

PLAYGROUND

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>travel issue!

Local Families Visit:

Alaska
Asheville
The Keys

plus,
The 5-Star
Camp Guide

Ella (5) of Winter Garden
at Four Seasons Resort Orlando



THE ISLANDS

FAMILY FUN IN THE FLORIDA KEYS: SNORKELING, SEA LIFE, SUN

Words by Heather Reneau

Lagoon at
Hawks Cay Resort

A favorite vacation destination for Central Florida families is the beautiful Florida Keys. Some may argue going there is a necessary Florida family pilgrimage. This diverse ecosystem has a plethora of fish and the most beautiful reefs in the world. The small chain of islands that comprises the Florida Keys also has a unique, laid-back vibe that is best described in Jimmy Buffett's songs.

GETTING THERE

Most families will choose to road-trip to this beach vacation. It's going to take approximately six hours of driving, depending on where in Central Florida you live and how many stops you make along the way. Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale and Miami are all ideal stops to get a bite to eat and stretch your legs.

STAY

There are many options to stay and play at, from the first island of Key Largo to the southernmost city in the United States—Key West. For families, it's best to stay in the middle Keys near the city of Marathon.

Marathon is one of the largest areas, with much to do. There are a lot of small hotel options; however, when you're looking for a luxury family resort, the selection is somewhat limited. My recommendation, hands-down, is **Hawks Cay Resort** on Duck Key (www.hawkscay.com). This place is an oasis in the middle of paradise. The accommodations range from two-story condos with easy access to your own boat slip to poolside suites with large private lanais.



Generally, I would say to go for the two-story condo, but they are a little farther away from the resort amenities. If you are staying for a while, are towing your boat with you, or have a large family and need more room, then the condos are your best option. However, if you're going for a short stay (one week or less) and would like to be close to the pool, you'll definitely want to stay in a Premium Lanai Guest Room. It has its own private poolside sundeck area. Your hotel room literally will open up to the pool, lagoon and adorable restaurants.

The most unique feature of Hawks Cay Resort is a closed-in lagoon adjacent to the pool. It has a dock in the middle, and families can rent kayaks and paddleboards for safe saltwater play. In addition to the lagoon and 24-hour pool, Hawks Cay has the most amazing kids club area that I've ever experienced. The Coral Cay kids club has a drop-off program, or families can chill together at this awesome play area. It has mini golf, a pirate ship splash playground, its own separate pool, indoor crafts, video games and scheduled events, such as nature walks and kayaking trips. It's a bit of a walk from the main hotel resort, or you can jump on the free shuttle that gets people around this large resort easily. (It's the size and layout of a suburban neighborhood.)

A trip to the Keys will never be complete without a snorkeling trip to the only living barrier reef in the United States. A giant, 65-foot catamaran picks up Hawks Cay Resort guests right next to the lagoon for a three-hour adventure. This is a kid-friendly charter, as the boat deck is large, completely flat and covered. There are even bathrooms on board. While your strong swimmers will enjoy crystal clear snorkeling with water noodles (all gear is included), younger children will love the boat ride, view and snacks. Or, you can opt for a shorter family sunset cruise. TIP: If it's windy, don't go. Summertime boat excursions are best as the wind is minimal so you'll have a smooth boat ride.

Looking for a dolphin experience? Hawks Cay has an on-site dolphin research facility. You can pay to have a dolphin experience in the water or on the dock. But really, you don't even have to pay to see the fun dolphins from the Ocean restaurant's back deck. This is such a cool feature.



Paddleboarding in Hawks Cay Resort lagoon



Coral Cay kids club



Dolphin Connection at Hawks Cay Resort

Feature

PLAY

If you ever manage to peel the kids (and yourself) away from all the resort activities, then I recommend hitting up these cool places for a quintessential Florida Keys experience:

The Turtle Hospital—Make the trip educational with a tour of The Turtle Hospital in Marathon to encounter sea turtles up close. Some are being nursed back to health for future release, and others are lifetime residents, but all of them have names and a story that is told by the tour guide. Your kids will learn about the anatomy of a sea turtle and the importance of keeping our beaches and water safe and clean. With a little luck and planning, you can visit the hospital's website (www.turtlehospital.org) or Facebook page and schedule your visit around one of its sea turtle releases.

