



Between Miami and Key West, Florida has a whole different vibe

HAWK'S CAY RESORT PHOTO

Keys to happiness



ROBIN ROBINSON/TORONTO SUN



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Florida's popularity with Canadians is no secret. During the winter, provincial licence plates are almost as common as state ones in beach towns along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. Attraction-packed Orlando and glitzy Miami draw huge Canadian contingents, too.

But mention the Florida Keys and it's a different story. Most people have heard of Key West, but few have visited any of the 1,700 coral cays that stretch south-southwest along the Overseas Highway from the

United States mainland.

Except for its balmy winters, white sand beaches and swaying palms, much of Florida resembles the rest of the U.S. Not so in the 30 inhabited Keys, which have distinct personalities and a Caribbean vibe. While there are many tourist attractions, this is not the Florida of amusement parks, chain restaurants and outlet malls. But if you embrace individuality, even quirkiness, it may be the Florida for you.

The places below are only a small sample of what awaits between Miami and Key West:

KEY LARGO Floating history

The rustic steamboat with the riveted metal hull and red-and-white striped awning stands out among the lux tour boats and mega-yachts docked at Marina del Mar.

The 102-year-old vessel plied the waters of the Victoria Nile before being featured in the 1951 John Huston classic *African Queen*. Humphrey Bogart won his only Oscar for his performance as the film's crusty, gin-swilling Canadian riverboat captain. Katherine Hepburn was nominated for best actress for her portrayal of the plucky prissy missionary. But the vessel, where those famous scenes took place, faded into obscurity before being found in Cairo in the '70s, shipped to the U.S., restored and put into service as a tour boat.

The story of the boat's long journey from derelict to delightful is complicated but today film fans and boat buffs can cruise down the placid Port Largo Canals to the Atlantic and back aboard a piece of floating history. In the '90s, the

American Film Institute ranked *African Queen* as the 17th greatest movie of all time; the boat is a designated National Historic Site.

Lance Holmquist and his wife Suzanne painstakingly restored the boat and operate it with the African Queen Trust. The vintage watercraft attracts a lot of attention from locals, especially when Lance dresses the part and or lets passengers blow the stream whistle.

The 1.5-hour cruises are \$69 per person (\$25 for kids). Evening cruises with dinner are \$89. Contact africanqueenflkeys.com or 305-451-8080.

DUCK KEY Dolphin encounters

There are many places where people can learn about and interact with dolphins but Dolphin Connection — based at



PHOTOS BY ROBIN ROBINSON/TORONTO SUN

Around the Florida Keys, clockwise from left: The Dolphin Connection program at Hawk's Cay Resort fosters connections between dolphins and humans. Cpt. Lance Holmquist dresses the part when he takes the restored African Queen out for canal cruises in Key Largo. Whimsical sign at the open air Hungry Tarpon restaurant at Robbie's of Islamorada. A giant tarpon tries to swallow Tyler Cashin's arm as he demonstrates how to feed the fish from the dock at Robbie's Marina. Fortunately the huge fish have tiny teeth! Guests gather at the firepit at Hawk's Cay Resort. Manager Bette Zirkelbach shows off one of the smaller patients recuperating at the Turtle Hospital in Marathon, Fla.

Hawk's Cay Resort — is the only resort-based program in the continental U.S.

Several activities focused on fostering connections between humans and dolphins are offered. The Dockside Dolphin Encounter (\$60 per person) allows people of all ages to feed and interact with these engaging creatures from the dock. For a more in depth experience, the Dolphin Discovery (\$175) puts participants (minimum height 4' 6") on platforms in the water, where they can touch, splash, swim and play with dolphins. There is also a three-hour Trainer For A Day experience (\$325) for those 10 or older who meet height restrictions.

The resort also organizes free viewing of the four resident dolphins a few times a day. Contact dolphinconnection.com or 888-251-3674.

ISLAMORADA
Fish tales

When people talk about the quirkiness of the Keys, places like Robbie's of Islamorada spring immediately to mind. For an interesting morning, have a hearty breakfast at the marina's waterside Hungry Tarpon restaurant then go out onto the docks (\$1 per person) to see the huge tarpon that hang out in the clear shallow waters.

You can buy a bucket of fish bits (\$3) to feed the tarpon

and — if you're really brave — learn to hand-feed them. You need to have quick hand-to-eye coordination for this task as the enormous game fish (which can measure more than 2 metres and weigh up to 90 kilos) jump right out of the water to snatch the tasty morsels! Fortunately their teeth are tiny, but they can give you a nasty scrape.

Robbie's also arranges fishing and snorkelling charters, and is surrounded by funky stalls selling cheap and cheerful souvenirs and crafts. Contact 877-664-8498 or see robbies.com.

PIGEON KEY
Flagler's Folly

No story about the Keys is complete without a mention of Henry Flagler. The American tycoon built luxury hotels along Florida's Atlantic Coast and established the Florida East Coast Railway before turning his attention to the Keys.

