

# 12 Keys TO THE KEYS

By Mary Ann DeSantis • Photos by Mary Ann DeSantis (Except Where Noted)

**M**y love for the Florida Keys began in 1972 with a drive down U.S.1 with a college roommate who hailed from Miami. I returned a few times in the 1980s, but in 2001 Key West became my home away from home with a timeshare purchase.

While many things about the Keys have changed over the years, the awe-inspiring feeling I get when I travel from Key Largo to Key West has remained the same. The sparkling water on both sides of the highway, tropical fauna and flora, fresh seafood and, of course, the laid-back attitude keep me returning on a regular basis.

So turn on your favorite Jimmy Buffett tunes and travel along as I share some of my old favorites and some newly discovered places to see along the Overseas Highway, a recently designated All-American Highway and a destination unto itself.



Photo Courtesy fka-keys.com



Photo Courtesy fka-keys.com



## Diving Into Paradise

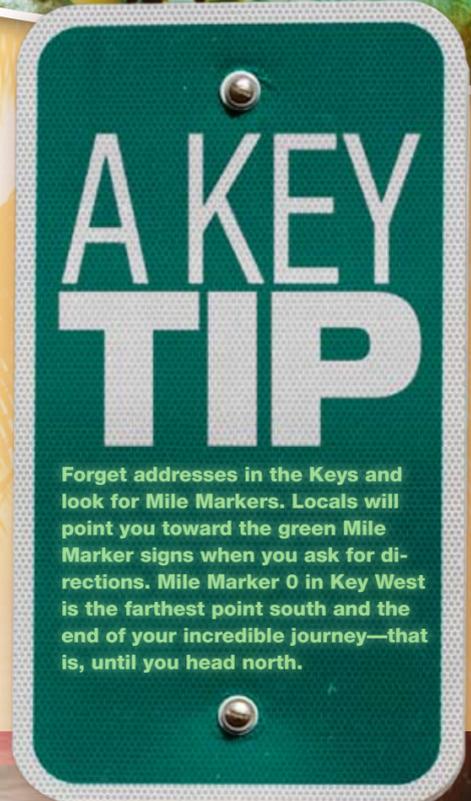
John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park (MM 102.5)  
pennekamppark.com

After maneuvering through Miami traffic, you'll be ready for a break at Key Largo, the first and largest island in the chain of keys. The John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park and adjacent Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary are well known for their diving and snorkeling, and many tourists never make it any farther south than this well-used camping paradise. If you prefer to stay dry, climb aboard a glass-bottom boat to Molasses Reef. Land lovers can enjoy short nature trails, two man-made beaches, picnic areas, and a snack bar.

## Early-Bird Special

Florida Keys Wild Bird Center (MM 93.6) • fkwbc.org

Supported entirely by donations, the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center rescues injured, sick, and orphaned birds with the goal of returning them to their natural habitats. However, that is not always possible if a fowl is missing a wing or eye, so the center has permanent exhibits where the non-releasable birds live. A boardwalk meanders between large cages where hawks, ospreys, owls, egrets, and others act as educational ambassadors for their species. Time your visit for the 3:30pm feeding of the pelicans, which start flying in around 2:00pm to jockey for the best positions to catch fish tossed to them by a trainer. With pelicans surrounding you in every direction, you'll be tempted to reach down and pet them, but don't. As the trainer said, nothing gets in the way of pelicans and their fish, including fingers.



Forget addresses in the Keys and look for Mile Markers. Locals will point you toward the green Mile Marker signs when you ask for directions. Mile Marker 0 in Key West is the farthest point south and the end of your incredible journey—that is, until you head north.





## A Secret Garden

The Gallery at Kona Kai (MM 98) • g-k-k.com

Before you resume your journey south, take time to peruse this very sophisticated gallery at Kona Kai, which is seemingly hidden in a lush secret garden. The gallery once focused on Florida artists, but it now features many European artists who are not exhibited elsewhere in the United States. While the average tourist may not be able to pay the five-figure "Euro prices" to own paintings by artists such as ship captain-turned-painter Dirk Verdoorn, the Kona Kai still welcomes casual lookers. The tropical gardens surrounding the small 11-cottage resort have been featured on HGTV and provide a great photo-op, especially under the vine-covered archway leading toward the water.

