



Keys Traveler

DIVE EDITION

fla-keys.com

Dive Volunteerism
Reef Etiquette
Wrecks and Reefs
Learn to Dive

A diver explores the Spiegel Grove off Key Largo.

Stephen Frink

Keys Programs Spotlight Wrecks and Reefs

For thousands of scuba diving and snorkeling enthusiasts who visit the Florida Keys annually, two unique programs spotlight the Keys' shipwrecks and coral reefs between Key Largo and Key West. Each program offers special souvenir journals for participants.

The Florida Keys Wreck Trek logbook features nine iconic sites: Duane, Benwood, Eagle, Thunderbolt, Adolphus Busch Senior, Cayman Salvager, Joe's Tug and two of the world's largest shipwrecks intentionally sunk as artificial reefs,

the Spiegel Grove and Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg.

Advanced, wreck-certified divers who complete at least one wreck dive with a participating dive operator receive the logbook and a personalized print of Florida Keys shipwrecks.

First-timers, families and fun-loving adventure groups can participate in the Become a Reef Explorer program. Participants receive a journal from a professional dive or snorkel operator and collect validation stamps each time they visit one of a region's reefs highlighted in the journal.

After divers or snorkelers collect one reef stamp in each the five regions of the Keys, they can email reefexplorer@fla-keys.com and receive an access code to download, personalize and print a frame-ready Florida Keys Reef Explorer poster.



Keys Traveler DIVE EDITION

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Cover photo by Tim Grollimund

Regardless of experience, divers in the Florida Keys exercise caution and awareness of their surroundings – reef etiquette extends to snorkelers and even participants in SNUBA, a cross between snorkeling and scuba.

Every day Keys dive operators help enforce – through continued education and shared information – guidelines from boat etiquette to the “no touch” rules that are strictly enforced for all divers and snorkelers visiting the coral reefs within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Many dive shops have a low divers-to-guide ratio when they are in the water with their divers, ensuring they employ proper reef etiquette – a procedure that is especially important among beginner divers such as open-water students or newly certified divers just learning to control their buoyancy underwater.

Late spring and summer are among the best times to explore the undersea world of the Florida Keys, but it's crucial to practice important reef etiquette:

Before hitting the water, apply **environmentally safe sunscreens** both for skin protection and to eliminate harmful chemicals such as oxybenzone from entering the water column and poisoning coral reefs.

Avoid wearing gloves, except when diving on wrecks.

Perform weight checks at the surface.

Trim weights correctly — taking weight off during the dive or redistributing weights on the belt. Dive shops demonstrate to new divers the proper **neutrally buoyant position**, how far to keep off the reef and correct swimming kick style.

Understand that **touching the coral reef** is damaging.

Private boaters need also to be aware of **dive flag etiquette** and properly evaluate diving conditions,

Be an Ocean Advocate Florida Keys Reef Etiquette for Divers

Pam Murphy



It's important for divers to practice reef etiquette such as the correct swimming kick style and a neutrally buoyant position to keep from impacting the reef.

including slowing down in an area where another vessel is displaying a dive flag, paying close attention to currents, staying close to the boat and having someone who knows how to operate the vessel remain on the boat at all times.

Paramount among private vessels is **not to anchor on the reef**. Be aware of **reef mooring buoys** to use instead of anchoring; many dive

and snorkel sites are located within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, and anchoring in marked **Sanctuary Preservation Areas** is prohibited.

When divers are educated about reef responsibility, everyone involved can benefit — and the coral reef can remain the Florida Keys' greatest environmental treasure for generations.



Divers play a significant role as stewards of the world's oceans. They can give back to the living, dynamic ecosystem of the Florida Keys through "voluntourism" vacations, helping to protect the continental United States' only living coral barrier reef by diving purposefully for the greater good.

Recreational sport divers can join coral restoration dive programs for ongoing coral propagation efforts with marine scientists from Key Largo's Coral Restoration Foundation and Mote Marine Tropical Research Laboratory, a fully equipped facility located on Summerland Key as a substation of Sarasota, Florida-based Mote Marine Laboratory.

Divers learn about environmental impacts on Keys reefs through orientations and hands-on restoration dives. Endangered base-building corals include boulder, brain and star corals. Two branching species, staghorn and elkhorn, propagate quickly to create new habitats.

On working dives to coral nurseries, volunteers clean and prepare corals for planting. Dives at restoration sites involve planting coral fragments and show firsthand the evolution of corals over time.

Coral restoration is something the average person can get their hands on and do, giving people ownership. Volunteers can take the experience back to their home communities to encourage others to join the cause.

