

# Keys Traveler

*Welcome back  
to the Florida Keys*





Dear Friends,

The southern stretch of U.S. Highway 1, running from mainland Florida through the Florida Keys to Key West, has earned many names over the years. It's been called the Overseas Highway, The Highway That Goes to Sea and an All-American Road.

But for those of us who love the Keys, whether as residents or visitors, it's our road home.

Following Hurricane Irma's unwelcome visit to the Florida Keys and mainland Florida, that highway also became an enduring symbol of our road to recovery.

That's because many islands along the Overseas Highway sustained damage from Irma. Some, like Key Largo and the bayside/gulf areas of Islamorada and Marathon, as well as the southernmost island of Key West, felt less of the storm's wrath. Others, such as the Lower Keys and the oceanside regions of Islamorada and Marathon, experienced more and will require more time to recover.

The hurricane might have impacted the Keys' landscape, but the storm couldn't touch the island chain's greatest asset and greatest strength — the tough, independent and warmhearted spirit of its people.

Our focus is now on recovery, re-energizing and renewing affected areas. Just three weeks after the Sept. 10 storm, the Keys reopened to visitors — an important step in our recovery and a vital one for residents whose livelihood depends on welcoming both first-time and repeat travelers.

Many news reports and erroneous assessments unfairly portrayed the Florida Keys as being completely devastated. That simply is not true and, to demonstrate that, each editorial photograph in this special edition of "Keys Traveler" was shot after Irma's passage through the Keys.

Today, as before Irma, the island chain continues to offer a laid-back atmosphere, a much-needed respite from the demands of everyday life, the natural wonders of our marine sanctuary, appealing attractions and galleries, unique environmental features and eateries serving fresh-from-the-ocean specialties.

It's not only these elements, however, that capture so many visitors' hearts and minds. The Florida Keys' motto is "One Human Family," representing a respect for diversity and people of all kinds — and that spirit is stronger than ever.

So, wherever you travel along the Overseas Highway when you journey to the Keys, you can expect a welcome as warm as our year-round subtropical climate. We invite you to become part of our revitalization.

Sincerely,  
Stacey Mitchell  
Director of Marketing  
Florida Keys & Key West

# Keys Traveler

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All editorial photographs in this edition of "Keys Traveler" were shot after Hurricane Irma passed through the Florida Keys.



ROB O'NEAL

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ROB O'NEAL

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Cover photographs by Andy Newman  
Cover "We Are 1" photo illustration by Rick Blitman and Vanessa Burguiere



Three weeks after Hurricane Irma made an unwelcome visit to the Florida Keys Sept. 10, tourists were able to return to the 125-mile subtropical island chain.

Of course, that doesn't mean the Keys are completely back to normal or that every tourism and lodging facility is fully operational.

Hurricane Irma caused varying degrees of damage along the island chain. Key West and the northernmost island of Key Largo reported the fewest impacts, but in other areas — especially the Lower Keys and parts of Marathon and Islamorada — many homes and businesses were hard hit by the storm. Recovery efforts there are likely to go on for weeks or months.

But amazing progress was made very quickly after Irma wrecked residents' electricity, running water and communications. Within two weeks, almost all power and water had been restored from Key Largo through Marathon, as well as throughout Stock Island and Key West, and cell phone service was restored as well.

For Keys officials, the decision to reopen to visitors was based in great part on their concern for residents. Getting the islands' tourism-based economy back up and running is vital for those who earn their living by serving visitors.

"We know we have a long way to go before the Keys fully recover," said Monroe County Mayor George Neugent. "But because tourism is our top economic engine

and many of our residents' livelihoods depend on it, we also know that we need to begin asking visitors to return."

Key West Mayor Craig Cates was on hand personally to greet passengers disembarking Empress of the Seas, the first cruise ship to return to the Port of Key West after Irma. The port call, Cates said, marked a significant step in the Keys' recovery.

In addition to the port, Key West International Airport is open for commercial service and general aviation. Florida Keys Marathon International Airport is open for general aviation and charter flights as usual.

And the 127-mile-long Florida Keys Overseas Highway, the iconic road that connects the Keys with each

other and the Florida mainland, was inspected by state officials and declared safe for vehicular traffic.

But perhaps most important, the spirit and resilience of most Keys residents is in equally good condition despite the hurricane's impacts and aftermath.

As an example of that spirit, many Keys special events scheduled for mid-to-late October took place as planned, including Key Largo's Humphrey Bogart Film Festival, Marathon's Stone Crab Eating Contest and Key West's internationally renowned Fantasy Fest.

The calendar for the coming months is full as well. Visitors can look forward to a wide range of events that celebrate the character, lifestyle and natural wonders of the resilient, remarkable Florida Keys.

By Carol Shaughnessy

# Come back to the Keys



Sunset dining at Morada Bay in Islamorada.



Fish are biting and Keys charter captains have resumed angling excursions.

Cars cross the Florida Keys' Seven Mile Bridge near Marathon after Irma.



Stephanie and Robert Boes married Oct. 7 at the Coconut Palm Inn in Tavernier.



Key West Mayor Craig Cates (right) welcomes cruise ship passengers to the island during the first post-Irma port call.



Many hotels in the Keys, like Guy Harvey Outpost's Islander Bayside, are accommodating guests.



# Only in the Keys



Divers examine a trumpetfish on Conch Reef off Key Largo in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Florida Keys locals and in-the-know visitors often greet the news of some particularly offbeat happening by grinning, nodding and sagely murmuring, “Only in the Keys.”

The phrase also describes an inviting array of environmental, cultural and adventure activities that can't be enjoyed anywhere except in the island chain. To make lasting vacation memories, sample the “only in the Keys” experiences suggested here.

**Snorkel or dive** on the continental United States' only living coral barrier reef — the third largest in the world — and discover stunning coral formations and brilliantly hued tropical fish. Dive and snorkel operators around the Florida Keys offer excursions led by experts who are passionate about the underwater realm. The treasured reef, like all Keys waters, is protected within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

**Channel classic cinema** icons in Key Largo by cruising on the restored African Queen. The original vessel from the 1951 film starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn, it looks much like it did on the silver screen. Come aboard for a 90-minute Key Largo canal cruise or even a dinner cruise.

**“Hook and cook”** in the Sportfishing Capital of the World. Book a skilled charter captain or guide in Islamorada for exhilarating offshore, reef or backcountry fishing. The Keys claim more saltwater fishing world records than anyplace else on the globe. After catching your fish (like yellowtail snapper or tuna), take

it to one of many nearby restaurants to have it cooked. There's nothing like savoring perfectly prepared fish that you caught yourself.

**Meet “patients”** at a pioneering sea turtle hospital. Encounter rescued sea turtles during a behind-the-scenes tour of the planet's first licensed veterinary hospital specializing in these fascinating creatures. A dedicated team at Marathon's Turtle Hospital rescues, rehabilitates and nurtures sick and injured turtles and, whenever possible, releases them back into the ocean. Occasionally it's possible to witness a turtle release — a truly heartwarming experience.

**Drive (or run!)** across the Seven Mile Bridge. It's a “bucket list” adventure to drive over the landmark Seven Mile Bridge, one of the longest segmental bridges in the world and the centerpiece of the iconic Florida Keys Overseas Highway. The majestic span, which connects Marathon and the Lower Keys, stretches above



Where else but the Florida Keys would you find a paddleboarding chicken? Karly Venezia enjoys a sunset paddle with Loretta.

the blue Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico — giving drivers the sensation that they're floating over water. And each April 1,500 athletes test their stamina on the bridge in the famed Seven Mile Bridge Run.