## Rock Quarry Paradise

Theater of the Sea (MM 84.5) • theaterofthesea.com

Established in 1946, Theater of the Sea is not only one of Florida's oldest attractions but also the second oldest marine mammal facility in the world. The 17-acre tropical paradise was originally a quarry that supplied rock for Henry Flagler's famous railroad. Today, the natural salt water lagoon is home to Atlantic bottlenose dolphins, California sea lions, sea turtles, tropical and game fish, sharks, and stingrays. The theater's "swim with the dolphins" program began in 1987 and has since expanded to include swimming with sea lions and stingrays.

## Shop 'Til You Drop

World Wide Sportsman (MM 81.5)

The four islands that comprise Islamorada are known to sport fishermen all over the world. Although I don't fish, the World Wide Sportsman in Islamorada is a required stop. The two-story store, now owned by Bass Outdoors, is a tourist attraction unto itself. *Pilar*, the sister ship to Hemingway's boat, is surrounded by hundreds of clothing racks and the latest angler equipment. My husband and I have lost each other for hours in this mega-store because I'm usually on the second floor where the cutest bathing suits and ladies sportswear are located. I've also bought some of my best books about the Keys in the "library" section near the back register. Exit through the rear door and you'll find the original Islamorada Fish Company, an outdoor eatery where you can watch boats come into the docks while enjoying one of the best mojitos in the Keys.

## Feed The Fish

Robbie's Marina (MM 77.5) • robbies.com

If the kids are getting restless in the backseat or if you are feeling the need to buy some kitschy souvenirs, Robbie's Marina on the Lower Matecumbe Key is a good place to take a break. Vendors at this roadside attraction provide everything from painted coconut heads and T-shirts to stainless steel wall sculptures. The real event, though, is a chance to feed tarpons from Robbie's dock. For \$1 you can watch other folks risk fingers when the gigantic fish jump skyward for a small herring. Or you can buy your own \$3 bucket of fish and join in the fun. You can also have lunch or rent a charter boat at what has been described as an "authentic Keys community."

# FORKS in the road

Literally! Exploring the Keys can give you an appetite, so be sure to stop for a bite along the way.

**The Fish House (MM 102.4)**—You don't have to drive far to find one of the most highly recommended restaurants in the Keys, The Fish House. My favorite menu item is the grouper sandwich, while my husband thinks the conch chowder is the best in the Keys. For something different, try a fish fajita.

**Craig's Restaurant (MM 90)**—When a charter boat captain told me that his favorite place for a fish sandwich was Craig's Restaurant, I knew I'd have to give it a try on the way home. Indeed Craig's has won numerous awards for its "Famous Fish Sandwich," so yummy that most people staying in the upper Keys return night after night. Lightly breaded in cornmeal, the fish is about as fresh and juicy it gets. Craig's also serves breakfast all day, including a seafood omelet.

**Green Turtle Inn (MM 81.2)**—Built in 1928, the Green Turtle Inn is a piece of old Florida that you don't want to miss. Peruse old photos while you enjoy a breakfast of coconut French toast or a lunch of churrasco steak with yucca hash or rum-glazed duck. The menu is a nice mix of continental favorites with Latin touches. Be sure to save room for a Turtle Sundae.

**Keys Fisheries Market & Marina (MM 49)**—Ask the locals where they go, and you'll always find the freshest seafood at the best prices. You'll have to leave U.S. 1 at 35th Street in Marathon to find this outdoor restaurant on Florida Bay. Walk up to the window to order specialties like the hogfish sandwich (a great alternative to grouper), a lobster Reuben, or Key Lime scallops.

**The Shrimp Shack, Stock Island (MM 4)**—Even after you find the address of 6840 Front Street, you'll have to walk through an alleyway to the docks to find the freshest shrimp in Key West, prepared any way you like. Owner Ray Massero worked for Jimmy Buffett's original Margaritaville for 25 years before opening this little gem far away from Duval Street's maddening crowds. Definitely time your meal to enjoy a peaceful sunset.

**Hurricane Hole (MM 3)**—I'll usually visit Hurricane Hole two or three times during my week-long stays in Key West. Located on Stock Island just east of the city, Hurricane Hole is reasonable and offers a great fish and chips entrée as well as an excellent smoked fish dip. If you catch a fish during your trip, take advantage of the restaurant's BYOF—Bring Your Own Fish service—and they'll cook it for you.



## Turtle ER

The Turtle Hospital (MM 48.5) • [turtlehospital.org](http://turtlehospital.org)

The world's only state-certified veterinary hospital for sea turtles has also become an acclaimed attraction that educates the public about this endangered species. The facility even has a turtle ambulance. The hospital rescues and rehabilitates injured and sick turtles, and is able to return most of them to the sea. Currently, though, the Marathon Turtle Hospital has 17 permanent "residents" whose injuries prohibit them from ever returning to the ocean. A salt-water protected pool is now their home and visitors can even help feed them with kibbles provided by the tour guide. A non-profit corporation, the Marathon Turtle Hospital offers three tours daily by reservation only.