Capturing lionfish is another hands-on activity for divers to help preserve the Keys' natural resources and protect reef organisms. Capture and consumption of lionfish helps prevent the invasive Indo-Pacific species from voraciously preying on invertebrates



Divers with the Key Largo-based Coral Restoration Foundation harvest coral clippings in an underwater nursery.

Photo by Tim Grollimund

and juvenile fish, stealing food resources from domestic species like grouper and snapper.

The popular aquarium fish, probably introduced to Florida waters during the 1980s, has no natural reef predators except humans.

The Keys' Reef Environmental Education Foundation, whose mission

is to conserve marine ecosystems, partners with the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and the dive community to create awareness about the importance of removing lionfish from Keys waters.

There is no season or size limit for lionfish. Recreational lionfish roundups provide divers a chance to

capture, earn prizes and sample the tasty edible fish.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission also established an annual Lionfish Removal and Awareness Day throughout Florida, the first Saturday in May following Mother's Day.

Divers in the Florida Keys

contribute through everyday conservation actions to leave an area cleaner than they found it. Cutting and removing monofilament fishing line eliminates a potential entanglement for other divers and marine life, such as endangered sea turtles. Picking up lost fishing tackle as well as removing cans,

bottles, plastics and refuse can make a huge difference over time.

For other eco-friendly opportunities and activities in the Florida Keys, visit fla-keys.com/sustain.

— Julie Botteri

Snorkeling the Keys Underwater Paradise

Katherine Wieland snorkels to examine the 'Christ of the Deep' statue off Key Largo.

Featuring vivid coral reefs teeming with exotic sea creatures, the Florida Keys attract snorkel and scuba aficionados each year who can't wait to get into the water and explore — even as first-timers.

Snorkeling requires a mask, snorkel, fins for propulsion and inflatable snorkeling vest to enjoy a day of underwater sightseeing. Professional snorkel charters provide (and rent) equipment and simple instruction. Add an SPF-rated shirt or "rash guard" and coral-friendly sunscreen for protection and you're ready to go.

Spectacular shallow reefs are a short boat ride from shore, located in water that's often just 10 to 15 feet deep.

Some favorite undersea sites include the nation's first undersea park, Key Largo's John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. Nearby, the 9-foot-tall 4,000-pound bronze statue known as "Christ of the Deep" stands on a concrete base in approximately 25 feet of water and is one of the most photographed underwater sites in the world.

Off Islamorada, Alligator Reef is populated with yellowtail snapper, grunts, goatfish and damselfish. Spiny lobsters hide in crevices.

Among Marathon's notable patch reefs and spur and groove formations is Sombrero Reef, marked by a large lighted tower.

The Lower Keys' Looe Key Reef is one of the most spectacular shallow-water undersea environs. Its great numbers of reef fish annually play host to snorkelers and divers during the Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival.

Key West offers snorkelers nearby offshore wreck and artificial reef sites with abundant marine life, gorgonians and corals like the Western Sambos, part of an ecological reserve, and Eastern Dry Rocks.

Snorkeling is the perfect family activity for close observation of the inhabitants of one of the world's most diverse, complex and beautiful ecosystems.

Blue Star–Certified Operators Inspire Confidence for Keys Visitors

Catering to divers and snorkelers enjoying coral reefs within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, Blue Star–certified dive and snorkel charters differentiate themselves as having voluntarily trained with a government agency to help educate others and reduce human impacts on the coral reef system, the only barrier reef in the continental U.S.

Responsible diving is commonly practiced by encouraging visitors to help reduce stress on coral reefs while partaking of their beauty.

Since Blue Star's inception in 2010, some 20 Keys professional operators have become members, adhering to the program's coral reef education and conservation standards, and including Blue Star program messaging throughout dive briefings and student certification programs.

Participating dive operators meet certain criteria and are evaluated yearly. Trained staff members are committed to promoting responsible tourism, aimed at teaching in-water etiquette such as the rules of sanctuary-protected areas, reef fish identification, practicing good buoyancy, taking care in placement of hands and fins as well as avoiding touching or standing on coral.

Participating divers and snorkelers can become Blue Star Partners by attending a reef etiquette briefing or watching a reef etiquette educational video, to learn more about diver responsibilities.

Blue Star–rated operators can be identified by a flag or decal with the Blue Star logo displayed on their charter vessel.

floridakeys.noaa.gov/onthewater/bluestar



Learn to Dive in the Florida Keys

Learn-to-dive options in the Florida Keys range from introductory one-day experiences, full certification and various specialties to professional diving career opportunities — all with personalized training. Here are some basic facts.

Who can learn to dive? Scuba diving is an adventure sport that any healthy and active individual as young as age 10 can enjoy.

