



A tale of two cultures



Take a tropical road trip all the way down to Hemingway's home on Key West, to experience the islands' distinctive culture. **Rowena Carr-Allinson** discovers the odd but delightful mix of traditions and lifestyles in the Keys

There's a distinct Caribbean vibe that sets the Keys aside from the rest of Florida. Little unassuming motels and fishing stores line the road, but none of the usual monster chains, fast food joints or recognisable brands are to be seen flaunting their trade. It's a world away from the busy streets of Miami.

Hit Highway 1 and head south to Key West from Miami and discover the 110-mile Keys chain by car. The first thing to know is that the Keys have plenty of unusual quirks. The first of which is that everything here is measured in 'Mile Markers', though they aren't always easy to spot.

Despite the thoroughfare that slashes through the islets, the keys have kept their charm and picturesque aspect. Stunning views of the turquoise blue waters, Caribbean pastel cottages and swanky hacienda-style developments are everywhere. But there's more to the Keys than palm trees and idyllic waters; they have a secret, a hidden personality. They may look quiet and unassuming, but several times a year they come alive with bizarre events such as underwater

pumpkin carving, conch blowing and what's said to be the most outrageous gay carnival in the US: costumes, drag queens and dancing in the streets are all par for the course.

On the one hand, the Keys are the ideal retirement spot for the elderly in search of sunshine; on the other, they are wildly permissive. This odd mixture of the easy going and the vibrantly eccentric has attracted all sorts of visitors over the years. Long home to some of the United States' most influential writers such as Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and Robert Frost, the paradise-like setting also has a third identity as a literary landmark unlike any other. Following Highway 1, we aimed to discover the true colours of the Keys along the way.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Driving south from Miami, the first longest, largest and easternmost island of the Florida Keys chain is Key Largo, set between Florida Bay, the Florida Straits and the Atlantic Ocean. The upper part of Key Largo is unspoiled and protected

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Above Follow the winding Seven Mile Bridge to idyllic Pigeon Key

home to the Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge, a 6,800-acre breeding sanctuary for the endangered American crocodile. For obvious reasons, no visitors are allowed here; though you are allowed in the water.

If you're looking for stylish accommodations with a friendly welcome, stop in at Azul del Mar, a brand new hotel with lovely views and sleek decor. The rooms come with their own kitchens for total independence and the British owner Dominic is more than happy to recommend local activities or just chat.

Moving onto Islamorada, the Caribbean vibe is going strong. Try bone-fishing in the flats around this 'Purple Isle', or head off-shore for wahoo, tuna or sailfish. Take your catch home or go to a 'catch to cook' restaurant like the appropriately named Lazy Days.

We check into the stylish Casa Morada, a boutique hotel started up by some swanky city types who decided to escape to the Keys. There's some reggae in the air, cool white decor, dazzling purple orchids and swaying palm trees. It's totally tropical. The bedroom consists of a simple, elegant wrought iron bed swathed in white linens and another sleek orchid; and of course the views stretching over the hotel's man-made island surrounded by surreal blue water.

The tiny island is covered in white sand, has a glorious pool and a cosy bar where guests gather at night. Sundown cocktails are accompanied by the relaxed chatter of those who have no care in the world. The barmaid tells stories of her five engagements, while guests play backgammon, show off their paintings and get to know each other, even introducing their dogs. At breakfast fresh muffins, bagels, cake and fruit make for a healthy start to the day, before ambling down to the pool, hanging in a hammock or going to explore in the hotel's sailboat. It's deliciously relaxing and laid-back.

LOST IN TIME

The closest we come to a strip mall is in Marathon, 'the heart of the keys', where Radio Shack and Office Depot remind you this is the US rather than some remote Caribbean island. But it's possible to steer clear of Wendy's burgers and find a more genuine food experience. For fantastic coconut shrimp or calamari, try the Key West Fisheries, where local delicacies are served up without any airs and graces. A popular restaurant for the food and the views over the dock, there are dozens of tanned clients waiting to be served. A majority of today's punters are elderly, but there's a breath of enthusiasm and youth running throughout. To pick up your food you have to give a celebrity alias. Over the tannoy, Elvis, Clark Gable and John Wayne are being called up. The generation gap is ➔



Photos: fia-keys.com



Photo: A.E. Hotchner/AP/Empics

“ There’s some reggae in the air, cool white decor, dazzling purple orchids and swaying palm trees. It’s totally tropical ”

Top Everywhere you look you'll find another quirk of the islands
Left Key West's favourite son, Ernest Hemingway, fell in love with the island's way of life



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striking. But it’s fun, and there’s a genuine ‘feel good’ attitude; a little like being in a scene from the movie *Cocoon*.