## Waves & Wings

Bahia Honda State Park (MM 36.8)  
[bahiahondapark.com](http://bahiahondapark.com)

One of Florida's southernmost state parks is just south of the historic Seven-Mile Bridge. Spanish for "Deep Bay," Bahia Honda State Park has an overlook from the first span of the original Flagler train bridge. The panoramic view of the island and surrounding waters is breathtaking and one that should not be missed. The biggest draw, however, is Sandspur Beach, named one of Florida's best beaches by several national magazines and travel sites. Don't miss the Sand & Sea Nature Center at the west end of the park and the Silver Palm trail at the east end, just past Sandspur Beach. The nature trails and the beach attract numerous butterflies, including the nearly extinct Miami Blue butterfly.



## A Bucket-List Experience

Dry Tortugas National Park, 70 miles west of Key West  
[yankeefreedom.com](http://yankeefreedom.com)

You can't drive to the Dry Tortugas, so you won't find a mile marker to these historic islands that became a national park in 1992. I've wanted to visit the Dry Tortugas for years, but the price of the trip always deterred me. This year, however, I decided to cross *this* off my bucket list and go. I was also concerned that the Gulf oil spill could close these unbelievably beautiful islands. The trip aboard the *Yankee Freedom II* ferry was worth every penny, and I only regret that I hadn't done it sooner. As you approach the Dry Tortugas, the red-brick Fort Jefferson will seemingly rise from the ocean. During the War Between the States, the fort was used as a military prison for captured deserters and for the four men convicted of complicity in Abraham Lincoln's assassination, including Dr. Samuel Mudd. After the Army abandoned Fort Jefferson, the area became a wildlife refuge in 1908. Today, it is called the Atlantic Galapagos because of the unusual birds that nest there. The full-day excursion includes breakfast, lunch, guided tours, and snorkeling equipment and costs \$160 for adults.



## More Than A Crawl Along Duval

Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden (MM 3)  
[keywestbotanicalgarden.org](http://keywestbotanicalgarden.org)

Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden is just a short bicycle ride over the bridge to Stock Island, also known as Cow Key. Like most things in Key West, the gardens have a fascinating history. Founded and developed by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in the 1930s, the Key West Botanical Garden began as a depression-era tourist attraction. Much of the original stone wall remains intact along the rear of the property. The Garden features two of the last remaining freshwater ponds in the Keys and is a major migratory stopping point for neo-tropical birds from places as far away as South America. A boardwalk meanders through some of the Keys most unusual tropical plants.

## The Island Of 'True Lies'

Pigeon Key (MM 48) • [pigeonkey.net](http://pigeonkey.net)

Chances are you have seen this tiny island lying in the shadow of the Seven-Mile Bridge and wondered how people got there. They either hiked the rugged 2.5-mile remnant of the railroad trestle or they took the ferry from the Pigeon Key Visitors Center. The five-acre island also will look familiar to fans of the 1994 movie *True Lies*, because it was used extensively during the filming. Tour guide Annie Miners said that actor Arnold Schwarzenegger was so enamored with the setting that he even considered buying the island. The largest structure contains a museum and an extensive collection of old photographs from the days when the island served as a work camp for Flagler's railroad. Once on the island, you'll sit in the shade of the sea grape trees while the tour guide gives you a delightful recap of the island's history. Save time to snorkel because the \$11 fee includes use of snorkeling equipment. Be sure to take bottled water with you, however, because the island has only one small water fountain.



## Flutters For The Shutters

Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory (Near MM 0)  
[keywestbutterfly.com](http://keywestbutterfly.com)

Around the corner from the Southernmost Point in the U.S. is the Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory and one of my all-time favorite ways to spend a morning in Key West. Photographers can capture amazing pictures of the more than 50 species of butterflies that seemingly pose for pictures, especially in the morning when they are basking in the sun or feeding on the flowers and fruits. The climate-controlled, glass-enclosed habitat houses more than 1,500 butterflies from around the world. Be prepared for the moist humidity as you follow the path through the lush tropical setting. When you leave the conservatory, walk to the end of South Street for the obligatory Key West photo at the colorful Southernmost Point buoy, a monument so heavy that it can withstand hurricanes.



Photo Courtesy Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory