Keys Sanctuary
25 Years of Marine Preservation
National Parks Turn 100
Offbeat Keys Names
Florida Keys Sunsets
Decompressing at Bahia Honda State Park near Big Pine Key in the Lower Florida Keys.

Splash or Relax at Keys Beaches

Each of the Florida Keys’ regions, from Key Largo to Key West, features sandy beaches for relaxing, sunning and swimming in warm turquoise waters. Key Largo is home to John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, with its main entrance at mile marker (MM) 102.6. Known worldwide as America’s first underwater preserve, the park also boasts upland areas including the popular Cannon Beach and Far Beach. Guests can rent kayaks, paddleboards and snorkel gear to explore the park’s waters.

Islamorada’s Anne’s Beach, located at MM 80, attracts waders and kiteboarders cruising along the shallows off Islamorada. Great views and scenic walkways please passersby and visiting families, and the shallow water typically means no breaking waves.

Sombrero Beach, located at MM 50 oceanside in Marathon, is a well-maintained Middle Keys gem. The free-access public park and beach features a kayak launch, volleyball courts, children’s playground, shady picnic pavilions equipped with cooking grills, freshwater showers, restroom facilities and handicap access. Marathon also features a 1,200-foot beach at Curry Hammock State Park.

The Keys’ best-known beach area can be found at Bahia Honda State Park, located in the Lower Keys between MMs 36 and 37. The beaches of Bahia Honda repeatedly have been named among the top 10 in the United States by numerous travel surveys. Bahia Honda was voted the USA’s best beach in 1992 by Dr. Beach himself, Dr. Stephen P. Leatherman, a professor at Florida International University who has been rating America’s beaches since 1989. Leatherman lauded the park for its facilities including boat slips, cabins and amenities for camping in tents or RVs. The on-site concession offers a complete gift shop, snack bar, kayak rentals and daily snorkeling tours to nearby Looe Key.

Several Bahia Honda beaches, including one with a view of the uniquely historic Florida Keys Over-Sea Railroad trestle bridge, round out offerings.

In Key West, guests can enjoy the temperate waters of Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park, swimming and snorkeling among colorful tropical fish, and exploring a National Historic Landmark. The 54-acre park features picnic tables and grills, nature trails, fishing areas and the opportunity to tour the iconic Civil War-era fort.

— Chloe Lykes
The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is celebrating its 25th year of protecting the 2,900 nautical miles of waters that surround the island chain.

It’s a big job to preserve a marine world that features a spectacular and unique ecosystem with shallow seagrass beds, mangrove-fringed islands and the world’s third-largest barrier coral reef that collectively support more than 6,000 species, as well as being the final resting spot of culturally important shipwrecks — some that date back centuries.

It’s a mission that can be challenging because the same turquoise and blue waters also are a vital cog in the Keys’ economic engine. The island chain’s residents and visitors use the subtropical waters year-round for recreational and commercial activities: boating, diving, snorkeling, swimming, deep-sea and backcountry fishing, dolphin-watching, paddleboarding, kiteboarding, kayaking and just relaxing.

By Cammy Clark

It all began in 1989 when three large freighters ran aground just 17 days apart on the coral reef.

The groundings came only months after the devastating Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska and just days following hearings held in Key West about oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

“It was the perfect storm,” said leading underwater photographer Stephen Frink of Key Largo.

There had been talk at the time of slightly expanding the boundaries of already existing protected waters in the Keys, but the alarming groundings led federal lawmakers immediately to begin pushing a bill through the U.S. Congress that would protect all waters surrounding the islands.

“The nation recognizes that the coral reef in the Keys is one of the natural wonders of the world,” then-Sen. Bob Graham of Florida, a co-author, said at the time.

Observing wild dolphins is a popular visitor activity in the Florida Keys sanctuary.

Administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the new sanctuary’s boundaries stretched from Biscayne National Park near Miami to the Dry Tortugas (70 miles west of Key West) and absorbed the Fort Jefferson National Monument and the existing Looe Key and Key Largo marine sanctuaries.

“The most important thing the sanctuary did was instigate a mindset of conservation,” Frink said.

The Keys’ waters make the island chain an extremely popular destination for visitors, with world-class diving and snorkeling at the reef and on shipwrecks. The warm water and great visibility mean underwater explorers can see the vibrant colors of sea fans, corals and a wide array of tropical fish. Sea turtles, moray eels and rays also are regulars at reefs.

