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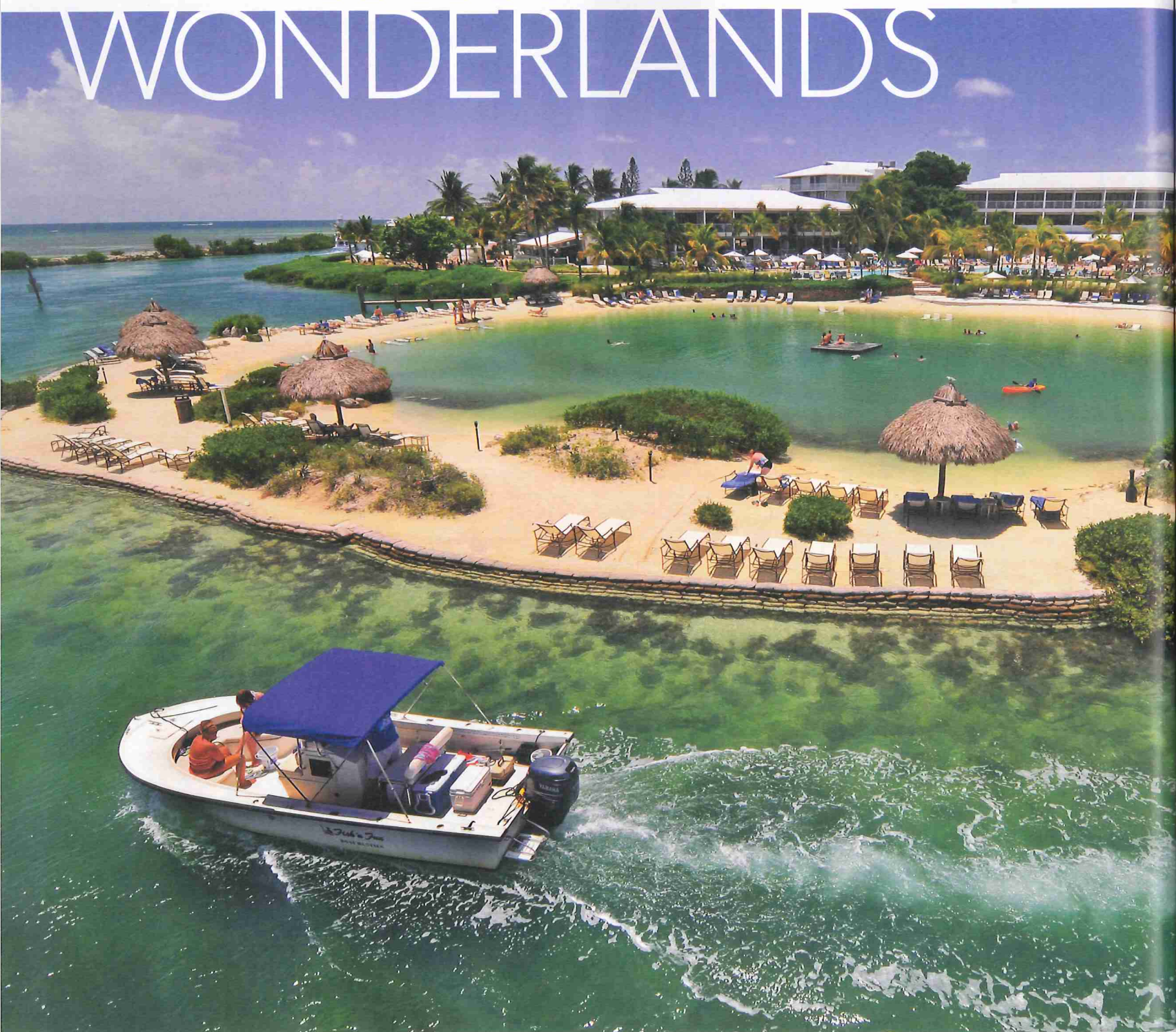
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Contemplating a warm weather family getaway? Let the dreaming (and planning) begin!



