World's longest segmental bridge, an icon of Marathon



Old Seven Mile Bridge

Historic landmark listed on the National Register, integral part of Henry Flagler Railroad construction.



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

Lush tropical resort spans 10 acres overlooking Florida Bay

Day 3 - Florida Keys

DAY NOTE: A day at the pool, then on to the ocean for training ... you'll likely get a lunch break, or be finished early afternoon. Head to No Name Key for some world-famous pizza for a surface interval you won't forget.



No Name Pub

World famous deep dish pizza, fish dip and sandwiches



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

Lush tropical resort spans 10 acres overlooking Florida Bay

Day 4 - Florida Keys



Dockside Lounge

Young, hip, live-aboards



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

Lush tropical resort spans 10 acres overlooking Florida Bay

Day 5 - Florida Keys



Braza Lena

A Brazilian steakhouse



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

Lush tropical resort spans 10 acres overlooking Florida Bay

Day 6 - Florida Keys

DAY NOTE: Congratulations! By today you should have received your certification card. Welcome to the world of scuba.



Hurricane Grill

Good prices, good food



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

Lush tropical resort spans 10 acres overlooking Florida Bay

Day 7 - Florida Keys

DAY NOTE: Start the day off right with a hearty breakfast at Hungry Tarpon - and order the dish of the same name! Today is about a sense of accomplishment and appreciation of the natural surrounds - you made it, you are a diver! Take in the sites before you head home, and make note of the coral reefs and Shipwreck Trek to make your NEXT trip to the Keys all about scuba diving!

Itinerary Overview

things to do
restaurants
hotels
nightlife



The Hungry Tarpon

Tropical Florida flavors with traditional American seafood



Sombrero Beach

Palm-lined, remote beach, with clear waters, near Seven-Mile Bridge



Fish Tales Market and Eatery

From hot dogs to barbecued shrimp



Museum of Natural History of the Florida Keys

Discover the Middle Keys' early history



Looe Key Tiki Bar

Local hot spot with live music, drinks and food



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

Lush tropical resort spans 10 acres overlooking Florida Bay

Day 1 - Florida Keys

QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: Okay, so you've decided to try a new sport - in one of the HOTTEST destinations for world-class diving. My suggestion: train at a location in the Middle Keys, to allow for day trips east and west of Marathon, around classtime.

Important considerations when researching professional dive operations include determining value versus price, asking what rental equipment is included in the cost and whether or not you receive personalized, one-on-one service and training. Cheaper price does not always mean the same quality experience. Scuba diving training is a sport for life, why would you scrimp on that?

contact:

tel: +1 305 743 3500 / +1 800
226 2621

fax: +1 305 743 2670

<http://www.bananabay.com/>

location:

4590 Overseas Highway
Marathon FL 33050

1

Banana Bay Resort & Marina

DESCRIPTION: Banana Bay sprawls over 10 acres, offering a pleasantly alluring atmosphere that's popular with honeymooners and others of a romantic bent. You can even get married here. Learn-to-sail sessions take place at this resort that also sports a whirlpool, pool, dock, tiki bar, volleyball, beach, fitness room, water sports, and fishing and sailing charters. A Cabana Restaurant is open for lunch, dinner and tropical drinks. Rick's Watercraft can get you out on the waters in powerboats that measure in at 17 to 25 feet. © wcities.com

MY NOTE: Moderately priced, and centrally located, Banana Bay sits on the Bay, has a pool and tiki hut for evening relaxation in between your days as a dive student.



editor

Day 2 - Florida Keys

QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: Crack open those books and launch yourself into an exciting new sport. Be one with the fishes!

contact:
tel: +1 800 352 5397

location:
Mile Marker 47 to Mile Marker 40
Marathon FL 33050

1 Seven-Mile Bridge

DESCRIPTION: Although this isn't a traditional attraction, it's the only way you're going to get to Key West, and it's also one of the wonders of Florida. While it falls a bit short of seven miles, this amazing span bridges the Middle and Lower Keys and has nearly 40 expansion joints. As you cross, with the Gulf of Mexico on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, you can see the Old Seven Mile Bridge, now on the National Register of Historic Places. © wcities.com



editor

contact:
tel: +1 800 352 5397

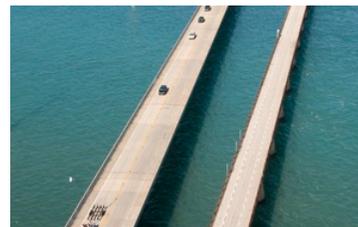
location:
Mile Marker 47, U.S 1
Pigeon Key FL 33050

2 Old Seven Mile Bridge

DESCRIPTION: When the new Seven Mile Bridge was constructed, the old bridge was left in place. It's become a favorite spot for fishing, jogging, rollerblading, cycling, sunset viewing and just general absorption of atmosphere. It's even been used as a location for many action films, and most recently was featured as the final destination in the CBS smash hit, 'Amazing Race.' You can get to the bridge at MM 47, by Knight's Key and walk out (2.1 miles) to Pigeon Key, which is, in itself, a fascinating place to get a look at Keys history. There is no admission fee on the bridge, but if you walk over to Pigeon Key, a minimal yet well-worth-it donation is accepted for the Pigeon Key Foundation.

