

FLORIDA KEYS & KEY WEST

First-time visitors to the Florida Keys comment almost immediately on the island chain's unique laid-back atmosphere that is a world away from big cities and theme parks.

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 and the Lower Keys, and Key West.

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. But Key Largo's star attraction is John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park - the first underwater preserve in the United States - that is incorporated within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. These protected areas feature 55 varieties of delicate corals and more than

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

Marathon>> Located between Key Largo and Key West - Marathon is anything but a middle of the road destination! In fact, Marathon is home to the Seven Mile Bridge and Crane Point, 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 artifacts, and was once the site of an entire Indian village. Marathon also features the Dolphin Research Center, one of five Keys facilities that provide visitors an opportunity to swim and interact with the intelligent mammals.

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.

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. 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).

At day's end in Key West, visitors gather at Mallory Square to experience the nightly "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 Harbor.

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, theater is available at several playhouses and the Key West Symphony offers periodic concerts.

For more information about the Florida Keys & Key West, visit the Keys Web site at www.fl-keys.com or, in the U.S. and Canada, dial toll-free **1-800-FLA-KEYS (800-352-5397)**.

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