The route continues winding its way past quiet romantic sounding keys, from Long Key to the Conch Keys and Pigeon Key. Some damage from hurricanes is still visible, but life goes on. Slowly turn off the highway and you’re lost in time in a park-like setting where nature is the order of the day. Where else can you set up camp at Duck Key or lay down your hat on Sombrero Beach? Marathon also offers eco tours, fishing and diving for those in search of action.

TROPICAL TREASURES

Venture a little further afield and you’ll find the 30-mile stillness of the Lower Keys after passing over one of the Keys’ most famous landmarks: Seven Mile Bridge. An impressive structure, it rises high above the clear waters and is without a doubt the most impressive of all. A feat of engineering, it was built in the 1930s by World War I vets after the 1929 economic crash.

Here it seems civilisation takes a break and there is little but water. At Little Torch, we turn off onto the left on a dusty road to find a wooden reception house hidden behind the rushes. It doesn’t betray the incredible private island that lies beyond. An Abercrombie & Fitch-style poster boy, Taylor, gives us a virtual tour. There are only 39 suites, thatched cottages and cabanas on stilts.

Little Palm Island Resort is stunning; it looks more Bali than Florida. By the time the sleek

Florida Keys calendar

Take a trip to the Keys during the UK’s autumn and winter to sample incredibly crazy festivals, serious sporting competitions and intriguing educational event

- 5-10 September, Key West
Women Fest
Lesbian-oriented festival of art shows, sailing and snorkeling, comedy performances and other activities
www.womenfest.com
- 8-9 September, Islamorada
The Ghost Hunt
Bone-fishing tournament
www.fla-keys.com
- 19-22 September, Islamorada
29th Annual Islamorada Invitational Fall Fly Bonefish Tournament
www.challengercharters.com
- 20-21 October, Key West Bahama Village
Goombay Festival
Two-day street fair with island-style food, handmade African arts and crafts, nonstop live entertainment and dancing in the streets.
www.goombay-keywest.org
- 20-29 October, Key West
28th Annual Fantasy Fest
Outrageous 10-day celebration with a packed schedule of costume competitions, promenades and street fairs, and a grand parade featuring marching groups and lavish floats.
www.fantasyfest.net
- 29 October, Key Largo
Underwater Pumpkin Carving
Divers become underwater artists as they turn pumpkins into Halloween masterpieces beneath the sea in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.
www.fla-keys.com
- 31 October, Islamorada
Fright Night at Holiday Isle
Halloween party and costume contest with cash prizes.
www.fla-keys.com
- 5-6 November, Islamorada
13th Annual Corvettes in Paradise
www.flkeyscorvetteclub.com

Above Once used to control navigation in the Gulf of Mexico, Fort Jefferson is now a protected wildlife park

- 5-12 November, Key West
Key West Offshore World Championships
www.superboat.com
- 9 November, Key West
Conch Republic Offshore Powerboat Race
Association Fishing Tournament
www.keywest.com
- 30 November – 3 December, Key West
Pirates in Paradise 2006
Historic Key West and Fort Taylor are transformed into a pirates' stronghold with over 150 pirate entertainers. Tall ships, sea battles, arts and crafts, pirate sails, a living history encampment and nonstop entertainment celebrating Key West maritime history.
www.piratesinparadise.com
- 10 December, Big Pine
Winter Fest 2006
Fine arts, jewellery and crafts by entirely local Keys artists.
www.fla-keys.com
- 15 December, Key West
Key West Lighted Boat Parade
Features decorated and lighted boats from kayaks to schooners cruising through Key West Harbor and the waters of the Historic Seaport to celebrate the Christmas holidays.
www.schoonerwharf.com
- 16 December, Key Largo
Key Largo Christmas Boat Parade
Decorated boats parade along the shoreline of Blackwater Sound.
www.fla-keys.com
- 31 December, Islamorada
New Year's Eve Fireworks at Holiday Isle
This spectacular fireworks display over the water is a highlight of the holiday.
www.holidayisle.com
- 31 December, Key West
14th Annual New Year's Eve Key West Celebrations
The Southernmost City celebrates New Year's Eve with a wench drop at Schooner Wharf, a conch shell drop at Sloppy Joe's Bar and a red high heel drop with drag queen Sushi at Bourbon Street Pub/New Orleans House.
www.keywest.com
- January – May, Key West
Key West Old Island Days including art festival, crafts show, conch shell blowing contest and house and garden tours holidays.
www.fla-keys.com



Above Visitors flock to Key West to follow in the footsteps of the island's most famous literary resident, from visiting his home to making friends with his unusual cats.

mahogany launch takes us to the resort, I'm totally bewitched (see p46 for more resort info).
On the way to our new home we encounter the first of many miniature key deer. With their big eyes and wet noses, they are so lovely that it's hard not to feed them or take one home with you (both against the law). The deer amble through the property freely and, at night, they even come to pinch bread off your table.