TRAVEL TIP: A celebration to honor the historic railroad, lauded as the most unique railway in the world upon its completion, has begun in the Keys, and is to culminate in January, 2012 when Henry Flagler first arrived in Key West on his own train, a railcar called The Rambler. Planned elements for this once-in-a-lifetime 100th anniversary celebration include history tours showcasing Flagler sites, bicycling expeditions, educational presentations and explorations of Pigeon Key. © wcities.com

MY NOTE: Although you should not walk on the (new) Seven Mile Bridge, with all the traffic flow, the beauty of the Old Seven Mile Bridge is that it runs parallel! At least for two miles or so. And, Pigeon Key is in between. A great place to take a sunset stroll, reflect on your day of learning, and prepare yourself for tomorrow.



editor

contact:

tel: +1 305 743 3500 / +1 800
226 2621

fax: +1 305 743 2670

<http://www.bananabay.com/>

location:

4590 Overseas Highway
Marathon FL 33050



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

DESCRIPTION: Banana Bay sprawls over 10 acres, offering a pleasantly alluring atmosphere that's popular with honeymooners and others of a romantic bent. You can even get married here. Learn-to-sail sessions take place at this resort that also sports a whirlpool, pool, dock, tiki bar, volleyball, beach, fitness room, water sports, and fishing and sailing charters. A Cabana Restaurant is open for lunch, dinner and tropical drinks. Rick's Watercraft can get you out on the waters in powerboats that measure in at 17 to 25 feet. © wcities.com

MY NOTE: Moderately priced, and centrally located, Banana Bay sits on the Bay, has a pool and tiki hut for evening relaxation in between your days as a dive student.



editor

Day 3 - Florida Keys

QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: A day at the pool, then on to the ocean for training ... you'll likely get a lunch break, or be finished early afternoon. Head to No Name Key for some world-famous pizza for a surface interval you won't forget.

contact:
tel: 305 872 9115
<http://www.nonamepub.com/>

location:
North Watson Boulevard
Big Pine Key FL 33043

hours:
11a-11p M-Su

1 No Name Pub

DESCRIPTION: Plunked down here in 1936, this rustic spot has changed little, still offering plenty of beer and pizza. No Name is rough, it's ready and it is about as close to the "original" Keys as you are likely to get these days. Appetizers include smoked fish dip and spicy conch fritters. For dinner, try a fish sandwich, blackened chicken with Swiss, or a seafood combo with grouper, shrimp and clam strips. Pizza choices include key shrimp, Caribbean chicken, vegetarian and Mexican. Or just ask for a cold pint and enjoy the ambiance of this memorable bar. © wcities.com

MY NOTE: Just a short drive from Marathon, No Name has the best pizza in the Keys. Take a right at the (only) light in Big Pine, and follow signs. A locals' favorite! Great food, great prices.



Photo courtesy of No Name Pub

contact:
tel: +1 305 743 3500 / +1 800 226 2621
fax: +1 305 743 2670
<http://www.bananabay.com/>

location:
4590 Overseas Highway
Marathon FL 33050

2 Banana Bay Resort & Marina

DESCRIPTION: Banana Bay sprawls over 10 acres, offering a pleasantly alluring atmosphere that's popular with honeymooners and others of a romantic bent. You can even get married here. Learn-to-sail sessions take place at this resort that also sports a whirlpool, pool, dock, tiki bar, volleyball, beach, fitness room, water sports, and fishing and sailing charters. A Cabana Restaurant is open for lunch, dinner and tropical drinks. Rick's Watercraft can get you out on the waters in powerboats that measure in at 17 to 25 feet. © wcities.com

MY NOTE: Moderately priced, and centrally located, Banana Bay sits on the Bay, has a pool and tiki hut for evening relaxation in between your days as a dive student.



editor

Day 4 - Florida Keys

QUICK NOTE

contact:
tel: 305 743 0000
www.keysy.com/dockside

1 Dockside Lounge

location:
35 Sombrero Boulevard
Marathon FL 33037

DESCRIPTION: A popular spot for gatherings of local folks, the lounge offers live entertainment and has an outdoor dance floor that's often pulsating on weekends when this spot is very lively indeed. A popular spot for sunset-watching, one of the Keys' most popular daily activities. © wcities.com

contact:
tel: +1 305 743 3500 / +1 800 226 2621
fax: +1 305 743 2670
<http://www.bananabay.com/>

2 Banana Bay Resort & Marina

location:
4590 Overseas Highway
Marathon FL 33050

DESCRIPTION: Banana Bay sprawls over 10 acres, offering a pleasantly alluring atmosphere that's popular with honeymooners and others of a romantic bent. You can even get married here. Learn-to-sail sessions take place at this resort that also sports a whirlpool, pool, dock, tiki bar, volleyball, beach, fitness room, water sports, and fishing and sailing charters. A Cabana Restaurant is open for lunch, dinner and tropical drinks. Rick's Watercraft can get you out on the waters in powerboats that measure in at 17 to 25 feet. © wcities.com



editor

MY NOTE: Moderately priced, and centrally located, Banana Bay sits on the Bay, has a pool and tiki hut for evening relaxation in between your days as a dive student.

Day 5 - Florida Keys

QUICK NOTE

contact:
tel: 305-664-4940
<http://www.brazalena.com>

location:
83413 Overseas Highway
Islamorada FL 33036

hours:
Tues - Sun 5-9:30 p.m.

1 Braza Lena

DESCRIPTION: Braza Lena is an authentic Churrascaria or Brazilian steakhouse that offers a continuous dining experience. Between 16 cuts of meat, an extensive "salad" bar - which has everything from soups to salads to shrimp - and a to-die-for dessert tray to choose from, you will never leave this restaurant hungry. An attentive staff keeps a watchful eye on you as your green ("Yes, more") and red ("No, thanks") table markers alert them to bring another serving of the seasoned, delectable meats. You can even sample pork, chicken and shrimp skewers. The 20-layer chocolate fudge cake, well, take it home if you cannot fit it in at dinner!



editor

contact:
tel: +1 305 743 3500 / +1 800 226 2621
fax: +1 305 743 2670
<http://www.bananabay.com/>

location:
4590 Overseas Highway
Marathon FL 33050

2 Banana Bay Resort & Marina

DESCRIPTION: Banana Bay sprawls over 10 acres, offering a pleasantly alluring atmosphere that's popular with honeymooners and others of a romantic bent. You can even get married here. Learn-to-sail sessions take place at this resort that also sports a whirlpool, pool, dock, tiki bar, volleyball, beach, fitness room, water sports, and fishing and sailing charters. A Cabana Restaurant is open for lunch, dinner and tropical drinks. Rick's Watercraft can get you out on the waters in powerboats that measure in at 17 to 25 feet. © wcities.com



editor

MY NOTE: Moderately priced, and centrally located, Banana Bay sits on the Bay, has a pool and tiki hut for evening relaxation in between your days as a dive student.

