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Florida: Keys to paradise

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FLORIDA: Key West is the final dot on mainland America

view gallery



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AFTER the high life of Miami or the theme park thrills of Orlando, recharge your batteries in the Florida Keys

The Florida Keys are the end of the line as far as continental USA is concerned. Straddling the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, this ribbon of sun-kissed tiny islands are closer to Havana than Miami. The tropical islands, linked to mainland Florida and each other by the Overseas Highway, vary in size and character, but all exude a laid-back vibe.

While Orlando has become a temple to Mickey Mouse and Miami to

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partying, the Keys are a mecca for mavericks, moochers and meanderers. So if you've spent a week walking around Florida's theme parks with the kids, why not enjoy some rest and relaxation? Offering gorgeous vistas, unrivalled weather, superb seafood, stunning national parks and coral reefs, it's clear the USA has saved the best till last. So order a Margarita or Mojito and enjoy a cocktail of American warmth and tropical gorgeousness.

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WHERE SHOULD I GO?

The Florida Keys are a 150-mile long necklace of 1,700 tropical islands, many only accessible by boat. As the Upper Keys are closest to mainland Florida (Miami is less than an hour's drive away), they're more developed and attract weekenders who come to stay in the likes of Key Largo. The coral reefs and magnificent marine kingdom of the John Pennkamp Coral Reef State Park are the major attraction for scuba divers and snorkellers. While nearby Islamorada is often referred to as the sport fishing capital of the world. The Middle Keys are a haven for eco-tourists, home to the Dolphin Research Center, Turtle Hospital and wildlife such as alligators, turtles and exotic birds. Base yourself in the lovely resort town of Marathon.

Once you've passed over Seven Mile Bridge, you're in the Lower Keys, a cluster of smaller unspoiled islands with fewer visitors, dense forests home to the endangered Key deer, and the Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary. Last but not least is Key West, a two-by-four mile island that is the final dot of mainland USA. Renowned as a haven for writers, there's also large Cuban community as it's only 90 miles from Havana. Popular with party animals, day-trippers and cruise ships, Duval Street is the main touristy thoroughfare lined with bars, restaurants and souvenir stores. While the historic Mallory Square is where everyone flocks to watch the sun set, the street entertainers and to shop at the market stalls.

WHERE SHOULD I STAY?

While there are plenty of fancy resort hotels dotted around the Keys, one of the best ways to soak up the quirky charm of the islands is to stay in a B&B. OK! checked into the delightful Ambrosia, a short walk from Key West's Duval Street. Beautiful spacious en-suite guest rooms are arranged around tropical foliage-filled courtyards with their own private pool, fountains, sculptures and verandas. There's more than a whiff of the Caribbean at the Ambrosia, a residence brimming with real personality and warmth that serves as a better introduction to Key West life than any guidebook. Families or bigger groups may prefer Key West's waterfront Parrot Key Resort as it offers the choice of two or three-bedroom cottages as well as rooms and suites. This lovely white clapperboard modern resort offers five acres of landscaped grounds with four pools.

WHAT SHOULD I SEE?

Kids will go nuts for the Dolphin Research Center (www.dolphins.org) as they'll get a captivating glimpse into the lives of both dolphins and sea lions. There's also an opportunity to be a trainer and to swim with the dolphins.

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Another must-see is the home of revered novelist Ernest Hemingway, who lived in Key West for many years. His lovingly preserved Spanish colonial home still houses the descendents of his six-toed cats and a fragrant, evocative scent of old Key West.

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The Florida Keys also plays host to some unique events – from the Underwater Music Festival (July), where music is piped underwater for snorkellers and divers, to the Key Largo Pirates Festival (October) and Key West's Pirates In Paradise buccaneer-fest (November/December).

WHAT STARS MIGHT I SEE?

Many films have been shot on the islands, ranging from the 1948 film Key Largo, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall (you can still visit the original steam-powered boat Africa Queen used in the film) to the more recent Meet The Fockers, 2 Fast 2 Furious and I Love You



Phillip Morris. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jamie Lee Curtis filmed True Lies here, while Sheryl Crow, Will Smith, Jennifer Lopez, Jude Law and Sandra Bullock are island fans.

Sandra is one of the many A-listers (including Johnny Depp and Cameron Diaz) who've stayed at the Little Palm Island Resort, the only hotel on the tiny Little Torch Key. While in Key West, Top Gun actress Kelly McGillis owns Kelly's Caribbean Bar, Grill & Brewery.

WHERE SHOULD I EAT?

Local delicacies abound but no trip is complete without sampling the Key's signature dishes, such as conch fritters – the flesh from large sea snails, which OK! found surprisingly chewy but delicious. Also make sure you try the coconut-crusted shrimp – ours came with piquant orange marmalade and horseradish dip. The Keys are also famed for their key lime pie, a gorgeous, tangy, meringue baked delight served almost everywhere. Great places to sample local dishes are the Conch Republic Seafood Restaurant in Key West, while the quaint Porky's Bayside diner in Marathon, where Elizabeth Taylor once dined, serves great barbecue seafood.

One of OK!'s culinary highlights was dining alfresco on the veranda of the Butterfly Café, part of the beachside Tranquility Bay Resort in Marathon, where we tucked into a heaven-sent shrimp cocktail, horseradish encrusted grouper and a sublime sticky toffee pudding. Head to the Rum Barrel restaurant in Key West for American classics such as a Philly steak and Portobello mushroom sandwich. Or try local dishes such as the blackened mahi mahi salad or the blood orange marinated tuna. Beware, though, the starters are huge and the main courses are big enough to feed a coach party!

HOW DO I GET THERE?



Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com; 08442 092 770) flies to Miami daily from London Heathrow from £429 return, including tax.

A water-view two-bedroom beach house at the Tranquility Bay Beach House Resort in Marathon (www.tranquilitybay.com) starts from £120 per night. A double room at the Ambrosia Lodge in Key West (www.ambrosiakeywest.com) costs from £120 per night. A double room at the Parrot Key Resort in Key West (www.parrotkeyresort.com) costs from £112. All prices based on a September 2010 stay.

For a Miami stopover, book into the W Hotel (www.wsouthbeach.com), where rooms start at £235 per room per night. Rent a car with Dollar (www.dollar.co.uk) from £130 per week.

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