

How to Take the Ultimate Florida Keys Road Trip

BY [GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI](#) | MAY 09, 2019



PHOTO: GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI

The cool dark of the bar provided respite from the hot, afternoon sunshine and it was a minute or two before our eyes adjusted to the scene inside. Settling onto a couple of stools, we ordered beers and took in our surroundings. Dollar bills, most bearing messages penned in magic marker, covered every inch of the walls and ceiling, three and four layers deep in some places. Two sunburned couples across the bar ordered another round, tapping their plastic cups in a toast while Johnny Cash crooned overhead.

“I kind of feel like we’re in the Twilight Zone,” my husband said as the bartender set baskets brimming with french fries and fried grouper in front of us. We’d landed in No Name Pub, a longtime [Florida Keys institution](#) quite a ways off the beaten path. A few hours earlier saw us part of a different Keys tableau – sipping our coffee while gazing at the Atlantic across a lawn dotted with swaying palms. The ocean and a busy woodpecker were the only sounds we could hear.

A drive down Florida’s Overseas Highway from Key Largo to Key West offers the perfect blend of eccentric bohemia and chic *joie de vivre*. As the mile markers decrease, Old Florida charm sharpens into focus. Strip malls hawking beach sundries and snorkeling tours along the upper reaches of U.S. 1 give way to dazzling turquoise flashes as the road becomes more bridge than highway. The route south is festooned with the Keys’ ubiquitous kitsch – a giant, spiny lobster presides over a local arts village, lipsticked manatees clutch mailboxes, and hand painted mermaids tempt passersby with the promise of sunset cocktails.

Though Hurricane Irma, which ravaged the archipelago in September 2017, is not yet a faint memory for those who call the Keys home, the region has made a remarkable recovery. Most hotels and resorts have reopened – [many after completing extensive renovations](#) – and a few new spots have joined the roster. Restaurants, beach bars, state parks, and legions of watersports outfitters have also rebounded, leaving visitors hard pressed to find evidence of the storm’s Category-4 destruction.

You could drive the 113-mile stretch in a little over three hours, but why would you want to? Road trips, especially one as iconic as this, are all about the stops along the way. So put the top down and cue Jimmy Buffet. Here’s our guide to the best the Florida Keys has to offer.

Marathon

Even before Hemingway's old man took to the sea, the Keys were a saltwater angler's paradise, legendary for big game like sailfish, wahoo, and blue marlin. Though pulling a trophy fish from the ocean can be a thrill, sometimes the best part of casting a line is eating your catch later.

One of the best ways to do so is on a Hook and Cook adventure at [Hawks Cay Resort](#) on Duck Key, a pocket-sized island about 20 miles south of Islamorada. The resort, which received a major lashing from Hurricane Irma, reopened last August fresh off a \$50-million renovation that included a complete redesign of its public spaces and guestrooms, two new restaurants, and a reimagined adults-only enclave called Oasis Cay.

Get out onto the water with lifelong conch, [Captain Dave Perry](#), who has been fishing the Keys for decades and runs charters out of the Hawks Cay Marina with Captain Justin Brunk. In addition to blue water hunting, the two specialize in fishing the reef for snapper and grouper, fish that Hawks Cay executive chef William Ryan will later blacken, grill, or fry for a hyper-local meal at [Angler and Ale](#), the resort's new dockside restaurant.

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