**Discover tiny Key** deer. On Big Pine Key, if you're lucky, you can glimpse a real-life “Bambi” that's about the size of a large dog. Tiny Key deer, an endangered species that live only in the Lower Keys, can be seen grazing especially in the early morning and at dusk. Spotting them isn't always easy, but it's a real treat when you do.

**Attend a music** festival — underwater. Join several hundred divers and snorkelers at Looe Key Reef during July's Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival. The unique subsea concert spotlights coral reef protection and environmentally responsible diving. Swim among vivid marine life and coral formations while listening to music broadcast by a local radio station and piped underwater. Costumed “mermaids” pretend to play artist-crafted musical instruments.

**Explore the homes** of former President Harry Truman and literary legend Ernest Hemingway. Key West is home to the Harry S. Truman Little White House Museum, Florida's only presidential museum,



Visitors enter the Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum in Key West.

where Truman spent approximately six months of his 1945-53 presidency. View items including the original piano and poker table (ask about its unassuming “disguise”) used by the former POTUS.

**Nearby stands the** Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum, where Hemingway lived and wrote masterpieces in the 1930s. Tour his Spanish colonial home, peer into his second-story writing studio and even pet the descendents of his six-toed cat.

**Take a “southernmost** selfie.”

Key West's red, black and yellow Southernmost Point marker isn't terribly picturesque, but hundreds of visitors take their photos beside it every day. Why? Because the ungainly buoy replica marks the southernmost land mass in the continental United States. Overlooking the Atlantic Ocean on Whitehead Street, its brightly-painted body bears lettering that proclaims it's just 90 miles from Cuba. What better spot for a selfie?

As well as these, scores of other unique and memorable activities can be enjoyed in the Florida Keys. From eco-adventure “voluntourism” opportunities to special events showcasing the island chain's rich environment, heritage and fun-loving vibe, they offer ample proof that the best vacation experiences can be found “only in the Keys.”



Stephen Byrd shows off a nice bonefish caught by Sara Stanczyk off Islamorada, world renowned as the “Sportfishing Capital of the World.”



A rescued sea turtle hatchling, named “Irma,” is cleansed at the Turtle Hospital.



# 'The cavalry'...

Crews working for Keys Energy deploy in the Lower Keys.



# ...helps restore Keys infrastructure

Infrastructure throughout the Florida Keys was restored quickly after Hurricane Irma struck the 125-mile-long island chain Sept. 10. Within three weeks nearly all power, water, sewage and cell services were restored.

And most importantly, the Florida Department of Transportation deemed all 42 bridges of the Florida Keys Overseas Highway safe to travel on and completed emergency repairs on several sections of the road that had been damaged by storm surge.

Miraculously, officials declared the Keys open for tourism Oct. 1.

Pre-storm preparation and detailed implementation of full-force recovery plans paid off for both residents and visitors.

The main transmission system of Florida Keys Electric Cooperative, overseeing power to 27,000 members in the Middle and Upper Keys, stood strong from Florida's mainland to its Tavernier substation.

"We had rolled the dice and committed to significant resources prior to the storm," said John Stuart, FKEC's chief operating officer. "The

## By Laura Myers

decision paid off, ensuring we had all the outside assistance and supplies we needed."

More than 300 contracted outside workers and another 120 FKEC workers finished restoration by Sept. 22.

"Our surprise was that we were able to get our main transmission line up in 24 hours," Stuart said.

A week after Irma, about 31,000 customer service meters had been restored.

"Even in Marathon, where the northeast quadrant of the eyewall churned for several hours, our distribution poles stood strong,"



Technicians repair cellular antennas.

Stuart added.

Throughout the Keys, hundreds of municipal and Monroe County employees weathered the storm.

"Within 48 hours all the roads in Marathon were clear, homes were being searched and our sewer system was restored," said Marathon City Manager Chuck Lindsey.

Keys Energy Services, a public power utility with 29,000 customers from the Seven Mile Bridge to Key West, restored electricity to 95 percent of its customer base just two weeks after Irma, said Lynne Tejeda, general manager and chief executive officer.