Bahia Honda State Park—This is a great place to spend the day exploring the beautiful state park in Marathon. There are many beaches, boat charters and rentals, bathrooms, concessions and even a nature center. You can fish, snorkel and explore the wonders of the Atlantic Ocean. It's probably the coolest place to camp in the Keys, and everyone knows it, as reservations may be booked up to a year out. (www.floridastateparks.org)

Key West—While there are mixed opinions regarding the famous southernmost Key, families can have a great time exploring the daytime activities on Duval Street. Rent an electric "egg" car (called that due to its shape) to make the experience more enjoyable for everyone. Because it's about a mile from one end to the other and sweltering most of the year, an egg car rental will put a smile on everyone's face, and you might not even notice the heat (maybe).

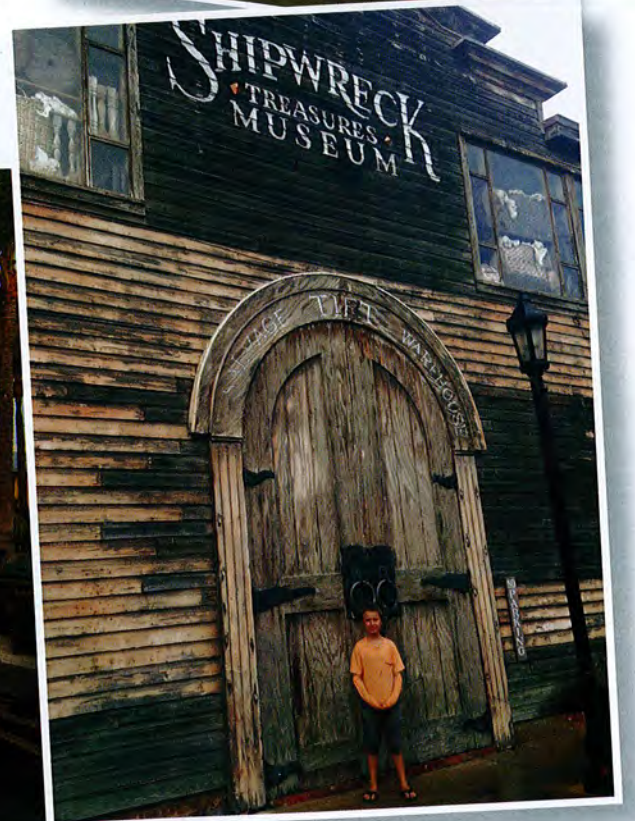
Start the day at the southernmost tip (on the south end of Duval Street). This is a must-have family photo opp! As you work your way north, you'll find fun shops and places to stop for lunch, ice cream and shopping. Do as the signs say, and "Eat at Sloppy Joe's" for live music entertainment and a fun Key West atmosphere. On the north end of Duval, families can enjoy the Shipwreck Treasure Museum and the Memorial Sculpture Garden. Finish out the day at the Key West Sunset Celebration at Mallory Square. It's a nightly arts festival that starts about two hours before sunset and consists of exhibitors, street performers, food carts and (of course) the beautiful Florida sunset over the Gulf of Mexico.

If you're really looking for a laid-back outdoor vacation, it doesn't get any more relaxing than a family trip to the Florida Keys. The water is clearer than most pools, the reef is a natural wonder, and the casual Salt Life attitude is permeating. It can be as upscale or affordable as you want it to be. You'll be overwhelmed by the connectedness you'll feel with nature and family.

Electric egg car



Sunset cruise



Hawks Cay Resort