Convinced Key West could become the largest port in the U.S.A., Flagler decided to run a rail line there. But building a railroad across many small islands, through swamp and over long stretches of ocean presented expensive construction challenges. Skeptics dubbed the pricey project "Flagler's Folly," but work started in 1905 and finished in 1912, when the line went into daily service.

During construction, some

400 railway workers were housed on Pigeon Key — now one of the last surviving sites of the Overseas Railroad and Overseas Extension, which ran until 1935 when it was severely damaged by a powerful hurricane. Bridges and sections of rail were washed out, and hundreds perished when 10 coaches of an evacuation train were swept off the tracks by the storm surge.

The railway was never rebuilt, but in the '40s, some of its foundations and bridges formed the backbone of a new Overseas Highway.

Today, Pigeon Key is one of Monroe County's most historically significant sites. The island is managed by the Pigeon Key Foundation, which offers tours and runs a small museum. Eight of its buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places.

Visitors can take a short ferry ride from Knight's Key to the 2-hectare island to learn about its railroad history, or just enjoy a picnic and a swim at the beach or a stroll on a remaining section of Flagler's legendary Seven Mile Bridge.

For a longer stay, you can rent a refurbished cabin equipped with modern amenities. Tours are \$12 for adults, \$9 children 5-13. Contact pigeonkey.net or 305-509-0345.



MARATHON
Turtle time

Sea turtles don't have it easy. They are frequently hit by boats, become entangled in fishing lines and nets, or develop intestinal blockages from eating plastic bags, which they mistake for jelly fish.

In addition, they are prone to tumours that damage their eyes, mouth and organs, and must sometimes migrate vast distances to lay eggs that have a very low survival rate.

All seven species of marine turtles are threatened or endangered. Five — hawksbill, green, Kemp's Ridley, loggerhead and leatherback — are found in the Keys. When sick or hurt these air-breathing reptiles often float on top of the water, unable to dive for food, or wash ashore. Fortunately ones are rescued, rehabilitated and (if possible) released by the Turtle Hospital, the world's only state-certified veterinary hospital for sea turtles.

Their ground-breaking work is partly funded by a fascinating 90-minute tour during which visitors see some of the patients, treatment rooms, and recuperation tanks. About 70 sea turtles are rescued each year. More than 1,000 have been released back into the wild. Turtles too disabled to be released sometimes find new homes at zoos and aquariums.

Contact turtlehospital.org or 305-743-2552. Tours are \$18 for adults, \$9 for children 4-12.

BAHIA HONDA KEY
Park yourself

There are 10 state parks in the Keys and — like the islands

— each one is a little different from the next. What makes 202-hectare Bahia Honda different are its sandy beaches.

Beaches are not as plentiful in the Keys as elsewhere in Florida, and Bahia Honda's pristine beaches are some of the best. They have even made "America's Best Beach" list put out yearly by foremost U.S. beach expert Dr. Stephen P. Leatherman, aka "Dr. Beach."

In addition to excellent swimming, snorkelling, fishing and birding, Bahia Honda has campsites and rental cabins, a Sand and Sea Nature Center for visitors, and Bahia Honda bridge — an Overseas Railway remnant with great views and now used for recreation.

Admission is \$2 per pedestrian/cyclist or \$8 per vehicle (up to eight occupants). There are about 80 campsites from \$36 per night. Cabins go for \$120-\$160 per night. Contact floridastateparks.org/bahiahonda or 305-872-2353. Campsites can be booked at ReserveAmerica.com.

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Sweet dreams

From campgrounds, cottages and B&Bs to motels, beach hotels and resorts, the Florida Keys has accommodation for most budgets. But it doesn't get any better than Hawk's Cay Resort, which has 24 hectares of beautifully landscaped grounds and opportunities for swimming, fishing, diving, kayaking, kiteboarding, standup paddle boarding, tennis, Segway tours and more.

Resort features include the Dolphin Connection program, a full-service marina, six swimming pools — including a tranquility pool, a pirate-ship pool for kids and a saltwater lagoon— activity clubs for kids and teens, the Calm Waters Spa, five restaurants and a firepit for evening gatherings. In addition to 177 guest rooms in the main resort, there are 225 villas arranged in "villages" around the property.

A new Stay and Play offer includes a 25% savings on villa stays of seven nights or more, plus two complimentary bike rentals. Prices vary depending on dates and villa selected. For instance, a townhome in Sunset Village with two bedrooms (two queen beds or one queen and two twin beds, plus a sleeper sofa), full kitchen, living and dining rooms, 1.5 bathrooms, and a terrace starts at \$339.96 per night for seven nights starting Jan. 24. Other deals are offered during the year. Contact hawkscay.com or 888-395-5539.

NEED TO KNOW

For travel information, contact the Florida Keys Tourism Council at flakeys.com or 1-800-FLA-KEYS (352-5397).



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