The sanctuary has implemented the Blue Star program with commercial operators to promote responsible diving and snorkeling at the reef, with emphasis on not touching or removing corals. The number of mooring buoys has more than doubled to 470 so that boats don’t have to drop anchors that might damage corals.

The sanctuary encompasses the Florida Keys Wreck Trek that features nine shipwrecks, including the USNS Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg off Key West and USS Spiegel Grove off Key Largo. They are the second- and third-largest vessels in the world to be intentionally sunk as artificial reefs.

Keys waters also are an internationally renowned fishing destination — for deep-sea angling in the Atlantic Ocean, backcountry fishing in Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico and even bridge fishing off the old railroad bridges that parallel the Florida Keys Overseas Highway.

More saltwater world fishing records have been established in the Keys than any other angling destination on the globe, according to the International Game Fish Association.

The sanctuary has put in place no-take zones, covering a small percentage of the waters, which are designed to allow important species of fish an opportunity to spawn and grow to help improve size and populations.

With support from the Keys tourism council, the sanctuary built the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center in Key West to enable visitors to learn about the ecosystem without getting wet.

Kayaking and paddleboarding, also popular in Keys waters, are great ways to see the beauty of the sanctuary’s seagrass beds full of juvenile marine life or observe birds and other wildlife on pristine islands.

The sanctuary works with other government agencies, universities and private entities on research projects to get better science about fish populations and other marine life topics.

Pioneering work on coral restoration has been accomplished by the Florida Keys–based Coral Restoration Foundation and Mote Marine Tropical Research Laboratory. Projects have been a resounding success, with a number of transplanted infant corals maturing and spawning to create new corals on their own. The research already is being extended to other reefs around the world.

“We have done our best to put in management tools to protect the environment,” Morton said. “But it’s a changing world and we have to be adaptive to make sure it is protected for the future.”

Islamorada-based freelance writer Cammy Clark is a former staff journalist with several major daily newspapers and enjoys scuba diving in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

florida-keys.noaa.gov
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Outdoors Art Enriches the Florida Keys

Artistry in the Florida Keys can be seen in palm-fringed shorelines that edge the island chain, abstract clouds unrolling across azure skies and the sculptural arches of old Overseas Highway bridges silhouetted against a watery backdrop. Equally enticing are open-air pieces crafted by Keys artists. From vibrant ocean murals to whimsical large-scale sculptures, outdoor artistry inspires interest and smiles throughout the island chain.

Many such pieces can be seen along the Overseas Highway that traverses the length of the Keys, stretching above and alongside the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, Florida Bay and Gulf of Mexico.

For example, visitors arriving at Key Largo might spot a 7,500-square-foot marine life mural at mile marker (MM) 99.2. Portraying inhabitants of the living coral reef, it was painted in 2007 by well-known artist and Upper Keys resident Wyland — who also created supersized murals near MM 50 in Marathon and in Key West’s Historic Seaport.

At MM 95 stands an outdoor mural commemorating the 1912 completion of Henry Flagler’s Florida Keys Over-Sea Railroad, whose bridges later formed the base for the Overseas Highway. The dramatic 60-foot-long artwork depicts a train steaming across an arched bridge.

In Islamorada, at MM 83, the exterior of the Florida Keys History of Diving Museum has a 360-foot undersea mural painted by David Dunleavy and Guy Harvey.

And then there’s Betsy, a 30-foot-tall, 40-foot-long sculpted Florida Keys spiny lobster that greets visitors to Islamorada’s Rain Barrel Artisan Village at MM 87 bayside. The much-photographed icon was crafted in the 1980s by area resident Richard Blaze.

From Key Largo to Stock Island, the exterior walls of fire stations have provided backdrops for work by creative spirits. The airports at Key West and Marathon feature a distinctive collection of pieces by talented Keys artists, including Rick Worth’s panoramic mural of Key West rooftops painted on a terminal building.

Particularly in Key West, artistry can be found in numerous unexpected locations, from botanical gardens to pocket parks. Unique creations include a flirty life-sized figure of Marilyn Monroe outside the Florida Keys History of Diving Museum.

In Islamorada, outside Key West’s Tropic Cinema, a color-block tile mosaic along a portion of the seawall at Smathers Beach.