WINTER

WONDERLANDS



HAWKS CAY, FLORIDA

By Janice Biehn



If you think Florida is all about amusement parks and shopping malls, think again. Or rather, think further south. Beyond the pink hotels of Miami, that collection of islands of the southern tip of Florida known as the Keys are truly a unique experience that make you feel like you've just driven to the Caribbean.

You can fly, but most people drive the #1 highway south from Miami International Airport. You can take a shuttle bus, but renting a car isn't a bad idea. It affords you some flexibility to explore while visiting and it's pretty hard to get lost when there is just one road to take you there.

Residents of the Keys all refer to their location by the mile marker (MM), with Key West being the furthest south at zero, and Key Largo being the northernmost Key, between 100 and 107.

Around MM 61 you'll find Duck Key (named for its shape, not the fowl), with Hawks Cay Resort as one of the premier destinations. Like most of the keys, Hawks Cay does not have a to-die-for white sand beach. The keys are formed on coral reefs and fringed with mangrove outcroppings. However, Hawks Cay has created a saltwater lagoon beach (pictured at left) which is ideal for kids and families. The resort also has four pools, one of which is for adults only.

ACTIVITIES Being situated on a coral reef has its obvious benefits. The third largest in the world, it is teeming with colourful underwater life. Hawks Cay marina offers snorkeling, scuba diving and Snuba, which is as it sounds: a cross between snorkeling and scuba. With snuba, you are able to go well below the surface, about 15 to 20 feet (5 to 7 metres), but unlike scuba diving, you are not carrying your oxygen on your back. Instead, you breathe through a long line that is attached to a tank floating on the surface. Your guide monitors and moves the oxygen tank as you swim. Unlike scuba, you won't need to be certified because you don't go as deep. It's an ideal step up from snorkeling and the scenery makes it worthwhile.

The on-site marina also offers all sorts of other water craft including kayaking and paddle boarding, which allow for a more serene tour of the mangrove waterways. Looking for some speed? Try the jet skis. Your guided tour takes you on the other side of the highway to the open water where dolphins frolic happily.

Speaking of dolphins, they are a main attraction at Hawks Cay. No need to drive to an aquarium facility to get up close and personal. The onsite Dolphin Connection allows three levels of dolphin interaction: Dockside Dolphins

(see inset photo), Dolphin Discovery (includes swimming with them) and Trainer for a Day, a three-hour intensive. Advanced bookings are recommended for all. If you decide not to partake, the dolphin enclosure is within easy view so you can often watch them playing.

KIDS PROGRAMS For some families, time away from school doesn't mean a vacation from learning opportunities. Activities in Indies Club and Camp Hawk are fun and educational.

Hawks Cay is not an all-inclusive, so you pay for kids club programs as you go. This set-up is ideal for families whose kids don't really want to be in camp all day long. It allows them to dip in and out of programming so you can have some parent time (check out the spa), as well as together time.

The kids area is not for kids only. It's a great place for families to lounge at one of the two large pools or the water playground for younger children. There's a snack bar dishing out typical kid fare, plus a lounge with all the video games any tween or teen would love, but it's a good mix of indoor and outdoor pursuits. Check out the new miniature golf and sporting field.

FOOD Hawks Cay has plenty of delicious dining opportunities. Ocean, a bright and airy space, is adjacent to the main pool. It has a plentiful breakfast buffet and a wide selection for lunch and dinner. Alma is more of a fine dining experience that while delicious, might not suit everyone's budget more than once. Diners in both restaurants are treated to musical performances nightly. It's a very chill vibe.

Top off your meal with an ice cream cone from Emack & Bolio, next to the marina.

But what's a sunny resort without poolside service? Efficient and friendly servers from the Beach Grill will wait on you pretty much hand and foot until 5 p.m. Try the mahi mahi tacos. Like anything you purchase at Hawks Cay, you can just charge it to your room - no need to carry cash with you.

OFF SITE If you are looking to shop or explore local history, that's where a rental car comes in handy. Hawks Cay is about a 30-minute drive to Marathon, where souvenir shops abound. ○

Janice Biehn is the editor of ParentsCanada and feels she could have been a dolphin trainer in another life.



For more information, visit hawkscay.com

Planning a vacation? Go to ParentsCanada.com/traveltips