

The Florida Keys & Key West

... come as you are®



Internationally renowned marine life artist Wyland shows off his 95th mammoth marine life mural, painted on a four-story building in Key Largo. The entire mural, depicting a Florida Keys coral reef scene, is 7,500 square feet and wraps around the building's four sides. It is to be Wyland's final United States mural in his worldwide series of 100 larger-than-life artworks.

Dolphin Facilities Embrace AMMPA Philosophy

The Atlantic bottlenose dolphins residing at interactive facilities throughout the Florida Keys are living the good life. They work. They play. They get the highest quality medical care and food. They make baby dolphins.

Many of the dolphins' homes in the Keys are members of the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA), including Dolphin Research Center in Marathon, Dolphin Connection at Hawk's Cay on Duck Key and the Theater of the Sea in Islamorada.



Members have successfully completed the AMMPA's stringent accreditation process, which assures that the facility meets the association's standards and guidelines "to optimize the psychological and physical health of, and environmental conditions for, individual marine mammals under their care and to maximize the educational and scientific value of their collections as a whole."

But the dolphins themselves are the best evidence of the care they receive and the love and professionalism that go into that care. Tursi, daughter of two of the original "Flipper" dolphins from the movie and television show of the same name, is still thriving at Dolphin Research Center – even though she's 44 years old.

Earth-Friendly Lodging Beckons Environmentally Savvy Travelers

When guests check into Deer Run Bed and Breakfast on Big Pine Key, they'll find an environmental focus that extends far beyond the property's location. Nestled on a secluded, tree-shaded Atlantic Ocean beach, close to two protected wildlife preserves in the pristine Lower Florida Keys, Deer Run is operated to reflect its innkeepers' earth-friendly mindset.

At breakfast, guests at the small Caribbean-style inn can savor vegetarian feasts prepared by Jennifer DeMaria, owner of Deer Run with fiancé Harry Appel. Home-baked breads and fruits are predominantly organic and sourced locally, and the kitchen serves only organic fair trade coffee and tea.

Guestrooms feature organic cotton towels, cruelty-free eco-friendly products are used throughout the inn, water is collected in rain barrels for irrigation and the mineral springs pool is solar-heated. The couple's goal is a completely solar-powered energy system.

The innkeepers encourage visitors to enjoy low-impact nature-oriented activities in the Lower Keys: discovering the beach and indigenous plantings at Bahia Honda State Park, snorkeling or diving Looe Key Reef in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary or kayaking the shallow mangrove areas rich in bird life.

As well as Deer Run, other properties with a strong environmental focus can be found throughout the Florida Keys. For more information about Deer Run, visit www.deerrunfloridabb.com.

Visit Florida Keys Web sites at www.fla-keys.com, fla-keys.co.uk, fla-keys.de, fla-keys.ie, fla-keys.fr or fla-keys.nl



Sail and Snorkel the Shallows of Key West

When all you hear is the sound of water slipping by the hull, you know you're enjoying a part of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary—quiet, unhurried, enthralled by the dazzling beauty of these protected shallows.

Vandenberg Transforming a Rusted Relic into a Reef

By the summer of 2008, a retired military ship that had been rusting away in a Virginia river for almost a quarter-century is to be intentionally sunk off Key West to serve as a new habitat for marine life and a new attraction for divers.

The former U.S. Air Force missile-tracking ship Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, a 523-foot vessel that also monitored American spacecraft blastoffs, is being cleansed from stem to stern to remove all contaminants so it can be intentionally sunk in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

After it is scuttled, algae will form on exposed surfaces of the ship, providing the foundation for coral-building organisms. The accumulation of attached marine life in turn provides intricate habitat and food for many species of fish. The ship should benefit the underwater environment by taking recreational diving pressure off natural coral reefs.

The Vandenberg will not be the first American military ship to serve as an artificial reef in the Keys. Coast Guard cutters Bibb and Duane as well as the Navy's Spiegel Grove were purposely sunk off Key Largo.

For more Vandenberg details, dive in to www.bigshipwrecks.com.

