

# Keys Traveler

Sport Fishing Edition



The  
Florida Keys  
& Key West  
... come as you are®

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# The Florida Keys

## World-Class Angling in the U.S.A.



By Captain Ted Lund

ROB O'NEAL

Planning your next exotic destination fishing expedition? There's no reason to leave the U.S. and no reason to look farther than the Florida Keys & Key West.

The region owes the abundance of fantastic inshore and offshore angling opportunities to its unique geography; it's here that five of the planet's greatest natural wonders come together. The Florida Keys are at the center of the confluence of the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Gulf Stream current, Florida Bay and the Florida Everglades.

The entire 125-mile-long island chain offers year-round, world-class access to backcountry, inshore and offshore fishing, including species such as tarpon, yellowtail snapper, kingfish, dolphin (mahi-mahi) and sailfish.

But just as each Keys island community has its own flavor, each region enjoys its own specialized fishery — unlike any found elsewhere in the angling world.

### Key Largo

For shallow-water anglers, Key Largo is one of the finest destinations for seeking the elusive flats slam: a permit, bonefish and tarpon all in one day. Why? Savvy skiff guides have access to the bonefish- and permit-rich waters of Biscayne National Park. After releasing your first two, it's off to the remote wilds of Everglades National Park for your tarpon. Reach your goal? Upgrade to a super slam by adding a redfish and a snook.

Key Largo also is a Keys sailfish hotspot, especially during winter when the high-leaping "spindlebeaks" chase baitfish on the edge of the reef, producing "showers" of ballyhoo that serve as beacons to the prized gamefish.

### Islamorada

For over 100 years Islamorada has been known as the Sport Fishing Capital of the World. Now it has another gem to add to its crown: Daytime Swordfishing Capital of the World.

Thanks to an innovative group of professional charter captains, this unique daytime fishery for broadbill swordfish has blossomed. Using state-of-the-art tackle and techniques developed right here, you'll present baits at depths ranging to 2,000 feet. It's possible to log several releases of these rare gamefish in one day — with some scaling more than 400 pounds.

And Islamorada's reefs are prime for yellowtail snapper, one of the tastiest fish of the sea. Chefs at area restaurants will take filets, skillfully carved by captains and mates, and prepare them in several different styles. You can't get fish any fresher.

### Marathon

Moving southwest along the island chain, anglers arrive in the Middle Keys and Marathon. This is arguably one of the world's premier tarpon fishing destinations, especially along the world-famous Seven Mile Bridge. Though many fishermen target the silver king during daylight hours, Marathon's charter community has been able to cool things off — making it one of the world's best evening tarpon fisheries.

Marathon also features a great deepwater habitat called the Marathon Hump. It's literally an underwater mountain where the Gulf Stream current upwelling forces bait to the surface, attracting pelagic species such as blackfin tuna, dolphin and sharks.

### Big Pine Key and the Lower Keys

Want to experience the "Primal Pull?" Then Big Pine and the Lower Keys is the place for blackfin tuna as well as deepwater snapper and grouper. Located just off American Shoal is a series of sunken U.S. Navy ships called the Destroyers. Ranging from depths of 180 feet to nearly 600 feet of water, the shipwrecks offer plenty of nonstop, drag-smoking action to put tackle to the test year-round.

Farther offshore toward the continen-

tal shelf, anglers find blue marlin and other species of billfish as well as dolphin, wahoo and blackfin tuna around the East Crack, a deep vertical fissure where water depths range from 750 to 1,500 feet. Such severe bottom relief attracts hordes of baitfish and, in turn, predators.

### Key West

When you finally come to mile marker 0 in the Southernmost City, you're only 20 miles from world-famous Wood's Wall. It's the continuation of the continental shelf and features the Middle and West cracks. This is the stretch of water Ernest Hemingway roamed.

But Key West also offers exceptional shallow-water habitats for permit. The late legendary fly fisherman Del Brown landed over 500 of the wary gamefish on fly in the region.