Day 6 - Florida Keys

QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: Congratulations! By today you should have received your certification card. Welcome to the world of scuba.

contact:

tel: 305 743 5755
fax: +1 305 743 5786
<http://thehurricanegrille.com/>

location:

4650 Overseas Highway
Marathon FL 33050

hours:

6a-11p Su-Th, 6a-1a F-Sa

1 Hurricane Grill

DESCRIPTION: Seafood steamed, raw or cooked any way you want it is the watchword of this charming restaurant. You will find crabs, shrimp, lobster, clams and oysters here at quite reasonable prices. Also available are landlubber items such as chicken and steaks. There is usually something going until the wee hours. Bands play at night and satellite television sports events are the highlight of the big bar. Prices are quite reasonable. © wcities.com

contact:

tel: +1 305 743 3500 / +1 800 226 2621
fax: +1 305 743 2670
<http://www.bananabay.com/>

location:

4590 Overseas Highway
Marathon FL 33050

2 Banana Bay Resort & Marina

DESCRIPTION: Banana Bay sprawls over 10 acres, offering a pleasantly alluring atmosphere that's popular with honeymooners and others of a romantic bent. You can even get married here. Learn-to-sail sessions take place at this resort that also sports a whirlpool, pool, dock, tiki bar, volleyball, beach, fitness room, water sports, and fishing and sailing charters. A Cabana Restaurant is open for lunch, dinner and tropical drinks. Rick's Watercraft can get you out on the waters in powerboats that measure in at 17 to 25 feet. © wcities.com

MY NOTE: Moderately priced, and centrally located, Banana Bay sits on the Bay, has a pool and tiki hut for evening relaxation in between your days as a dive student.



editor

Day 7 - Florida Keys

QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: Start the day off right with a hearty breakfast at Hungry Tarpon - and order the dish of the same name! Today is about a sense of accomplishment and appreciation of the natural surrounds - you made it, you are a diver! Take in the sites before you head home, and make note of the coral reefs and Shipwreck Trek to make your NEXT trip to the Keys all about scuba diving!

contact:
tel: +1 305 664 0535
<http://www.hungrytarpon.com/>

location:
77522 Overseas Highway
Islamorada FL 33036

hours:
Daily 6:30am through dinner -
no firm closing time

1 The Hungry Tarpon

DESCRIPTION: A down-to-earth, efficient staff dishes up home-cooked favorites at this plain-looking, plain-talking local favorite. As is typical of the Keys, flash and glamour give way to comfort and simplicity. Breakfast starts at 6:30am, and includes fun features like Frittatas and Grits and Grunts. The house specialty 'Hungry Tarpon' is a plateful of hash browns, covered in cheese, eggs and sausage gravy. You will not leave hungry. Try a sweet potato crab fritter with Caribbean cocktail sauce! The atmosphere is decidedly "Keys casual" with room for 28 diners inside, another 28 on an outside deck overlooking Lignumvitae Pass and a private room that can accommodate 15 for special occasions and small parties.
© wcities.com

MY NOTE: On your way out of the Keys get a late breakfast/ early lunch at the Hungry Tarpon, then you can feed the tarpon in the marina, behind the restaurant in Robbie's Marina. Watch the fingers!



editor

contact:
tel: +1 305 292 4560

location:
End of Sombrero Beach Road
Marathon FL 33050

2 Sombrero Beach

DESCRIPTION: Dog-paddle in the shallows, or float lazily on a raft perfecting your enviable tan. Marathon's own Sombrero Beach - complete with playground - is a 12.6-acre beautifully landscaped beach with walkways, picnic area, and roped swimming area. And, it's free! It closes at dusk, but during weekends it's all about a pick-up game of volleyball, BBQ's, or a quiet day with a book during the week. Beaches in the Keys are a rarity because it is a chain of coral islands - with the exception of Bahia Honda State Park in the Lower Keys, NOTHING rivals this location for sand between the toes. © NileGuide



editor

contact:

tel: +1 305 743 9196 / +1 888 662 4822

fax: +1 305 743 6066
<http://www.floridalobster.com/>

location:

11711 Oceanside Highway
Marathon FL 33050

hours:

11a-8:30p W-M

3 Fish Tales Market and Eatery

DESCRIPTION: This spot occupies unprepossessing quarters in a weathered structure on the Overseas Highway, and diners flock here for seafood straight off the boat. You can take it home or dine at one of the few equally unprepossessing picnic tables inside or outside. Some interesting preparations of seafood is what draws 'em in, including shrimp or fish topped with spicy sauce, cilantro and black olives. A children's menu offers chicken, hot dogs and fish. The restaurant will cook your catch for you. Landlubber offerings of chicken and steak are also available. © wcities.com



Photo courtesy of Fish Tales Market and Eatery

contact:

tel: +1 305 743 9100
<http://www.cranepoint.org/>

location:

Mile Marker 50.5 Bayside
Marathon FL 33050

4 Museum of Natural History of the Florida Keys

OUR LOCAL EXPERT SAYS:

One of the most romantic spots for a waterside wedding, it is little known and unmatched for the natural beauty inside.