Aboard one of the "skipjack" sailboats operated by Danger Charters of Key West, guests sail to the pristine, infrequently visited coral reefs and sponge gardens of the shallows and backcountry around the island city. The 65-foot-long Danger and Danger's Prize contradict their christenings by providing safe, comfortable, laid-back sails through clear waters to mangrove islands surrounded by marine life.

The crew helps each guest into properly fitted snorkel gear and the sightseeing begins. Queen conch, corals and sponges, tropical fish, rays and spiny lobsters are sighted. Occasionally a manatee is seen grazing on the turtle grass around the islands. The backcountry gives snorkelers a peek at the undiscovered Keys. For more information, visit www.dangercharters.com.



Kayak the Undiscovered Keys

From the highway, it's a distant vision of an unspoiled tropical wilderness. From a kayak, it's the Florida Keys as the early explorers saw it — quiet, undeveloped, wild.



Blue Planet Kayak Tours specializes in guided eco-tours of the Lower Keys backcountry. Guides point out the unique wildlife of the mangrove estuaries and flats and answer questions about the birds, plants and marine animals kayakers see.

Paddlers of any skill level are welcome because the backcountry is just a short paddle from the departure point. Before long, paddlers see herons and egrets stalking their prey in the shallows. Overhead, ospreys ride the air in search of mullet. Inches below the surface of the crystal clear warm water are fish and invertebrates like sponges and sea hares.

Visitors to Blue Planet can take a sunset and starlight tour. After watching a spectacular Keys sunset, paddlers set out with headlamps to explore nocturnal life in the backcountry.

For the more adventurous paddlers, there's a tour through a wildlife refuge where sights include stingrays and small bonnethead sharks, larger lemon and nurse sharks, tidal pools crowded with marine life and local raptors including the powerful, white-headed bald eagle, the national bird of the United States. For tour details, visit www.blue-planet-kayak.com.

Upper Keys Artists Celebrate Keys Environment

The environment surrounding the Florida Keys provides a perfect canvas for resident Upper Keys artists. Whether black and white photographs, colorful marine life and water scenes or pieces paying tribute to various indigenous wildlife, their artwork speaks volumes about their feelings for the destination.

Among those artists are Clyde Butcher, who has carved out a career with striking black and white environmentally charged photography; and Islamorada-based Stacie Krupa, whose art features vibrantly charged scenes of jumping game fish in such eye-popping colors they seem to leap off the canvas.

In addition, with a roster of 26 artists, the Redbone Gallery in Islamorada is bursting at the seams with art that evokes the Florida Keys, the region's world-class fishing and the varied marine creatures that call the local waters home.

With passion and skill, Upper Keys artists memorialize the destination's many wildlife and marine life jewels. Stepping into their galleries, visitors realize the artists' commitment to using their craft and their talents to share their vision of the region's unique environment.



New Resorts in Florida Keys 'Go Green'

Dedicated to maintaining the strong environmental focus evident throughout the Florida Keys, several of the region's new resorts are "going green" — implementing systems to conserve energy as well as offering programs that highlight the natural surroundings of the destination.

The new Beachside Resort & Conference Center has a system in place that remotely monitors electricity consumed in each unit, allowing management to track and adjust electrical use as needed. The Key West resort consists of 222 luxury rooms and suites amid more than seven acres of landscaped property — including a private beach and five-star resort-style amenities. For more information, visit www.spottswoodhotels.com/beachside.

Key Largo Grande Resort & Beach Club has its own wastewater management plant, a cardboard recycling program and laundry request "green" cards in all guest rooms.

The current \$12 million renovation also includes replacement of all incandescent bulbs with fluorescents. Located on Florida Bay in Key Largo, the resort features 190 rooms with private balconies, 10 large suites and a 21-slip marina. For more information, visit www.keylargo.com.

Dedicated Animal Rescuers Provide Compassion and Care

It's not only human visitors who come to the Florida Keys for rest and relaxation. Marine mammals in need come calling as well. Some arrive with health problems, while others are orphaned or lost.