— Carol Shaughnessy

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Epic Keys:
Kiteboarding and Wakeboarding

Thrill seekers who want 365 days’ worth of sun, surf and sea can get their blood pumping in the Florida Keys. Throughout the islands, people are immersing themselves in the kiteboarding lifestyle, an exhilarating alternative to surfing in the safe environment of the Keys.

Riders catch air and go fast, feeling the wind power kites for miles at heart-stopping speeds. Warm, knee-deep water is ideal for launching and riding, heading out to deeper channels for jumps and steady, rideable wind that carries kites from all directions over mostly calm waters.

Newcomers or students can take lessons to absorb 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 inflate and fly the kite, steer the bar and attempt jumps, spins and other maneuvers on the board.

“[Kiteboarding] is one on one, addressing safety, theory, equipment, setup and preflight, yet designed to get students ripping quickly.”

Training ranges from one-to-five-day beginner, intermediate and advanced lessons, the latter geared primarily for kiteboarders who want to hone their skills for riding and staying upwind consistently.

Adrenaline enthusiasts, sport pros and curious newcomers can safely participate in kiteboarding, wake-skating and kiteboarding at Keys Cable and Adventure Park, located at mile marker 59.3 in Marathon. Partner to Islamorada’s Otherside Boardsports, the facility is America’s first watersports cable park to offer full kiteboarding and wakeboarding instruction.

An overhead towing device operated atop a seven-acre lake is used to pull riders across the water. This system creates a customized ride, as only one rider is allowed on the cable at a time. — Julie Botteri
That Florida Keys Sunset!

By Carol Shaughnessy • Photo by Andy Newman

In most locales, the nightly sunset takes place without much fanfare. But in the Florida Keys, it’s always an occasion for a celebration. Throughout the island chain, people gather to mark the moment the sun slips below the horizon — perhaps toasting it with cocktails, saluting it during a sunset cruise on a tall ship or catamaran, or appreciating it during a stroll on the Old Seven Mile Bridge.

Admittedly, sunset in the Keys is worth the attention it receives, painting the sky with a palette of creamsicle orange, purple, red and dusty pink. It has inspired countless social media photos, backdropped thousands of weddings and earned national travel kudos. Why are sunsets so memorable in the Florida Keys?

According to Bill Cottrill, a specialist at the Key West National Weather Service office, the right clouds play a major role in making a sunset great.

“Scattered cumulous clouds toward the horizon can make a very dramatic sunset,” Cottrill explained. “As the sun sets, you have it going low enough in the sky to where we get crepuscular rays — the shadows caused by the clouds where they break the sun. If you add high cirrus clouds, you get more drama because cirrus clouds are made primarily of ice, and they add more ice crystals the sun reflects off of,” he advised. “You see pink and orange upwards off the sun and ice, and the clouds become colorful. But it’s really the sun reflecting or refracting off of the cloud itself.”

As for the “green flash” that Florida Keys legend says sometimes can be glimpsed at the moment the sun disappears, Cottrill said it’s caused by the refraction of light near the horizon on a clear, cloudless day. It’s so rare that he has never seen it.

While the green flash may be elusive, a unique element that accompanies sunset each evening in Key West is a waterfront Sunset Celebration featuring street performers and local artisans. People of all ages flock to Mallory Square, a historic pier overlooking Key West Harbor and the Gulf of Mexico, to enjoy the carnival-like atmosphere.

The Mallory Square performers offer a spectacle as vivid as the sunset itself. Visitors might encounter acrobats, musicians, dogs and cats doing tricks, jugglers and masters of comic patter — all sharing their talents with the crowds. And no one can overlook iconic tightrope walker Will Soto, who can be seen balanced high above his audience, silhouetted against the orange and crimson splendor of the setting sun.
The United States’ National Park Service, often called “America’s best idea,” celebrates its 100th birthday in 2016.

Florida Keys visitors can learn, discover and be inspired by two national parks that are accessible from the island chain.

Dry Tortugas National Park, the most remote park in America, is situated approximately 70 miles west of Key West in the Gulf of Mexico. A cluster of seven tiny coral-and-sand islands covering 100 square miles, Dry Tortugas is accessible only by seaplane or boat.

The park’s centerpiece is Fort Jefferson, one of the largest masonry structures in the Western Hemisphere, whose construction began in 1846. During the Civil War, Fort Jefferson — sometimes called the Gibraltar of the Gulf — served as a Union military prison for captured deserters and others. Its most famous prisoner was Dr. Samuel Mudd, convicted of conspiracy in President Abraham Lincoln’s 1865 assassination, but later pardoned.

During the Spanish-American War, the fort was a supply station for the U.S. Navy.

Outdoor enthusiasts can “unplug” at the remote park with ranger-guided tours, pristine beaches for sunning, excellent bird watching and clear blue waters for snorkeling. Garden Key, one of the most desert-like of the islands, is popular for overnight tent camping.

The Yankee Freedom ferry is the only commercial vessel authorized to carry passengers to the park. A high-speed 110-foot catamaran, the ferry features an air-conditioned wheelchair-accessible main deck. Breakfast, lunch, a fort tour and snorkel gear are provided. The ferry departs from the Key West Ferry Terminal.

Key West Seaplane Adventures offers morning, afternoon and full-day excursions aboard 10-passenger seaplanes. Flights depart from Key West Seaplane Adventures’ headquarters at Key West International Airport. Travel time between Key West and the Dry Tortugas is approximately 40 minutes each way.

Half-day trips include at least 2.5 hours to enjoy the park, while full-day trips include at least 6.5 hours.

Everglades National Park, established in 1947, spans 1.5 million acres. Featuring many rare and endangered species, it is the largest subtropical wilderness in the United States.

Minnesotan Marjory Stoneman Douglas, author of “The Everglades: River of Grass,” became synonymous with the park through her fierce efforts to protect the marshlands from agriculture and real estate development.

Everglades National Park abuts the near-shore waters of Key Largo and Islamorada. Those waters are an ecologically fascinating place where fresh water from the Everglades mixes with the saltwater of Florida Bay, making the area a popular spot for sport fishing.

An array of wildlife is commonly sighted including roseate spoonbills, American eagles, bottlenose dolphin, crocodiles, sea turtles, alligators and manatees, to name a few. Park sport fishing, with a focus on catch and release, is world renowned for snook, trout, tarpon and a host of other species.

Highly skilled Keys light-tackle fishing guides and eco-tour outfitters are ready to accompany visitors to introduce them to the wildlife and wilderness. Extended kayak and canoe trips are available for those who enjoy camping and paddling excursions. Visitors might also consider taking a day trip by car to the Flamingo outpost, the southernmost point in mainland Florida. The route is punctuated by walking trails and observation decks that offer stunning views of the park.

— Julie Botteri
nps.gov/drto
nps.gov/ever
drytortugas.com
keywestseaplanecharters.com
Florida Bay is a Must-Do Angling Experience

Florida Bay off Key Largo and Islamorada in the Florida Keys is probably best known for its glamour species such as tarpon, bonefish and permit. But it also offers a relaxing, multispecies, family-fun fishing trip, that is a “must do” for anglers of all experience levels.

The scenic, shallow waters of this mangrove-lined estuary lie between the Keys island chain and the Gulf of Mexico. The bay offers your best shot at catching everything from tripletail to tarpon and snapper to snook — all in a single day — while experiencing the incredible beauty of the southern portion of Everglades National Park.

“It gives the possibility of almost everything,” said light-tackle charter captain Rick Stanczyk, whose family owns Bud N’ Mary’s Fishing Marina in Islamorada. “It's easy for Stanczyk and other Keys backcountry guides to escort visitors in their 18- to 22-foot shallow-draft boats to as many as 15 species in a single day. To increase the odds, they typically go armed with a variety of dead and live bait, along with an assortment of lures such as jigs, spoons and flies.

The trip often begins with casting live shrimp on jig heads to mangrove shorelines to catch mangrove snapper, ladyfish, jacks, sheepshead, redfish, black drum, pompano and snook. Sans a fish or two kept for dinner, most fish are released to fight again another day.

Snook are the most wily, only biting when they are hungry and sometimes confounding unwary anglers with their subtle strike. But once hooked, the snook’s lightning runs and erratic jumps quickly erase feelings of frustration at the ones you missed.

To add to the species count, the guide might select a winding channel surrounded by meadows of sea grass and sandy holes where you could easily catch spotted sea trout in the double digits using popping corks and live shrimp.

If winds and seas are calm enough, the captain may venture out to the open gulf where rock piles and shipwrecks often hold large permit, cobia, tarpon, goliath grouper and various shark species. Heavier tackle and larger live baits, such as pinfish or grunts, are the ticket for reeling up the big ones.

Guides always release permit, tarpon and sharks, which are considered sport fish. All goliath grouper must be released because it is a protected species. But a cobia that measures at least 33 inches to the fork of its tail will provide multiple delicious dinner entrées, and many Keys restaurants will cook your catch.