DESCRIPTION: One of the most important historical and archaeological sites in the Keys, Crane Point, located at mile marker 50.5 bayside, incorporates the Museum of Natural History of the Florida Keys, the Florida Keys Children's Museum, nature trails, a wild bird rehabilitation center, rainforest, butterfly garden and flight habitat. The Museum of Natural History is filled with information on the land forms of the region, the environment and how all its parts are interconnected, and the part that mankind has played, both positive and negative, on the fragile ecosystem of the Keys. A shell exhibit is intriguing, and there are dioramas explaining how it all works together. This museum and the Florida Keys Children's Museum are part of a dual attraction called The Museums of Crane Point. Admission fee is minimal and acts as donation to Crane Point. Marathon Wild Bird Center is located inside, among the hammocks, along with six miles of nature hike trails and shoreline views. © wcities.com



editor

contact:

tel: 305 872-2215
<http://www.diveflakeys.com/Pages/Tiki/tikicover.html>

location:

27340 Overseas Highway ,
Ramrod Key
Little Torch Key FL 33042

5 Looe Key Tiki Bar

DESCRIPTION: After a great day on the water, relax in the friendly tropical atmosphere of the world famous Tiki Bar. Mingle with the locals, swap stories with fellow divers, and enjoy nightly live entertainment. The bar tenders are even known to dazzle guests with firey tricks!

contact:

tel: +1 305 743 3500 / +1 800
226 2621

fax: +1 305 743 2670

<http://www.bananabay.com/>

location:

4590 Overseas Highway
Marathon FL 33050



Banana Bay Resort & Marina

DESCRIPTION: Banana Bay sprawls over 10 acres, offering a pleasantly alluring atmosphere that's popular with honeymooners and others of a romantic bent. You can even get married here. Learn-to-sail sessions take place at this resort that also sports a whirlpool, pool, dock, tiki bar, volleyball, beach, fitness room, water sports, and fishing and sailing charters. A Cabana Restaurant is open for lunch, dinner and tropical drinks. Rick's Watercraft can get you out on the waters in powerboats that measure in at 17 to 25 feet. © wcities.com

MY NOTE: Moderately priced, and centrally located, Banana Bay sits on the Bay, has a pool and tiki hut for evening relaxation in between your days as a dive student.



editor

Florida Keys Snapshot

Local Info

Situated between the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, the Florida Keys occupy a unique geographical location whose ocean breezes keep temperatures moderate year-round. The islands are linked together by the Overseas Highway, the southernmost leg of U.S. Highway 1 that's sometimes called the Highway That Goes to Sea. A modern day wonder, in 2009 the Overseas Highway was named an All-American Road by the National Scenic Byways program administered by the Federal Highway Administration. It is the only roadway in Florida with that designation, and only one of 30 other roadways in the nation with the prestigious title.

A Florida Keys vacation means a great getaway to one of the most unique, relaxing places on earth as well as a haven for tasty seafood cuisine. We're ready to welcome all visitors in a traditionally friendly and laid back manner.

© NileGuide

History

More than a Century of Conservation

Visitors are drawn to the Florida Keys to experience the islands' priceless natural resources. Protection of these resources began more than a century ago, demonstrating the region's commitment to environmental stewardship and a resolve to preserve them for future generations.

In 1908 the Key West National Wildlife Refuge was designated. The refuge incorporates more than 2,000 land acres, all designated wilderness, as well as more than 200,000 acres of marine waters co-managed with the state of Florida.

Accessible only by boat, the refuge is largely composed of unpopulated islands and marine waters located immediately west of Key West. A few islands have sandy beaches that provide critical nesting habitat for sea turtles. Many of the refuge's beaches, including those at the Marquesas Keys, are open during daylight hours for wildlife-oriented recreational uses such as wildlife observation, nature photography and environmental education. The waters around the refuge's islands and flats are

prime territory for fishing, wildlife viewing, diving and snorkeling.

The Key West National Wildlife Refuge, along with the Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1938, are the last of the offshore raccoon-free islands in the lower Keys that provide safe nesting and breeding areas for great white herons and other migratory birds and wildlife. White herons are North America's largest wading bird and, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are found only in the Florida Keys and on the South Florida mainland.

Stretching from Key West to just north of the Seven Mile Bridge in the Middle Keys, the refuge features more than 375 square miles of open water and islands in the Gulf of Mexico. Visitors' primary access is by kayak, canoe or shallow-draft boat, although the refuge manages lands on Upper Sugarloaf and Lower Sugarloaf Keys that are accessible by car.

For several decades, leaders and citizens of Big Pine Key and the Lower Keys — located from the west end of the Seven Mile Bridge to just outside Key West — have advocated the responsible utilization and preservation of the abundant terrestrial and marine wildlife there. This commitment to conservation has earned the region the title of the Natural Keys.

The Lower Keys are home to the National Key Deer Refuge, established in 1957 to protect and preserve habitats for wildlife, most notably the diminutive Key deer. A subspecies of the Virginia white-tailed deer, Key deer range in size from 45 to 80 pounds fully grown.

Today the refuge encompasses more than 8,000 acres of prime Key deer territory ranging from Bahia Honda Key to the eastern shores of Sugarloaf Key, out to the edge of the Gulf of Mexico. It is also a stopping point for thousands of migratory birds each year, and a winter home for many North American bird species including the roseate tern and peregrine falcon.

Within the refuge are two interpretive nature trails. The Jack C. Watson Trail, named after the first refuge manager and a passionate protector of the Key deer, winds through pinelands into a tropical hardwood hammock. A second wheelchair-accessible

route meanders through pine rocklands to a small wetland area.