Whatever their reasons for coming to the Keys, ailing dolphins, whales and manatees encounter a willing and dedicated group of rescuers ready to lend a helping hand. A caring community of professionals and volunteers tries to assess and provide what these marine animals need to return them to their pods or habitual territory.

The Florida Keys Marine Mammal Rescue Team, Marathon's Dolphin Research Center and the Key Largo-based Marine Mammal Conservancy pursue rescue, rehabilitation and return to the wild as their goals.

Sea turtles are cared for through the efforts of Marathon's Turtle Hospital, where a dedicated team runs the world's only certified hospital of its kind. Turtles with a variety of injuries and ailments are brought to the hospital for treatment, rehabilitation and release to the wild. If a release isn't possible, the creatures become permanent residents.

As well as marine animals, individuals and groups are dedicated to providing food, compassion and treatment for wild birds and even homeless felines throughout the Keys.



Captain Victoria Shares Love of Ocean Realm



The waters surrounding the Florida Keys are a mecca for people passionate about the ocean environment and the creatures that inhabit it. Few are more passionate than Captain Victoria Impallomeni, a Keys native who has made it her life's work to share the wonders of the area's saltwater realm.

A native wilderness guide for 32 years, Captain Victoria offers unique excursions into Key West's protected waters and wildlife refuges aboard her Imp II, a 25-foot shallow-draft powerboat that holds six passengers. Trained as an environmental marine scientist, she flavors each trip with her keen observations and attitude of respect and reverence toward nature.

Visitors can enter the world of wild dolphins during Captain Victoria's dancing water spirit dolphin adventure, described as a healing and revitalizing day of transformation. Highlights include snorkeling in shallow coral-filled waters, a picnic on a mangrove island and a guided meditation in the company of whatever dolphins choose to participate.

Captain Victoria also offers wilderness tours that take participants into the unspoiled mangrove ecosystems surrounding Key West. This natural habitat is home to birds such as herons and ospreys, as well as marine creatures including manatees, sea turtles and wild dolphins.

For prices and departure information for the Imp II's environmental water adventures, visit www.captainvictoria.com.



Birds of a Feather Visit the Keys Together

Surrounded by the warm clear waters of Florida Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean, visitors and locals usually can be seen gazing down, catching glimpses of the spectacular marine life living close to shore. But there are other visual delights that walk the shallow flats and fly the clear, blue skies of the Florida Keys.

Birding has become one of the eco-friendly activities enjoyed by visitors to the Keys, and is celebrated each fall in the Florida Keys Birding and Wildlife Festival.

The annual event lets birders and sightseers get acquainted with some of the unique birds and wildlife native to the Keys. One highlight is the massive number of peregrine falcons — as many as 15,000 — that move through the Keys on their southerly migration.

The festival, based at Curry Hammock State Park in Marathon, includes field trips to many prime birding sites throughout the Florida Keys. Special activities for children are featured each year, as are educational seminars for adults and an environmental fair.

The festival coincides with the annual Florida Keys Raptor Migration Project, a research program that counts falcons and hawks as the raptors migrate through the Keys. Scientists and naturalists are on site to talk to visitors about the birds and their relationship to the Keys.

Bike Tour Offers Off-the-Beaten-Path Insights on Key West

For 17 years, Lloyd Mager has offered bicycle tours of Key West, introducing participants to the winding lanes, historic architecture, tropical fruits and flowers, hidden gardens and pocket parks most visitors never see.

It's a world he discovered 35 years ago when he ventured south from New Jersey to visit his brother, abandoned his car and embraced the casual island lifestyle. Now he shares it with visitors — not as an impersonal tour guide, but as a local inviting new friends to explore his home.

Lloyd's Tropical Bike Tours last approximately two hours, with participants on rental bikes obtained at the start of the excursion, and encompass four to five miles of easy pedaling along flat island byways. The pace is meandering, comfortable enough for kids or sedentary adults.

During the ride, participants inhale the fragrance of blossoms Mager picks for them, taste exotic fruits like Barbados cherry from a tiny park next to the picturesque Key West Cemetery, visit off-the-beaten-path natural preserves and private gardens, and sample sweet coconut water and meat.