Even beyond the world-class fishing that Florida Bay offers is the breathtaking scenery featuring incredible fauna and flora. It's the kind of trip that creates lifetime memories.

Sue Cocking is a former outdoors writer with the Miami Herald. When she is not giving love to her cat, she loves fishing in Florida Bay.

fla-keys.com/fishing

A happy angler shows off a beautiful snook prior to releasing it.

A youngster displays a nice spotted sea trout. An angler makes a cast to a passing fish.

A tarpon leaps at the end of an angler’s line.

The wildlife can be equally as spectacular as the fishing in Florida Bay and Everglades National Park.
Race Over Water During Key Largo Bridge Run

Each November, participants in the Key Largo Bridge Run compete in a spectacular athletic challenge offering panoramic views of the Upper Keys and eastern edges of the Florida Everglades.

Runners along the USA Track & Field–certified course cross the 65-foot-high, 1.25-mile-long Jewfish Creek Bridge and occupy the northbound lanes of the bridge and the southern portion of the 18-Mile Stretch, a section of the Florida Keys Overseas Highway that connects mainland South Florida with Key Largo.

The bridge is one of the highway’s 42 spans over the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

Enthusiasts of all ages can test their stamina and speed in the uniquely scenic out-and-back 10k, half marathon and 5k run/walk events that begin shortly after sunrise.

Since its inception, the bridge race has attracted participants from across the U.S., the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Canada and Europe.

“arion may lie more or less at the midpoint of the road leading through the Florida Keys, but when it comes to wonderfully offbeat place names, it’s anything but middle of the road.

Recognized as a prime Florida Keys boating and family destination, the Marathon and Middle Keys area is made up of a group of small islands colorfully named Boot, Knights, Hog, Vaca, Stirrup, Crawl and Little Crawl keys — plus Pigeon Key beneath the Old Seven Mile Bridge, East and West Sister’s Island, Deer, Fat Deer and Grassy keys.

Marathon itself got its name from workers constructing the monumental Over-Sea Railroad from mainland Florida throughout the Keys in the early 1900s. Laboring night and day to meet the grueling construction schedule, workers reputedly complained, “This is getting to be a real marathon!”

Beneath the Old Seven Mile Bridge, the railroad’s centerpiece, lies the 5.3-acre island of Pigeon Key. Its name, appearing in an 1849 account, may have been inspired by flocks of white-crowned pigeons that roosted there.

Stirrup Key, surprisingly, wasn’t named for the foot supports that are part of a cowboy’s saddle. According to documentation, in 1763 a Bahamian sea captain called Stirrup visited the Florida Keys — and left a lasting mark.

Crawl Key quite possibly got its name from the sea turtle pens or “kraals” found there. Another story says the island, called Kraal Key on at least one antique survey map, contained buried treasure.

The history of some Middle Keys place names is intriguingly vague. Much of the city of Marathon lies on Key Vaca, whose name can be traced back to the 1670s and perhaps earlier. Experts are unsure whether it derived from “vacas,” the Spanish word for cattle, in recognition of cows that may have roamed the area; “Vaccas,” supposedly the surname of a friend of the land’s early Spanish owner; wandering manatees (also called sea cows) or even long-ago exploration chronicler Alavar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca.

And according to some sources, Duck Key’s name came from Dutch Key, the English translation of its early Spanish moniker of Cayo de Holandes. Others, however, say it was so dubbed because the small island resembles a duck when seen from the air.

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In Marathon, Plenty!

Pigeon Key, in the Marathon area, was once the base camp for workers who built Henry Flagler’s Florida Keys Over-Sea Railroad.

Duck Key’s name either derived from Dutch Key or because, when viewed from the air, the island’s shape looks like a duck.

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What’s in a Name?

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In Marathon, Plenty!

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What’s in a Name?

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What’s in a Name?
Visit Indian and Lignumvitae Keys

Two Florida Keys islands with significantly different pasts, each a national historic site, are accessible only by boat. On the Atlantic Ocean side of the Florida Keys, near Islamorada, Indian Key Historic State Park comprises only 11 acres. In the early 19th century it boasted a shipwreck salvage community and the largest population between St. Augustine, Fla., and Key West. The tiny island once was the government seat for Dade County, when the county line of what today is Miami-Dade County extended well into the Florida Keys.