"I never dreamed that we would be able to get the vast majority of our customers back in two weeks," Tejeda said. "Our first look at the system was overwhelming. We could not believe the number of poles that were down."

To supplement Keys Energy crews, the utility hired crews from as far away as Wisconsin, mobilizing 500 workers for restoration.

"The logistics coordinating that number of people were huge," Tejeda said. "After the first day, we

A Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority crew repairs a water line break.

prioritized energizing the airport and hospital. Linemen were working 16-hour days in the blistering sun."

Crews at Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority, with 50,000 customers, had restored water throughout the Keys just 11 days post-Irma. FKAA had pre-contracted an additional 18 crews, including some from Tennessee and South Carolina.

FKAA, overseeing seven wastewater facilities, lifted all boil-water notices by Sept. 25.

"Our people, from dawn to dusk, from the day after Irma, were fully dedicated to the restoration of water and wastewater," said Kirk Zuelch, FKAA's executive director. "We had no major transmission breaks. With so many islands, it was difficult," Zuelch said. "It was an island-by-island recovery."

FKAA crews operated generators during prolonged outages and pumped out grinder stations on private properties to ensure all systems met regulatory compliance.

Eric Anderson, an FKAA wastewater mechanic, even rescued a baby



sea turtle.

Today Irma's lingering effects vary. In parts of Islamorada and Marathon, and particularly the Lower Keys, the storm left more impacts and recovery could take months.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott made several post-Irma trips to the Keys,

showcasing the destination's importance to Florida's tourism industry.

"All across the world, when people think about Florida, they think about the Keys," Scott said. "Our job is to make sure that everyone comes back in droves."

[fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com)  
[KeysRecovery.org](http://KeysRecovery.org)



The Florida Department of Transportation restored about 150 feet of the Overseas Highway in Islamorada just four days after Irma eroded portions of the road.



# Prepared for visitors' safety

**M**other Nature sometimes likes to remind you the same forces that created the comfortable climate and lush landscape can damage them as well.

In California or Japan the reminder might be an earthquake; in Indonesia, a tsunami; in Hawaii, a volcanic eruption.

Sometimes the Florida Keys are threatened by tropical cyclones, a name for a low-pressure weather system with organized thunderstorm activity and circular winds. When sustained wind speed reaches 74 mph (119 kmh), that system is classified a hurricane.

Official hurricane season is June 1 to Nov. 30, but the highest probability of activity typically is Aug. 15 to Oct. 1.

The Monroe County Tourist Development Council (TDC), the agency responsible for Keys tourism promotion, has a formal communications program executed in tandem with emergency officials to communicate the need for visitors to leave the Keys in the unlikely event a hurricane threatens the region.

The program has been developed because the Keys tourism industry cares about visitors and their safety.

## Monitoring Tropical Weather

Throughout summer and fall, emergency management officials receive continuous tropical weather system alerts from the National Hurricane Center and the Key West National Weather Service Office.

When it appears a hurricane may pose a threat to the islands, emergency managers communicate with local and state officials as well as the TDC to discuss visitor and resident evacuations.

Hurricane forecasting is not an exact science and officials base their assessments and action plans on available forecast data at the time

it is issued. Warnings cover a broad area, even though historically most storms miss or just skirt the Keys, with little or no impact.

## If a Hurricane Threatens

If a hurricane threatens the Keys, a mandatory evacuation order will be issued asking all visitors to leave. Usually the evacuation begins about 48 hours before the projected arrival of the storm's fringes and is only ordered if there is a significant threat.

Based on official weather and emergency management directives, the TDC transmits advisories to lodging facilities to provide details on potential evacuation orders and any need for guests to leave the Keys.