Expansive grass flats, big flood tides and abundant populations of the permit's favorite food source — crabs — have made this a go-to permit destination. Add the abundance of world-class fishing guides, and it's easy to see why no other destination comes close when you're chasing this holy grail of light-tackle fishing.

No matter what your fishing fancy, the Florida Keys & Key West have something for every angler — every day of the year.

For more information, visit [fla-keys.com/fishing](http://fla-keys.com/fishing).

*Captain Ted Lund is a former editor of Saltwater Sportsman magazine and a Florida Keys fishing fanatic.*



ANDY NEWMAN

Richard Stanczyk, left, and Vic Gaspeny display a broadbill caught while daytime swordfishing off the Florida Keys.

# King of the Keys

Story by Doug Kelly  
Photograph by Pat Ford



One clear, crisp spring day in 1908, the renowned South Florida charterboat skipper Charlie Thompson was fishing for tarpon off Long Key. According to his daughter, he spotted none other than Henry Flagler standing on the shoreline near his newly built Long Key Fishing Club. Flagler later told him that the sunlight glancing off the silvery backs of the huge school of tarpon around Thompson's boat produced a mesmerizing light effect.

Other anglers besides Flagler became similarly smitten with the unbelievable bounty of Florida Keys sport fishing for sailfish, wahoo, tuna, mackerel, snapper, grouper and scores of other species. But tarpon became a particular hit because of the species' close-to-shore availability, massive size and powerful fighting prowess.

First glamorized in books in the 1800s as a monstrous "tarpum," the tarpon later was nicknamed the "silver king" due to its regal size and the distinctive hue of its huge scales. Tarpon fishing became more common soon after the turn of the century, thanks in large part to Flagler's East Coast Railway connecting Key West to Florida's mainland.

With the ensuing 1920s tourism boom came fascinating articles appearing in national publications about anglers dueling with

100-pound-plus tarpon in the Florida Keys — particularly stories surrounding the exploits of personalities like Zane Grey, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt and, in later decades, Ernest Hemingway and Ted Williams.

As the popularity of tarpon fishing burgeoned, a cottage industry expanded with the increasing demand for more suitable boats, better equipment and expert guides. No longer did one have to dress in jacket and tie while balancing in a wooden boat ill-equipped for fishing. Specialized clothing for flats angling became available and motorized vessels were designed specifically for light-tackle and fly-fishing enthusiasts targeting tarpon.

In the 1960s new personalities began to take center stage in Keys tarpon angling — flats masters such as Stu Apte, Billy Pate and Al Pflueger.

Fishing guides like Islamorada's Jimmie Albright became world famous for their craft. And yet, despite all the inordinate skills developed by experts to successfully stalk silver kings often weighing more than themselves, even neophytes to the sport like Henry Flagler could experience the exhilaration of catching and releasing a tarpon.

And it's still happening every day in the Florida Keys.



ANDY NEWMAN

Randy Towe wraps a guide on one of his custom rods.

## Islamorada captain makes rod-building an art

When Randy Towe was 10 years old he asked his mother to buy him a \$200 custom fishing rod.

His mother didn't agree with the investment, so he convinced her to spend considerably less. The young fisherman then purchased parts and built his own rod.

Now more than 40 years later, Towe not only continues to build rods for himself, he also crafts them for others — all from his store in the Florida Keys.

Infatuated with sport fishing, Towe moved to Islamorada at age 19. He mated on an offshore charter boat and earned enough money to pay his \$250-per-month rent and cover his living expenses.

In 1983, he secured his U.S. Coast Guard captain's license and began taking customers out in the backcountry. He was making \$350 per trip and "living the dream."

But that didn't seem to keep him busy enough, so he rented a small business space and started a rod-building business just because it offered him a "therapeutic opportunity to take a break from fishing."

His brand, Captain Randy Towe's Signature Series Handmade Rods, has become well known to dedicated anglers.

"I make everything from fly to heavy offshore trolling rods," Towe said. "I build exactly what customers want, how they want it to feel and what they want to do with it."

Towe said his rods are all about fit, finish and top-quality parts.

When someone purchases a Towe-built rod, he can rest assured

that the entire package has been assembled by just one person: Captain Randy Towe.

Towe not only builds rods alone, he also prefers to fish customers in the same manner — whether it's in the backcountry for tarpon, bonefish and snook on his 18-foot Action Craft skiff or offshore for yellowtail snapper, sailfish, blackfin tuna or dolphin fish on his 34-foot Pursuit.

Towe's rods cost anywhere from \$300 to \$1,400 apiece, but are crafted to last a lifetime.

"There is nothing I build that I don't test," Towe said. "And I have the testing grounds of the Florida Keys in my own backyard."

Many of Towe's customers come to him because they are serious anglers — some even focused on breaking world records — and the rods become highly prized possessions.

"I had to testify in court when a couple got divorced," Towe recalled. "They were arguing over a set of fly rods and reels."

"She got them," he remembered, "and she had me take his name off of them." — Andy Newman

### Keys Traveler

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Cover photo of a charterboat heading to Alligator Lighthouse by Andy Newman

## When and where to fish for popular Florida Keys game fish

SPECIES	SIZE	HABITAT	SEASON	TACKLE*
Amberjack	30-75 lbs.	reef, wreck, humps	March-May	20-80#
Barracuda	7-35 lbs.	all areas	year-round	fly, spin, baitcast
Bonefish	5-16 lbs.	flats	May-Oct.	fly, spin, baitcast
Cobia	15-80 lbs.	reef, wreck, bay	Nov.-April	fly, spin, baitcast
Dolphin (Mahi-Mahi)	5-65 lbs.	blue water	April-Oct.	fly, spin, baitcast
Grouper (multiple species)	10-500 lbs.	reef, wreck	May-Dec.	spin, 20-50#
Cero Mackerel	3-10 lbs.	reef, wreck	Nov.-April	fly, spin, baitcast
King Mackerel	8-70 lbs.	reef, wreck	Oct.-April	spin, 12-30#
Spanish Mackerel	3-7 lbs.	bay, bridge, reef	Nov.-March	fly, spin, baitcast
Blue Marlin	80-600 lbs.	blue water	May-Oct.	50-80#
White Marlin	30-125 lbs.	blue water	April-Sept.	12-30#
Permit	8-40 lbs.	flats, wreck	March-Nov.	fly, spin, baitcast
Redfish	3-20 lbs.	backcountry	year-round	fly, spin, baitcast
Sailfish	30-80 lbs.	reef edge, blue water	Nov.-May	fly, spin, 12-20#
Shark (multiple species)	10-600 lbs.	all areas	year-round	fly, spin, baitcast, 30-80#
Snapper (Mangrove)	1-6 lbs.	bridges, bay and reef	year-round	spin
Snapper (Mutton)	5-20 lbs.	flats and reef	April-Sept.	fly, spin, baitcast
Snapper (Yellowtail)	2-6 lbs.	reef	year-round	spin
Snook	6-35 lbs.	backcountry	March-Nov.	fly, spin, baitcast
Swordfish	70-700 lbs.	blue water	year-round	50-130#
Tarpon	25-150 lbs.	bridges, flats, bay	March-Aug.	fly, spin, baitcast
Tuna (Blackfin)	5-38 lbs.	blue water, off-shore humps	year-round	fly, spin, 20-30#
Wahoo	15-80 lbs.	blue water	Nov.-June	spin, 30#

The Florida Keys lay claim to more world saltwater angling records than any other destination on the globe, according to the International Game Fish Association.

