Planning your next exotic destination fishing expedition? There's no reason to look farther than the Florida Keys & Key West.

The region owes the abundance of fantastic inshore and offshore angling opportunities to its unique geography; it's here that five of the planet's greatest natural wonders come together. The Florida Keys are at the center of the confluence of the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Gulf Stream current, Florida Bay and the Florida Everglades.

The entire 125-mile-long island chain offers year-round, world-class access to backcountry, inshore and offshore fishing, including species such as tarpon, yellowtail snapper, kingfish, dolphin (mahi-mahi) and sailfish. But just as each Keys island community has its own flavor, each region enjoys its own specialized fishery — unlike any found elsewhere in the angling world.

Key West
When you finally come to mile marker 0 in the Southernmost City, you're only 20 miles from world-famous Wood's Wall. It's the continuation of the continental shelf and features the Middle and West cracks. This is the stretch of water Ernest Hemingway roamed. But Key West also offers exceptional shallow-water habitats for permit. The late legendary fly fisherman Del Brown landed over 500 of the wary gamefish on fly in the region. Expansive grass flats, big flood tides and abundant populations of the permit's favorite food source — crabs — have made this a go-to permit destination. Add the abundance of world-class fishing guides, and it's easy to see why no other destination comes close when you're chasing this holy grail of light-tackle fishing.

No matter what your fishing fancy, the Florida Keys & Key West have something for every angler — every day of the year.

For more information, visit fla-keys.com/fishing.

Captain Ted Lund is a former editor of Saltwater Sportsman magazine and a Florida Keys fishing fanatic.
One clear, crisp spring day in 1908, the renowned South Florida charterboat skipper Charlie Thompson was fishing for tarpon off Long Key. According to his daughter, he spotted none other than Henry Flagler standing on the shoreline near his newly built Long Key Fishing Club. Flagler later told him that the sunlight glancing off the silvery backs of the huge school of tarpon around Thompson's boat produced a mesmerizing light effect.

Other anglers besides Flagler became similarly smitten with the unbelievable bounty of Florida Keys sport fishing for sailfish, wahoo, tuna, mackerel, snapper, grouper and scores of other species. But tarpon became a particular hit because of the species' close-to-shore availability, massive size and powerful fighting prowess.

First glamorized in books in the 1800s as a monstrous "tarpum," the tarpon later was nicknamed the "silver king" due to its regal size and the distinctive hue of its huge scales. Tarpon fishing became more common soon after the turn of the century, thanks in large part to Flagler's East Coast Railway connecting Key West to Florida's mainland.

With the ensuing 1920s tourism boom came fascinating articles appearing in national publications about anglers dueling with 100-pound-plus tarpon in the Florida Keys — particularly stories surrounding the exploits of personalities like Zane Grey, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt and, in later decades, Ernest Hemingway and Ted Williams.

As the popularity of tarpon fishing burgeoned, a cottage industry expanded with the increasing demand for more suitable boats, better equipment and expert guides. No longer did one have to dress in jacket and tie while balancing in a wooden boat ill-equipped for fishing. Specialized clothing for flats angling became available and motorized vessels were designed specifically for light-tackle and fly-fishing enthusiasts targeting tarpon.

In the 1960s new personalities began to take center stage in Keys tarpon angling — flats masters such as Stu Apte, Billy Pate and Al Pflueger.

Fishing guides like Islamorada's Jimmie Albright became world famous for their craft. And yet, despite all the inordinate skills developed by experts to successfully stalk silver kings often weighing more than themselves, even neophytes to the sport like Henry Flagler could experience the exhilaration of catching and releasing a tarpon.

And it's still happening every day in the Florida Keys.
Islamorada captain makes rod-building an art

When Randy Towe was 10 years old, he asked his mother to buy him a $200 custom fishing rod. His mother didn't agree with the investment, so he convinced her to spend considerably less. The young fisherman then purchased parts and built his own rod. Now more than 40 years later, Towe not only continues to build rods for himself, he also crafts them for others — all from his own fishing rod.

Towe not only builds rods alone, he also prefers to fish customers in the same manner — whether it's in the backcountry for tarpon, bonefish and snook or on his 18-foot Action Offshore for dolphin fish on his 34-foot Pursuit. "I make everything from fly to the rods become highly prized on the testing grounds of the Florida Keys in my own backyard," Towe said. "And I have the fishing records than any other destination on the globe, according to the Florida Keys & Key West Sport Fishing Edition. "

His brand, Captain Randy Towe's Signature Series Handmade Rods, has become well known to anglers — some even focused on breaking world records — and the rods become highly prized on the testing grounds of the Florida Keys in my own backyard." Towe said. "And I have the fishing records than any other destination on the globe, according to the Florida Keys & Key West Sport Fishing Edition. "

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The Florida Keys is renowned for world saltwater angling records such as the one held by Captain Randy Towe. His brand, Captain Randy Towe's Signature Series Handmade Rods, has become well known to anglers — some even focused on breaking world records — and the rods become highly prized on the testing grounds of the Florida Keys in my own backyard. "

Many of Towe's customers come to him because they are serious anglers — some even focused on breaking world records — and the rods become highly prized on the testing grounds of the Florida Keys in my own backyard. "

For details on fishing tournaments in the Keys: flakeys.com/fishing

* Tackle is specified as spin, fly, baitcast or conventional with appropriate line class (# means line test breaking strength in pounds).

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Cover photo of a charterboat heading to Alligator Lighthouse by Andy Newman
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/#air].

**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-95 South. 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**

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**Distance from Miami**

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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 90° 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.