It may seem quiet but there is plenty to do on Little Palm; from the spa to the beach and of course there's the sea: snorkelling, swimming, kayaking among the mangroves or even taking out a Boston whaler for a spin. Grab a picnic and discover your own deserted island or simply settle in to watch the impossibly colourful sunset, armed with a cocktail.

WRITER'S RETREAT

The final stop on our tour of the Keys is the United States' most southern point: Key West. Nicknamed the Conch Republic, the tiny laid-back island is by far the busiest Key with a reputation as a party place and literary shrine. Visitors of all creeds converge on Key West: cruise ship passengers, students on breaks and families in search of entertainment. The city is vibrant, continuously abuzz. Escape to the picturesque white beaches; into the waters where wrecks and reefs make for tropical diving; relax in a picturesque Bahamian-style wooden cottage; or simply soak up the tingling atmosphere.

Once a haven for wreckers, drug-runners and fisherman alike, the island is alive with tales of days gone by; especially about its most famous resident, Ernest Hemingway (1889-1961), who called it home throughout the 1930s when he lived here with wife Pauline and children. A visit to the Spanish colonial villa at 907 Whitehead St, where he lived, is almost compulsory. The registered National Historic Landmark is now a museum where his presence is still palpable. ▶▶



“ Reminders of ‘Papa’ Hemingway are everywhere. He fell in love with the island and called it paradise ”

Top The annual Hemingway lookalike contest brings many bearded revellers to the Keys
 Above The community celebrates the life and works of the famous Papa
 Above right The descendants of Hemingway’s cat are still resident at his former home

essentials

HOW TO GET THERE

- Fly to Miami with Virgin Atlantic from £452.30 (inc tax) in economy including pre-paid taxes. www.virgin-atlantic.com.
- Hire a car to go cruising from Miami down to the Keys in style with Avis. www.avis.co.uk

ADDRESS BOOK

- Azul del Mar, 104300 Overseas Highway, Key Largo, Tel: 001 305 451 0337 www.azulkeylargo.com
- Little Palm Island Resort & Spa, Little Torch Key www.littlepalmisland.com
- Casa Morada, 136 Madeira Road, Islamorada www.casamorada.com

FIND OUT MORE

- www.hemingwayhome.com
- www.fla-keys.com
- www.visitflorida.com
- Call 0870 770 1177 for a free Florida Vacation Guide & Map

Aside from the island’s first ever swimming pool – which reportedly set the Hemingways back \$200,000 – and collection of antiques, the villa has another reminder of its illustrious owner: a colony of cats, many of which have six toes and are all descended from a cat Hemingway received as a gift from a sea captain friend.

He wrote *Death in the Afternoon* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* here, and even set *To Have and Have Not* in post-1929-depression Key West. He fell in love with the island and called it paradise. He would interview any local characters and write down every detail. Reminders of ‘Papa’ Hemingway are everywhere; he liked to drink at Sloppy Joe’s Bar on Duval Street and his spirit still lingers on the corner of Thomas and Petronia where he often refereed boxing matches. He wrote, drank and discovered a passion for game fishing here, until he left his wife – and Key West – for another woman in 1939.

Hemingway wasn’t the only intellectual to set up camp in Key West. Tennessee Williams stayed here from the 1940s until his death in 1983, writing both *Summer and Smoke* and *Night of the Iguana* from his home at 1431 Duncan Street, which he bought with the proceeds from *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Poet Robert Frost, authors Richard Wilbur, Jim Harrison, Judy Blume and Nancy Friday, as well as painters such as Winslow Homer and John James Audubon have been inspired by the islands; even actors like Cary Grant found refuge here. I can’t help but wonder which side of the Keys attracted them: the easy-going Caribbean attitude or the permissive ways of Key West? Or perhaps it was the combination available; from natural reserves to luxurious retreats and the ubiquitous effervescence of life in Key West. ☀