

Brand new Cay

By **Holly V. Kapherr** | Dec 12, 2018



Hawks Cay's saltwater lagoon, lined with thatch-roof tikis, abuts Florida Bay, leading to the Atlantic.



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It has been just over a year since Hurricane Irma ripped through the Florida Keys, causing billions of dollars in damage, rendering many structures uninhabitable and forcing thousands from their beloved archipelago. In the last 15 months since the storm, almost all of the resorts in the Keys are now back to business, including



Hawks Cay, the sprawling, 60-acre megaresort on Duck Key.



The hotel **recently reopened** following a \$50 million refresh and invited me to visit to see the improvements.



All 177 guestrooms, meetings facilities, saltwater lagoon with tiki hut umbrellas, outdoor pools and three restaurants were reimaged as part of the renovation.

"We went for a lighter, brighter, more modern look," said Wilner Henri, marketing manager for the resort, as he took me on a tour of the updates. "Instead of the dark, heavy West Indies look and feel we had at the resort, it's now more open and inviting." He points to the lobby bar, which is now the entrance for the new prime steak and seafood concept restaurant, Sixty-One Prime, which took the place of the former Latin-inspired steak restaurant, Alma. "The bar always existed, but it was much more closed off. Now we have these partitions that invite people into the space to relax and have a cocktail before dinner."

The pool areas look similar, but the pools were resurfaced following the storm, and all new ivory-colored pool furniture, mirroring the bright decor in the lobby, has taken the place of the dark-brown ones that previously filled the pool deck. An upgraded adults-only pool area, called Oasis Cay, was the result of customer requests for a place couples and groups of adult friends could gather. Oasis Cay includes the existing adults-only pool and spa but now also features a dedicated bar and grill area, where I happily noshed an excellent alligator and fried okra po' boy sandwich. There's also an adults-only fire pit, cigar carts and five cabanas available for rental.

While the hotel might have ditched the whole West Indies theming, there's still elements of traditional "island-style" decor, including the new LED tiki torches -- a big step up from the wicker ones that were there previously -- and new thatched tiki huts at the saltwater lagoon. "We still offer complimentary kayaks and paddleboards for the lagoon, so guests can still participate in watersports even if they don't want to head out into the Florida Bay," said Henri.

Sole Watersports, located on property just a few minutes' walk from the main hotel, has partnered with Hawks Cay in the past to bring activities like a Jet Ski tour; snuba and snorkeling; paddleboarding; and kayaking to guests of the resort. Since the storm, they are still working on getting some of the activities up and running. The sunset cruise boat was destroyed in the storm, but the company is still taking guests out on a smaller boat while two new, larger boats are being built. Sole Watersports is also offering paddleboards and kayaks. Snuba, snorkeling and Jet Ski tours are slated to return in the spring.

All of the restaurants have reimagined menus, and all of the food I sampled while at Hawks Cay was excellent. Angler & Ale, the sports bar and casual seafood restaurant that's just a seven-minute walk from the hotel (or even quicker via the hotel's complimentary golf-cart tram), served an excellent conch chowder, teeming with local conch and topped with a fritter the size of a golf ball. I also adored the fresh ceviche served in lettuce cups, which were crisp and refreshing served alongside a pint of Channel Marker IPA from local brewer Islamorada Beer Co.

The new prime steak and seafood restaurant Sixty-One Prime is especially good, serving crowd-pleasing classics in lovely presentations, like its French onion soup served in a gigantic, hollowed-out Vidalia onion. The grilled octopus on avocado puree with pickled radishes was among the best dishes I've tasted all year. I also appreciated the inclusion of some grass-fed, grass-finished Florida beef from Fort McCoy Ranch -- the 16-ounce Delmonico steak I tried was perfectly medium-rare and succulent.

Another new addition to the hotel is the Hawks Cay Marketplace, which currently only serves a breakfast buffet, combining ready-to-eat foods with an omelet station and plenty of fresh fruit, cereals and yogurt. After the new year, though, the Marketplace will serve wood-fired pizzas and paninis for a more casual lunch and dinner option, ideal for families.

When I posted to my Instagram about visiting Hawks Cay, several of my friends were excited to see the changes. "We have been going there for Christmas for years," said one. "I was so sad to hear how much damage they sustained after the storm." I sent them a few pictures to see the changes. "Wow!," they replied, "it looks amazing! What a change!"

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