© NileGuide

Hotel Insights

Between Key Largo and Key West you'll find a variety of tropically comfortable accommodations, from simple to luxurious.

Options range from large resorts with several hundred rooms and a host of amenities to middle-size properties with fewer than 100 rooms to small family owned and operated motels, small resorts and cozy, romantic bed and breakfast-style accommodations. Choose from single rooms, cottages, suites and townhouses suitable for large families.

Key West

Accommodations in Key West include inns where residents claim there are ghosts, picket-fenced mansions, large hotels with every amenity, cheap hostels with a few handsomely-or whimsically-appointed rooms, campgrounds, and guest houses. The lodgings are as numerous and varied as the fish in the seas that surround this enchanting island.

If you would like to stay in a large and elegant there are several options: Pier House Resort and Caribbean Spa, Wyndham's Casa Marina and La Concha, all have historic ambiance. The Hyatt Key West is a great contemporary resort with excellent amenities. Smaller but select accommodations include Curry Mansion and Victorian Island City House. The Marquesa Hotel is elegant and has a 1884 grace. Also, Key Lime Inn is known for its Bahamian ambiance.

Key Largo

If you like big hotels with a restaurant, bar, pool, beach, and a host of water sports, the lively Key Largo Bay Resort and Holiday Inn Resort & Marina are the most popular. At the Holiday Inn, that famous film craft, the African Queen, of Humphrey Bogart/ Katherine Hepburn fame, offers sailings.

For a less conventional hotel, Jules' Undersea Lodge is a unique accommodation where you dine and sleep underwater while rainbow-hued fish drift past your window!

Florida Keys Snapshot continued

The United States' only living coral barrier reef, the third largest barrier reef in the world, parallels the 126-mile chain of the Florida Keys. The extraordinary reef ecosystem, much like a tropical rainforest, supports a unique diversity of plants and animals.

To protect a portion of this reef, John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park was established in 1963 as America's first underwater preserve.

The park hosts more than a million annual visitors, offering them numerous opportunities to observe abundant wildlife through recreational and educational experiences. These include scuba diving, snorkeling, kayaking a water trail and walking along a boardwalk through plentiful tropical hammocks of gumbo limbo, strangler fig, tamarind, wild coffee and mahogany trees.

Pennekamp is incorporated into the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, widely regarded as a national treasure, which was established in 1990 by the United States government.

The sanctuary encompasses 2,800 square nautical miles of coastal and oceanic waters and submerged lands. Not only does this area surround the entire land mass of the Florida Keys, it also includes vast stretches of Florida Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean.

The creation of the sanctuary allows for the management of the region's special ecological, historical, recreational, and esthetic resources. Within its boundaries lie mangrove islands, historic shipwrecks filled with rare artifacts, tropical fish and other marine life.

Divers and snorkelers worldwide are drawn to the Florida Keys to view the extraordinary reef ecosystem within the sanctuary.

Islamorada

If you want world-class accommodations, Cheeca Lodge is known for attention to detail and a great golf course. If you would like a smaller resort there are several options, including Pelican Cove Resort, Hampton Inn & Suites and Howard Johnson Lodge at Holiday Isle. If you would rather have a party-loving hotel the El Capitan at Holiday Isle is for you.

Called the Sportfishing Capital of the World, Islamorada's presence on the water is unmatched. The Keys' commitment to conservation also extends to fishing practices. Catch-and-release fishing, followed by size and bag limits, and more recently bans on gill nets and fish traps in state waters, have enabled fish stocks to stabilize and grow.

In fact, it was in the Florida Keys that the catch-and-release ethic became a way of life for saltwater anglers. Backcountry game fish such as bonefish, tarpon and permit were the first game fish to be released on a regular basis. Soon to follow were snook and redfish, though a few are still kept for food.

On the ocean side of the island chain, local charter boat captains were the original leaders in releasing billfish — marlin, sailfish and swordfish. Today's Keys captains are leading the way in releasing extra"food" fish like dolphin (mahi mahi), grouper and snapper. They teach their anglers to "limit their kill" instead of "killing their limit."

As a result, pelagic (migratory ocean fish), flats and reef species are plentiful throughout the Keys, and world records attest to healthy and productive fisheries.

Like the creation of wildlife preserves and sanctuaries, the promotion of environmentally responsible angling is a crucial element in the Keys' longstanding commitment to conserving and protecting the region's natural resources.

Marathon and the Middle Keys

The largest resort is Hawk's Cay, where you can swim with resident dolphins. Amenities also include four pools, sauna, beach, sailing, tennis, putting green, ecology tours and children's programs. Or for a more laid-back resort go to Conch Key Cottages.

Although, there are dozens of smaller hotels and inns peppered throughout the islands of the Middle Keys, including Grassy Key.

Marathon is known as the Heart of the Keys but also the boating destination of the Keys, attracting families galore. One of the not-to-miss events and much-anticipated feasts in Marathon is the Original Marathon Seafood Festival, an annual giant celebration of the sea that takes delectable aim at the tummy every March.

Bahia Honda and the Lower Keys

At the posh Palm Island Resort, you can shower under the sky in enclosed but open-air élan. An award winner for its ability to combine rusticity and elegance, casual and formal, you won't miss telephones and televisions.

© NileGuide

Restaurants Insights

Stretching more than 100 miles into the open ocean, the Florida Keys can boast early settlers ranging from Bahamian fishermen to Cuban cigar makers and New England merchants. In such a rich melting pot, it's natural that the indigenous cuisine incorporates diverse and delicious influences— with a reliance on an abundant array of fish and seafood harvested from surrounding waters.

Among the favorites are Key West pink shrimp, a delicacy generally considered sweeter than other crustaceans. Whether sautéed in scampi, battered and fried, nestled atop salad or pasta or simply steamed and served with savory sauces, Key West pinks rank among the most popular of the Keys' natural resources."

Stone crabs, renowned for their sweet and succulent meat, also are a popular delicacy. Because nearly all of the crab's meat is contained within its grappels, these are the only portions of the crustacean that are harvested. Once the claws are removed, the crab is returned to the sea where, over the course of up to two years, the claws regenerate. It is for this reason that stone crabs are considered a renewable resource, and the Florida Keys are responsible for nearly 60 percent of the state's overall harvest.

The mollusk conch (pronounced konk) is impossible to pass up and is served in many forms: lime-kissed salad, spicy chowder and golden deep-fried fritters among them. Conch chowder can either be tomato-based or white, but don't expect to find any consistency of recipes from one restaurant to another. Keys eateries pride themselves on creating unique interpretations of classic dishes, and you're sure to find the delicious treat at annual seafood festivals.

Florida Keys Snapshot continued

Unlike stone crabs, lobsters found in the Keys are clawless. Known as spiny lobster, they offer sweet and tender meat. Local restaurants often serve them steamed or boiled with drawn butter- or their meat might be made into salad or served with exotic sauces. Lobster season runs from August 6 to March 31.

Key West

Key West is known for its amazing seafood and there are great restaurants all around the city. A&B Lobster House naturally serves some of the best lobster around. If you want oyster head to Alonzo's Oyster Bar. The trendy Nicola Seafood has a wide selection of seafood and a romantic atmosphere.

Chefs from Europe added some intriguing touches to it all and, voila, such award-winning restaurants as Pisces and Louie's Backyard.

Cuban cigar makers who settled here generations ago and whose descendants remain brought their distinctive cuisine with them: picadillo, ground beef and raisins; thick, strong cubano coffee; and sweet, fried banana-like plantains. Bahamians, who have created a colorful Bahamian village right in the middle of Key West, brought their akee fish and rice, their rum and their pigeon peas. Try the flavors at Blue Heaven and Caribe Soul.

If you are an aficionado of Ernest Hemingway, a stop at Captain Tony's Saloon and Sloppy Joe's is required. Ernest Hemingway was said to frequent these bars.

Key Largo

Besides well-known restaurants scattered throughout the Keys, perhaps the most fun is stopping into some rustic little find and discovering a memorable meal you'll be discussing for many a day to come. Flamingo Seafood Bar and Grill is not well known, but serves a delicious catch of the day. Gus' Grill is another laid back restaurant that serves seafood. For a casual, biker- and party-friendly atmosphere the Alabama Jack's is the place to go.

Islamorada

You can taste the freshness of the seafood at Marker 88. You can select from Cuban and Spanish food, Italian and Mediterranean, although the best is the

fresh seafood from local waters that can't be beat. For a romantic dinner the Atlantic's Edge provides views of the ocean and a candlelight meal.

Bahia Honda and the Lower Keys

The Dining Room is an elegant restaurant where you can dine on seafood. In the Lower Keys, you can find some well-known watering holes such as the rustic ambiance of No Name Pub. Pizza pies are out of this world- if you can find the pub, that is! It's world-famous, so don't miss out.

© NileGuide

Nightlife Insights

There's more to the Florida Keys than meets the eye, yet visitors often overlook an array of hidden treasures and colorful locales. Exploring the ones listed here can enrich and deepen virtually anyone's enjoyment of the region's colorful culture and character. Visitors from around the world are drawn to the Florida Keys to experience the island chain's priceless natural resources. Protection of these resources began a century ago, demonstrating the region's commitment to environmental stewardship and a resolve to preserve them for future generations.

Outdoor Activities

Whether you choose to tour on a glass-bottomed boat or snorkel or scuba tank, an underwater world of amazing beauty awaits in John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, America's first undersea park and home to 78 square miles of coral reefs. The park recently celebrated its 50th birthday on December 10, 2010. Hiking trails and a visitor's center with exhibits and a 30,000-gallon floor-to-ceiling aquarium are among the other diversions of this not-to-be-missed park.

At the Theater of the Seas, you can swim with dolphins, sea lions or stingrays or become a trainer for a day, putting creatures of the sea through their paces. In the Middle Keys, the Dolphin Research Center offers another opportunity for swimming with dolphins.

At the Windley Key Fossil Reef State Geologic Site on Windley Key, you can see what a coral reef looks like when it's left high and dry, and visit middens left behind by the earliest Native American residents

of the keys, who clearly knew a good thing when they saw it. Looe Key Reef is home to a beautiful coral reef, and Bahia Honda State Park offers sand dunes, waters as clear as a teardrop, and views that go on forever.

For an offshore adventure, explore Indian Key State Historic Site, ferrying over on the twice-daily ferry or paddling your own canoe—well, kayak—to the island, where you will learn of murder and mayhem on this 10.5-acre islet. Or try a visit to the 280-acre Lignumvitae Key State Botanical Site, a hardwood forest that was the home and gardens of a millionaire who put it all together in 1919 in such style that the site is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

Museums

The Keys has a long and fascinating history and you can learn more about it at the many museums scattered amongst the islands. The Custom House Museum provides a detailed history of Key West's history. Fort East Martello Museum and Gallery is dedicated to Key West historical artifacts. The museum also has exhibits dealing with the daily life for earlier Key West inhabitants.

If you would like to know about specific portions of the island history, then Key West Shipwreck Historeum is the place to go. At the museum, you learn about how some islanders would dive for shipwrecked goods. Learn about the ill-fated Henry Flagler's railroad at Flagler Station Over-Sea Railway Historeum. If you want to know more about how the Bahamians influenced the Key West culture, the Lofton B. Sands African-Bahamian Museum provides fascinating artifacts, such as letters and clothing.

