

**Forbes**

# How To Feel Good In The Florida Keys: Resort's \$50-Million Rebirth



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Travel

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Oct 2, 2018, 10:54am



© HAWKS CAY RESORT

Inspired by uplifting comeback stories? What a difference a year can make, especially when committed leaders turn adversity into achievement. In September 2017, Category 4 Hurricane Irma pummeled Florida, changing landscapes and challenging lives. The award-winning, landmark, 60-acre [Hawks Cay Resort](#) — a beacon of vacation serenity in the Florida Keys — was devastatingly hit. On Duck Key at Mile Marker 61, halfway down the 125-mile-long necklace of islands that stretch south of Miami from Key Largo to Key West, Hawks Cay Resort was forced to close. Nearly all its employees were laid off. Many deep breaths were taken, many more tears shed. And then shirt sleeves were rolled up and ambitious new goals were set.

Hawks Cay Resort fully re-opened on September 1st, celebrating its 10th annual Heroes Salute concert-and-fireworks event, which honors first-responders: military, fire, rescue, law enforcement and all medical personnel. Transforming Hawks Cay from ruin to a flowering rebirth was a bold, visionary task. Explains Sheldon Suga, Hawks Cay Resort vice-president managing director: "At first, it was surreal to see our property so impacted. Water everywhere. Buildings destroyed. Fortunately, our generous ownership had foresight to engage a restoration company pre-hurricane. Now, after months of hard work, we are eager to introduce guests to the reimagined Hawks Cay. The resort has come back to a new era. There is new energy here. We're not just walking guests back into a new build, but back into a new experience. Not only entertaining guests, but also creating special moments that become key positive memories."



Its newly designed main hotel now shines with 177 tropical-hued, coastal-inspired, seaside-decor guest rooms. There are an additional 250 spacious two- and three-bedroom villas, six restaurants, a full-service boat-in-boat-out marina, a multi-tiered sun terrace with salt-water lagoon, five swimming pools, activities-filled children and teen clubs and the accolades-aplenty Calm Waters Spa with its emphasis on locally-influenced treatments and therapies, showcasing the islands' aromatherapy. Already 200 staff members are employed and positions for an additional 100 workers for this winter's high-season will be filled, boosting the resort's staff to 300.



Hawks Cay Resort renewed. © JASON STEMPEL / HAWKS CAY RESORT

"We are bringing back what our guests loved about Hawks Cay — along with a fresh design in the main hotel and new experiences that will take the resort into a new era," continues Suga. Dallas-headquartered Looney & Associates mastered Hawks Cay's rejuvenation, creating a brighter lobby, guest rooms with more of a residential ambience, lush landscaping and strategic lighting. "The best initial thing for our guests now is to see a resort that is new and clean. But what they will remember about us most is an experience that is personalized. Our personal touch will resonate with them," says Suga. Such experiential programming includes private romantic dinners orchestrated in guests' suites or *al fresco* near the lagoon with cuisine from Sixty-One Prime restaurant, serving fine-dining steaks and seafood dishes by Executive Chef William Ryan and Restaurant Chef Adam Matyi.



Chill out at this Florida Keys hot spot. © JASON STEMPLE / HAWKS CAY RESORT



The recharged resort has also expanded its roster of entertainment offerings with comedy improv shows, live music, mystery nights — and, for children, popular story-time with a mermaid, as well as other family-centric goings-on with resort characters: Captain Hawk, pirate queen Priscilla and first-mate Clarence. "We have hired professionals from theater arts schools," explains Suga. Sportier interests? Choose snorkeling, scuba diving, kayaking, kiteboarding, stand-up paddleboarding, waterskiing, playing tennis, Segway touring, jet-skiing, parasailing, fishing and sunset cruising. The new adults-only (age 21+ years) Oasis Cay area is built around an expanded Tranquility Pool.

Its applauded [Dolphin Connection](#) program — in which a pod of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins in an ocean-fed saltwater lagoon interact with guests — teaches the importance of protecting Florida's marine ecosystem. Hawks Cay Resort is the only lodging in the mainland USA that features free public viewing of trained dolphins.



For more fun ideas and Florida tips: [Hawks Cay Resort, Florida Keys and Key West](#) and [Visit Florida](#).

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