If you are traveling in the Keys and hear of a storm threat, check with your lodging's front desk, or visit [fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com), or call the 24/7 visitor assistance line at 800-771-KEYS or the 24/7 weather office at 305-295-1316. The Keys emergency management hotline during an emergency is 800-955-5504 or

- **Official hurricane season is June 1 to Nov. 30, but the highest probability of activity typically is Aug. 15 – Oct. 1.**
- **In the unlikely event of a storm threat to the Keys, the local tourism council helps communicate the need for visitors to leave the region for their safety.**
- **During an average week of hurricane season, the probability of a Florida Keys visitor having to evacuate is less than 2 percent.**

visit [monroecountyem.com](http://monroecountyem.com).

If a visitor evacuation order is necessary, officials strive to issue it by no later than noon to provide sufficient time to make alternative travel arrangements. The Lodging Association of the Florida Keys & Key West encourages its members to refund any unused nights as soon as officials issue a visitor evacuation order.

During an evacuation, visitors are urged to follow emergency directives in a timely manner to avoid delays and leave safely.

Obviously, visitors who plan to travel to the Keys, but have not arrived, must temporarily delay their trip until the risk has passed.

During an average week of hurricane season, the probability of a Florida Keys visitor having to evacuate is less than 2 percent according to the weather service.

## Pardon Us

Officials know evacuation orders cause unwelcome interruptions in visitors' vacation plans, but safety is a priority. If you must evacuate and find it inconvenient to return home, other parts of Florida not in the storm's forecast track may be an option. [Expedia.com/florida](http://Expedia.com/florida) is contracted with Visit Florida to have accommodations details.

## When Visitors Can Return

Once the storm passes, officials will assess the area's infrastructure. If the storm has had little or no impact, visitors should be able to return quickly. Visit [fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com) or call 800-FLA-KEYS in the U.S. and Canada to check the destination's basic infrastructure, tourism facilities and recommended dates for visitors to return. Keys social media outlets including Facebook ([facebook.com/floridakeysandkeywest](https://facebook.com/floridakeysandkeywest)) and Twitter [@thefloridakeys](https://twitter.com/thefloridakeys) ([twitter.com/thefloridakeys](https://twitter.com/thefloridakeys)) are also used to communicate details.



Bent, but not broken.

Here in The Florida Keys, we're always in awe of the power and beauty of Mother Nature, but Hurricane Irma truly tested what we were made of. Thanks to the resilience of our people and the kindness of strangers, we've gotten back on our feet, and we're getting back to business.

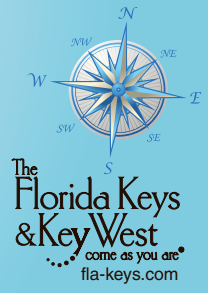
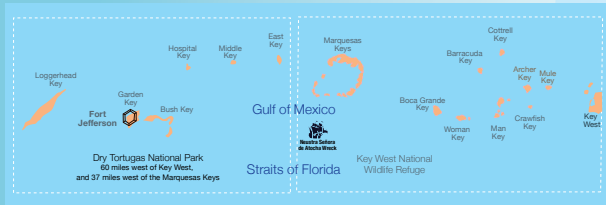
The power's on. The drinks are flowing. And The Keys are open. So come on down.

We'll bend over backwards for you.





# Traveling Tips to the Florida Keys



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](http://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 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) east 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 | 45-4        |
| 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:

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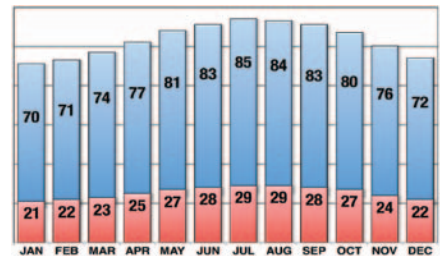
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## Weather/Climate

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 the peak of summer, 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 subtropical 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 the average monthly air temperatures for the past 30 years, according to the Key West weather office. Temperatures in blue shades are Fahrenheit and those in light 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](http://fla-keys.com) has a live chat feature with visitor information specialists available during regular U.S. weekday business hours to aid travelers in vacation planning.