Theaters

If you would like to enjoy the theater while in the Keys you have plenty of options. The historical Waterfront Playhouse has a modest theater and shows quirky and well-known productions, including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Best Man*. Another small theater that produces professional productions is Red Barn Theater. If you are in Marathon, the Marathon Community Theater produces small productions featuring local talent.

Festivals & Street Fairs

Florida Keys Snapshot continued

Depending on when you go to Key West, there are annual festivals and fairs that shouldn't be missed. The German Oktoberfest has reached Summerland Key that holds a parade, live music and of course plenty to drink and eat. If you come in December enjoy the beautiful and often humorous Key West Lighted Boat Parade. Key West is transformed into a pirates heaven for a day during Pirates In Paradise. In July the Hemingway Days Festival can't be beat.

One of the best annual events is the Conch Republic Independence Celebration. The festival is a ten day celebration of when the Florida Keys briefly seceded from the United States. The United States Border Patrol was treating the Keys unfairly and in protest the Keys seceded and humorously declared "war." After a minute and without any prompting the Keys surrendered and jokingly asked for foreign aid. The festival celebrates how the Border Patrol stopped the unfair treatment and the celebration features drag races, music concerts, a parade, and a "battle" against the US Border Patrol.

© NileGuide

Things to Do Insights

Along the 113 miles that make up Key West, you will see small signs every mile marking the distance. Called Mile Markers, many hotels and restaurants along the way bear no other address than MM 99 or MM 88.5. Businesses may also identify themselves with the letters OS for ocean side, or BS, for bay side. Florida's Keys are also often grouped into three divisions—the Upper Keys, Middle Keys and Lower Keys, and there are plenty to see in each one.

Key Largo Largo means long in Spanish and Key Largo lives up to that name as the longest of the keys, stretching from MM 106 to MM 91. Here you'll find the Indian Key State Historic Site, which holds many local treasures. The island is also home to the Dolphin Cove Research & Education Center's Dolphin Encounter, which offers you an opportunity to swim with dolphins and watch them play. Grab a bite at Alabama Jack's. The best attraction of Key Largo is John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the nation's first underwater park. Also stop into the Theater of the Sea.

Smathers Beach The Seven-Mile Bridge

connects the Middle and Lower Keys. Nearby Smathers Beach is Key West's longest, while the Curry Hammock State Park is a small wonder that attracts many visitors. For some interesting exhibits, check out the Museum of Natural History of the Florida Keys. Stop into the Barracuda Grill for dinner.

Key West Lighthouse Museum The views from the Key West Lighthouse Museum are stunning. Take a boat to Dry Tortugas National Park and do some diving, swimming or fishing. Dine at Louie's Backyard. The nearby Nancy Forrester's Secret Garden is worth a stroll, then discover the shops, restaurants and other attractions at Historic Seaport at Key West Bight.

Wrecker's Museum Take a tour of the Wrecker's Museum, a unique home built in 1829 that has some interesting features. Have lunch at Antonia's Restaurant, then stroll through Bahia Honda State Park or check out the creations at the Paradise Gallery. Tour the historical Curry Mansion, with its elegant period furniture and antiques.

Key West Aquarium City Zoo- The Gallery preserves some of the most important remnants of Haitian culture. The Audubon House & Tropical Gardens is named for the artist John James Audubon. The home and surrounding gardens are open to visitors. The Key West Aquarium is also a must-see. Dine at the Caribe Soul restaurant, then go to the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Museum to take in some nautical exhibits.

This is nature's wonderland. You'll find a national wildlife refuge devoted to tiny Key deer, an endangered species, and a national marine sanctuary, Looe Key, rated one of the best diving reefs in the world. You can see this Keys' version of Big Bird—great white herons, North America's largest wading bird—in a 375-square-mile refuge. Kayaks and shallow-draft boats are a favored way to tour, since the Keys are surrounded by water.

Boat Tours Dry Tortugas National Park Ferry(+1 305 294 7009/http://www.yankeefreedom.com/) Key Largo Princess(+1 305 451 4655/http://www.keylargoprincess.com/) Discovery Undersea Tours(+1 305 293 0099/+1 800 262 0099/http://www.discoveryunderseatours.com/) Snorkel and Sailing Adventure(+1 305

292 4768/http://www.keywestsebago.com/) Tortugas Party Boat(+1 305 293 1189/http://www.tortugacharters.com/)

Trolley Tours Old Town Trolley Tours(+1 800 213 2474/http://www.trolleytours.com/)

Train Tours Conch Tour Train(+1 305 294 5161/http://www.conchtourtrain.com/)

Air Tours Island City Flying Service Incorporated(+1 305 296 5422)

Diving Tours Reef Express Catamaran(+1 305 294 7755/http://www.sunnydayskeywest.com/reefx.htm) Snorkel and Sailing Adventure(+1 305 292 4768/http://www.keywestsebago.com/)

Ghost Tours Ghost Tours of Key West(+1 305 294 9255/http://www.hauntedtours.com) Ghosts & Legends of Key West(+1 305 294 1713/ +1 866 612 3890/http://www.keywestghosts.com/) © NileGuide

Travel Tips

Highway

The major U.S. airlines continue to offer convenient flights to the Florida Keys. However, our islands are the only tropical getaway reachable by car from the U.S. mainland.

The 120-mile island chain can be reached by U.S. 1 south of Miami. Each Key is linked to the next by the scenic Overseas Highway, which was first built atop the remains of tycoon Henry Flagler's Overseas Railroad. In 2012, the Florida Keys will celebrate 100 years since Flagler's arrival into Key West.