What classes are available? Entry-level, "open water" certification involves three to five days of training and classroom work covering concepts such as basic physics and physiology, ocean waves, marine life, monitoring dive time and depth, followed by pool and open-water dives at the reef. Students also learn about navigation around natural formations.

Upon passing a knowledge test and completing the required number of dives, students become certified recreational scuba divers, eligible to rent dive gear and book dive trips to depths of about 60 feet with most

operations worldwide.

Where do students receive their dive training?

Some of the first businesses to offer recreational dive training in America were opened in the Keys. Dozens of dive operators, staffed with working professionals, actively teach and train daily.

When are classes offered?

A primary advantage of the Florida Keys is year-round tropical weather and clear, warm seas to practice skin diving and scuba skills virtually any day of the year. Training conditions are nice and easy, with light currents and great underwater visibility.

Why dive the Keys? The reef lives in waters as shallow as 5 feet and up to 50 feet, but most reef divers

log a maximum depth of 20 to 30 feet. Keys shallow diving offers two immediate benefits: longer time safely spent on the bottom exploring, and brighter and more vibrant colors because more natural sunlight reaches shallow depths.

— Julie Botteri



Students practice scuba diving skills with an instructor off Marathon.

The Florida Keys History of Diving Museum, mile marker 82.9 in Islamorada, offers a free "Immerse Yourself!" lecture series for underwater enthusiasts.

Qualified and trained experts present as guest lecturers the third Wednesday of every month at 7 p.m.

Families of all ages can experience the Coral Reef Exploration exhibit at Islamorada's Florida Keys History & Discovery Center at Islander Resort, mile marker 82. A result of a

Yearn to Learn at Keys Facilities

partnership with Sarasota, Florida-based Mote Marine Laboratory, the exhibit features educational storyboards, interactive kiosks and video monitors that provide an educational view of the Keys' unique coral reef ecosystem and the challenges it faces.

Native local species populate a 1,250-gallon aquarium with angel and butterfly fish, tangs and wrasse, and invertebrates. Two 280-gallon aquariums support invasive lionfish, live cor-

als, crustaceans and Keys reef fish.

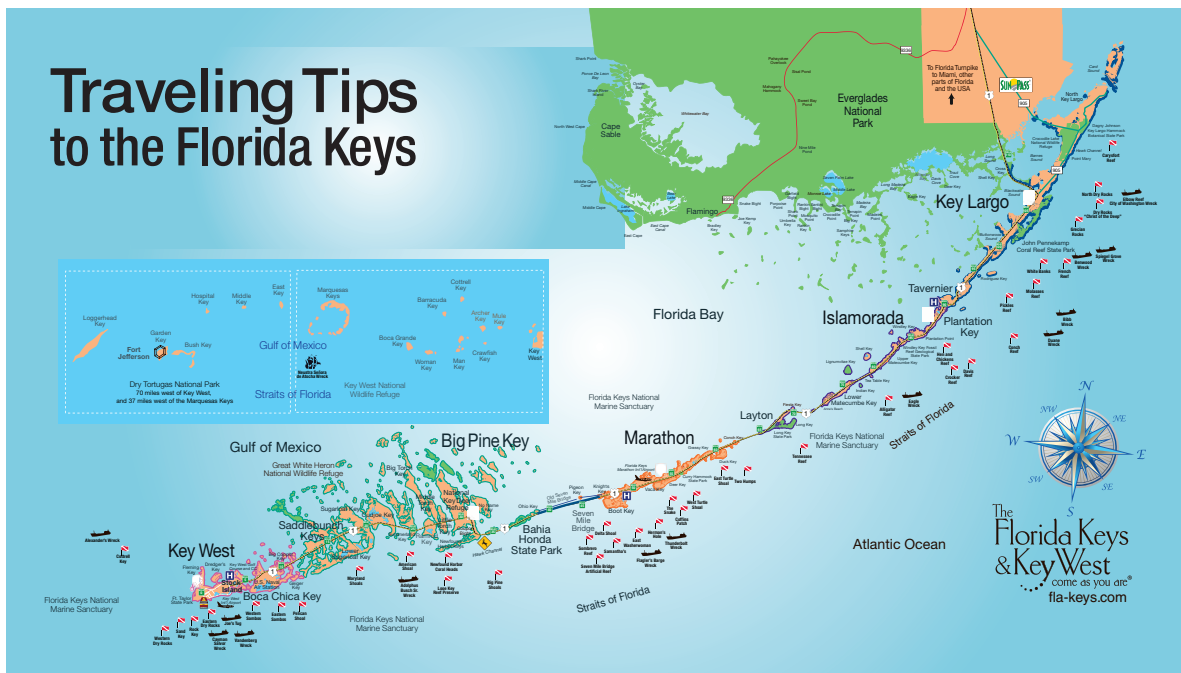
Key Largo-based Reef Environmental Education Foundation presents "Fishinars" to divers, snorkelers and landlubbers who want to know more about ocean life. Great for first-time REEF surveyors or those wanting a review, the short, free webinars teach the finer points of identifying fish and invertebrates underwater. Guest speakers present free "Fishinars" on a variety of ocean topics. Registration is required.