During the Second Seminole War in 1840, when Indian Key's Jacob Housman offered to remove the Seminoles from the area, a group of them raided the island, killing settlers and burning buildings. Indian Key never regained its population, and in 1971 was purchased by the Florida Park Service. Lignumvitae Key Botanical State Park, 280 acres of forest virtually untouched by man, is located in Florida Bay off Islamorada. The island’s nearly 1,500-year-old hardwood lignum vitae trees, Latin for “wood of life,” contain resin considered to possess medicinal benefits. The wood is so dense that it will not float in water.

The virgin tropical island remains much as it was when financier William Matheson purchased it in 1919 and built a four-bedroom house there. He left the rest of the island alone except for creating a small clearing and boat dock. Visitors can explore both historic sites on Island Heritage Tours departing from Robbie’s Marina, mile marker 77.5, in Islamorada.

Indian Key once had the largest population between St. Augustine and Key West.

Stroll Back in Time at Crane Point

Tucked away in the heart of Marathon, Crane Point Museum and Nature Center spans a 63-acre tropical oasis of hardwood trees, educational displays and nature trails where adults and children can take a relaxing walk through history and nature.

Located at mile marker 50.5 bayside, Crane Point’s slightly elevated patch of hammock is where Bahamian immigrant George Adderley and his family set up homestead in the early 20th century.

The Adderley home is a popular stop along the 2.5 miles of trails and wooden walkways crisscrossing the hammock. Trolley tours of the botanical gardens and historical sites also are available.

New Arts District Enlivens Key West

A trio of arts emporiums has turned Key West’s Eaton and Duval street area into an eclectic creative enclave, complementing several other Old Town arts districts. A 14,000-square-foot art deco building at 533 Eaton St. is the new home of The Studios of Key West. The island’s popular non-profit cultural organization promotes arts and culture through intriguing classes in varying disciplines, performances and concerts in a 200-seat professional theater, lectures, special events and showings of contemporary art in two exhibition spaces.

The Key West Theater, a relatively recent addition at 512 Eaton St., offers an innovative blend of national acts and locally produced showcases. The season’s offerings include a variety show and an exclusive musical experience featuring Keys performers, Broadway concerts, the world premiere of a locally written full-length play and a unique medley of short plays by Key West writers.

Nearby at 416 Eaton St. stands Tropic Cinema, a nonprofit independent film multiplex that specializes in showing new, independent, alternative and foreign films. Since its debut more than a decade ago, it has evolved into a Key West treasure whose lobby and theaters also are the site of community cultural events ranging from jazz concerts to art exhibitions and literary lectures.

The Key West Theater, a relatively new arts district, has evolved into a Key West treasure whose lobby and theaters also are the site of community cultural events ranging from jazz concerts to art exhibitions and literary lectures.

You can now walk on a “rainbow” in Key West. Actually, four “rainbows.”

The City of Key West has installed four permanent rainbow crosswalks at the intersection of Duval and Petronia streets, in the heart of the island city’s LGBT entertainment district.

Key West is the first city in Florida to have all four corners of an intersection connected with rainbow crosswalks. The crosswalks feature bands of all six colors of the rainbow flag, an internationally recognized symbol of gay and lesbian unity.

Spearheaded by the city and the Key West Business Guild, the rainbow crosswalks are composed of preformed thermoplastic color blocks alternating with white stripes. After the blocks were laid by Community Services Department workers, they were heat-treated with propane torches to affix the colors permanently to the pavement — ensuring that their message would remain vibrant and welcoming for years to come.

The rainbow crosswalks are the latest manifestation of Key West’s longstanding embrace of diversity. “One Human Family” was adopted as the city’s official philosophy in 2000, proclaiming equality and acceptance for everyone, and the island is known worldwide as a leading LGBT vacation destination.

“Accepting diversity has been going on for generations in Key West, mainly starting back when Key West was an island with no access but by boat,” said Mayor Craig Cates. “It means so much to Key West to show our diversity, and also it goes perfectly with our ‘One Human Family’ motto.” — Carol Shaughnessy

Four rainbow crosswalks at Duval and Petronia streets pay homage to Key West’s stature as an LGBT destination.
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/gettinghere/airport.

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 are now 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 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

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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 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 1-800-771-KEYS. It’s staffed 24 hours a day. To contact visitor offices in the Keys, call 1-800-FLAKEYS. The Keys website at 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.