The US Highway 1, or Florida Keys Overseas Highway, from north of Key Largo to Key West, has been designated an All-American Road. The Keys highway is the only All-American Road in Florida. It's the highest recognition possible under the National Scenic Byways program established by the U.S. Congress in 1991. Only 30 other roadways in the nation have earned the prestigious title.

Driving Directions to the Florida Keys...

From Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood

From Miami International Airport, take LeJeune Road south to 836 West. Take the Florida Turnpike south toward Key West. The Turnpike ends at US 1 in Florida City.

Florida Keys Snapshot continued

Follow U.S. 1 south about 22 miles to Key Largo and you are now in the Florida Keys. International Airport, exit the airport and follow the signs for 595 West. Take 595 to the Florida Turnpike and follow the signs for the Florida Keys.

From the north, take the Florida Turnpike south to just below Ft. Lauderdale, where Exit 4 joins the southern portion of the Turnpike. The Turnpike ends at US 1 in Florida City. Follow U.S. 1 south into the Florida Keys.

From Florida's west coast, take 1-75 Alligator Alley east to the Miami exit, and south to the Turnpike Extension.

A Note on Mile Markers. Once you're in the Keys, U.S. 1 becomes the Overseas Highway, which is like Main Street. The best way to get around is to know the mile marker of your destination. Look for the little green mile-marker signs on the right side of the highway (in either direction). They begin just south of Florida City with number 127 and run all the way down to zero in Key West. Think of them like addresses. If you know the mile marker, getting there is easy.

© NileGuide

Fun Facts

Top 10 Florida Keys Facts

@font-face{ font-family:"Times New Roman";}@font-face{ font-family:"Arial";}p.MsoNormal, li.MsoNormal, div.MsoNormal{ margin: 0in 0in 0.0001pt; font-size: 12pt; font-family:"Times New Roman";}table.MsoNormalTable{ font-size: 10pt; font-family:"Times New Roman";}div.Section1{ page: Section1;}

INTERESTING FACT:

The Overseas Highway represents a remarkable engineering feat: 113 miles of roadway and 42 bridges leapfrogging across the water from key to key in a series of giant arches of concrete and steel. The Atlantic Ocean lies on one side of the highway, with Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico on the other — providing drivers breathtaking vistas of open sea and sky. In 2009, the Overseas Highway was named an All-American Road by the National

Scenic Byways program administered by the Federal Highway Administration.

FREE APP:

Visitors are just a finger tap away from comprehensive travel information and guidance from Key Largo to Key West with the new Florida Keys Essential Guide App, free to download at the iTunes store.

WEIRD FACT:

Marathon is home to the Turtle Hospital, situated at mile marker 48.5 bayside; it is the world's only licensed veterinary hospital dedicated to the treatment of sea turtles. It was opened in 1986 with the goal of healing injured sea turtles and returning them to the wild.

HISTORICAL FACT:

Dry Tortugas National Park, located 68 miles west of Key West, is home to Fort Jefferson, the largest masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere. The classic red-brick structure is part of Key West's military history more than 130 years ago, in addition to Fort Zachary Taylor on the south shore. Fort Taylor, named for the country's 12th president, was built between 1845 and 1866. East Martello, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is one of the best-preserved Civil War-era batteries in the United States.

FUN FACT:

Key Largo is best known for John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, located at mile marker (MM) 102.5. It is the first underwater preserve in the United States, and celebrated its 50th anniversary on Dec. 10, 2010.

DRIVING TIP:

Travelers along the Overseas Highway will see mile markers, often called mileposts, on the right shoulder or median strip. These are small green signs bearing white numbers, which begin with number-mile – 126, just south of Florida City. Mile markers decrease steadily from there to Key West, ending with the zero marker

at the corner of Fleming and Whitehead streets. Awareness of these markers is useful, since Keys residents refer to them regularly when giving addresses. Visitors asking for directions shouldn't be surprised to hear that the spot they're seeking is located at- or just before or just beyond- a given mile marker number.

RANDOM FACT:

In January, 1912, railroad tycoon Henry Flagler completed his impossible "railroad that went to sea," connecting the Keys and Key West with the mainland for the first time and providing a way for wealthy visitors to travel to the Keys for warm-weather vacations. In 2012, the 100th anniversary of his arrival into Key West via rail is to be marked with a Keys-wide celebration.

FOOD FACT:

Stone crab season is open Oct. 15 – May 15 every year. Considered a renewable resource, the crabs are harvested only for their claws- the crabs can re-grow claws. While both claws can be taken lawfully if each is of legal size, defined as a 2.75-inch propodus (the larger, immovable part of the claw's pincer), harvesting only one claw is preferable for the crab's protection and feeding ability. Stone crab claws are delectable served either hot or cold, with mustard sauce.

THAT'S RICH:

Key West is home to the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum, founded by the legendary shipwreck salvor who died in 1998. The museum holds the richest single collection of 17th-century maritime and shipwreck antiquities in the Western Hemisphere — most of them excavated from the waters around the island city.

FISHY FACT:

According to the International Game Fish Association, the Keys are home to more sportfishing records than any other destination in the world. Pelagic, (migratory

Florida Keys Snapshot continued

ocean fish), flats and reef species are plentiful throughout the Keys, and the numerous world records attest to healthy and productive fisheries.

@font-face{ font-family:"Times New Roman";}@font-face{ font-

family:"Arial";}p.MsoNormal, li.MsoNormal, div.MsoNormal{ margin: 0in 0in 0.0001pt; font-size: 12pt; font-family:"Times New Roman";}table.MsoNormalTable{ font-size: 10pt; font-family:"Times New Roman";}div.Section1{ page: Section1;}

Quick Facts:

Time Zone: GMT-5

Electricity: 110 volts, 60Hz, standard two pin plugs

Country Dialing Code: 1

Area Code: 305

© NileGuide