Key Largo's Coral Restoration Foundation launched OK-Coral, an innovative swipe-based app for smartphones. With a special underwater housing called "Smart Housing," users can take and upload photos of transplanted corals.

The interactive app enables snorkelers and divers to become citizen scientists and collect information about reef restoration sites and document coral photos.

Marathon-based Florida Keys Aquarium Encounters offers a personalized Aquarium Encounters Coral Reef Dive certification led by a dive instructor who provides education about the unique Florida Keys marine ecosystem.

Traveling Tips to the Florida Keys



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The 125-mile-long Florida Keys island chain is linked to mainland Florida by U.S. Highway 1, the Overseas Highway. Visitors can fly into Miami International Airport (MIA) or Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL) and from there can reach the Keys by airport shuttle bus or rental car. Travelers can reach Key Largo, the gateway to the Keys, in about an hour from Miami or an hour and 45 minutes from Fort Lauderdale.

Air Service to the Florida Keys

For an up-to-date roster of commercial airlines and on-demand charter operators serving Key West International and Florida Keys Marathon International Airports, go to fla-keys.com/how-to-get-here.

Driving Directions

From Miami International Airport (MIA), take LeJeune Road south to 836 West. Take the Florida Turnpike (State Road 91) south toward Key West.

The Turnpike ends at U.S. 1 in Florida City. Follow U.S. 1 south about 22 miles to Key Largo and you and your travel companions will be in the Florida Keys.

From Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL), exit the airport and follow the signs for I-595 West. Take 595 to the Florida Turnpike and follow

the signs for the Florida Keys.

From farther north, take the Florida Turnpike south to just below Fort Lauderdale, where Exit 4 joins the southern portion of the Turnpike that ends at U.S. 1 in Florida City. Follow U.S. 1 south into the Florida Keys.

From Florida's west coast, take I-75 (Alligator Alley) south to the Miami exit, and south to the Turnpike Extension.

Driving Data to Keys/Key Largo

FROM	MILES	KM	HOURS
Miami	50	80	1
Fort Myers	200	320	4
Tampa	300	480	6
Orlando	280	450	5.25

Distance from Miami

REGION	MILES	KM	MILE MARKER
Key Largo	50	80	107-90
Islamorada	76	122	89-66
Marathon	111	178	65-45
Lower Keys	128	205	44-5
Key West	159	254	4-0

Via Bus

Bus/shuttle connections from MIA and FLL to the Florida Keys allow traveling to the Keys without renting a car.

Via Boat

Ferry connections from Fort Myers or Marco Island to Key West are offered via the Key West Express. Voyages take approximately 3.5 hours.

Extensive details on getting to the Florida Keys & Key West are available at:

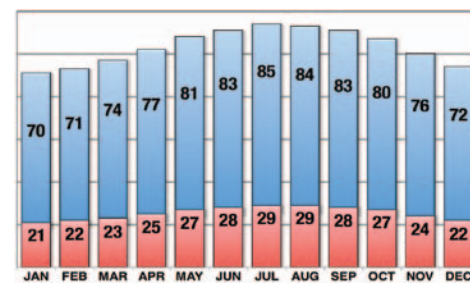
fla-keys.com/how-to-get-here

Weather/Climate

Wherever you are right now, chances are the weather is better in the Florida Keys. That's true even on a summer day. The hottest it's ever been in Key West is 97° F (36° C), and that was in 1880. At summer's peak, the average high air temperature is about 89° F (32° C). The Keys are devoid of superhighways or urban sprawl to absorb and radiate the sun's heat. And the islands are cooled by sea breezes.

In the winter, the Keys are typically the warmest region in the continental U.S. There has never been a frost in Key West, according to the U.S. Weather Service.

Below are past 30-year monthly air temperatures, according to the Key West weather office. Temperatures in blue shades are Fahrenheit and those in red are Celsius.



Help and More Information

If you're traveling in the Keys and need any help, call the toll-free visitors assistance line at 800-771-KEYS. It's staffed 24 hours a day. To contact visitor offices in the Keys, call 800-FLA-KEYS. The Keys website at fla-keys.com has a live chat feature with visitor specialists available during U.S. weekday business hours to aid travelers.

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