Their unique flavor is a perfect match for the flavor of the tour itself. For more information, visit www.LloydsTropicalBikeTour.com.

Secluded Rainforest Thrives in Key West's Old Town

Visitors seeking a pristine environment can find it at Nancy Forrester's Secret Garden, a breathtaking mini-rainforest hidden at the end of Free School Lane in Key West's historic Old Town neighborhood.

Environmental artist and activist Nancy Forrester has spent 40 years creating and preserving the jungle-like one-acre property that features scores of rare and endangered plants.

The garden contains more than 150 different species of palms, hundreds of other exotic trees, fruit and spice trees, plants including orchids and bromeliads, and more than 300 species gifted from a rare aroid and fern rainforest collection. They share the garden with a sizeable family of magnificent macaws, an educational exhibit and parrots rescued and cared for by the charitable organization Mana Project.

The garden is open year-round for self-guided tours from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Admission is \$10 per person. In addition, it can be booked for weddings, gatherings and special events. For more information, visit www.nancyforrester.com.



Released to Catch Again

Since the late 19th century, anglers have been known to catch and release many species of fish — in particular trout and Atlantic salmon. But it was in the Florida Keys that the catch-and-release ethic became a way of life for saltwater anglers.



Backcountry game fish — 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 the dinner table.

On the ocean side of the island chain, Keys charterboat 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."

Catch and release is so much a part of angling throughout the Keys that most major tournaments mandate that fish are released alive.

Most research shows that properly released fish do survive. In the Keys, anglers take special pride in watching their worthy adversaries swim away to fight another day.

Kiteboarders Rock on Adventure Learning Vacations

Paul Menta has kite-surfed from Key West to Cuba and pursued his sport in places as extreme as a lake beside three Guatemalan volcanoes at 10,000 feet.

Widely regarded as a kiteboarding pioneer, he adventured around the world — and then settled in Key West, where he offers kiteboard training vacations at his unique Kitehouse training center.

Students immerse themselves in the kiteboarding lifestyle, absorbing skills and moves, safety procedures and a philosophy of living in the moment and becoming one with the environment.

Kiteboarding requires a waist harness, a kite attached by four lines, a steering bar and a board. In the clear shallow waters of the Keys backcountry, students learn to pump up and fly the kite, steer the bar and attempt jumps, spins and other maneuvers on the board.

Kitehouse training options range from one- to five-day beginner programs to a five-day intermediate course — and most instruction is one-on-one with the teacher. Riding excursions are offered for advanced kiteboarders who don't need instruction.

"Even though we have a small island, we have a huge backcountry, a lot of shallow water and 360 degrees of wind," said Menta. "Because of this unique situation, we have a super-safe environment to learn the sport."

For information about Kitehouse learning vacations and excursions, including prices and lodging, visit www.thekitehouse.com/key_west.php.



Laura Quinn: Her Dedication is "For the Birds"

A simple wooden bird sign beckons visitors into the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center in Tavernier, an outdoor haven for nature lovers created and maintained by the bird lady herself, Laura Quinn, and her staff.

Once a statistician and mathematics teacher, Quinn always loved nature and upon retirement, began carving native birds for a living. Eventually she met Dr. Robert Foley, an Upper Keys veterinarian. The two collaborated and the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center opened in 1990.

Located in a natural Upper Keys setting beside Florida Bay, the center is dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing ill, injured and orphaned wild birds. Some at the center are recuperating and others, unable to survive in the wild, become lifelong inhabitants.

A walk along a boardwalk nature trail allows for a close look at resident hawks, ospreys, spoonbills, egrets and more. The scenic route also features minnows and crabs along with colorful bromeliads enhancing the landscape.

Catching a late afternoon bird feeding near the water's edge is another one of the highlights at this natural habitat. And Quinn's bird carvings are on display in the gift shop. For more information, visit www.fkwbc.org.



Visit Florida Keys Web sites at www.fla-keys.com



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