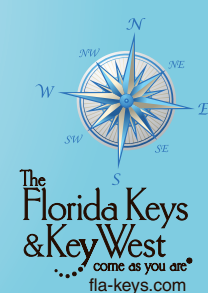
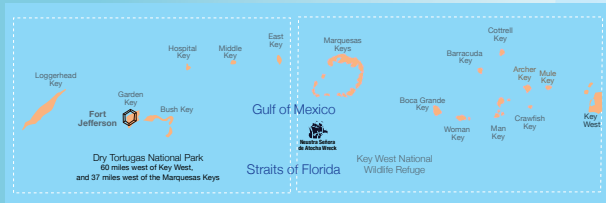
A saltwater fishing license is required to fish from a pier, bridge, boat or from shore in all Florida waters. Visitors who fish on a certified charter, party or backcountry boat do not need a license because the captain and boat carry necessary documentation.

More information on fishing licenses and saltwater fishing regulations is available at [myfwc.com/fishing](http://myfwc.com/fishing).

For details on fishing tournaments in the Keys: [fla-keys.com/fishing](http://fla-keys.com/fishing)

\*Tackle is specified as spin, fly, baitcast or conventional with appropriate line class (# means line test breaking strength in pounds).

# Traveling Tips to the Florida Keys



The 125-mile-long Florida Keys island chain is linked to mainland Florida by U.S. Highway 1, the Overseas Highway. Visitors can fly into Miami International Airport (MIA) or Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL) and from there can reach the Keys by airport shuttle bus or rental car. Travelers can reach Key Largo, the gateway to the Keys, in about an hour from Miami or an hour and 45 minutes from Fort Lauderdale.

## Air Service to the Florida Keys

For an up-to-date roster of commercial airlines and on-demand charter operators serving Key West International and Florida Keys Marathon International Airports, go to [fla-keys.com/gettinghere/#air](http://fla-keys.com/gettinghere/#air).

## Driving Directions

From Miami International Airport (MIA), take LeJeune Road south to 836 West. Take the Florida Turnpike south toward Key West.

The Turnpike ends at U.S. 1 in Florida City. Follow U.S. 1 south about 22 miles to Key Largo and you are now in the Florida Keys.

From Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL), exit the airport and follow the signs for I-595 West. Take 595 to the Florida Turnpike and follow the signs for the Florida Keys.

From farther north, take the Florida Turnpike south to just below Fort Lauderdale, where Exit 4 joins the southern portion of the Turnpike that ends at U.S. 1 in Florida City. Follow U.S. 1 south into the Florida Keys.

From Florida's west coast, take I-75 (Alligator Alley) east to the Miami exit, and south to the Turnpike Extension.

## Driving Data to Keys/Key Largo

FROM	MILES	KM	HOURS
Miami	50	80	1
Fort Myers	200	320	4
Tampa	300	480	6
Orlando	280	450	5.25

## Distance from Miami

REGION	MILES	KM	MILE MARKER
Key Largo	50	80	107-90
Islamorada	76	122	89-66
Marathon	111	178	65-45
Lower Keys	128	205	45-4
Key West	159	254	4-0

## Via Bus

Bus/shuttle connections from MIA and FLL to the Florida Keys allow traveling to the Keys without renting a car.

## Have your own boat?

The Keys feature an abundance of excellent marinas from Key Largo to Key West. Many are integrated into resorts and have boat ramps. So whether you choose to cruise down from the Florida mainland in your boat or car with a boat trailer, there's a choice of perfect locations for your Keys angling experience throughout the island chain.



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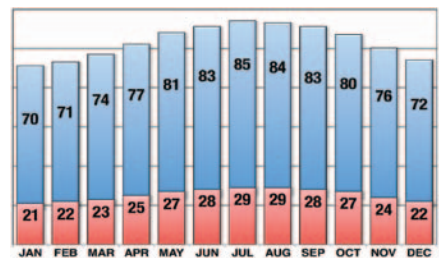
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## Weather/Climat

Wherever you are right now, chances are the weather is better in the Florida Keys. That's true even on a summer day. The hottest it's ever been in Key West is 97° F (36° C), and that was in 1880. At the peak of summer, the average high air temperature is about 89° F (32° C). The Keys are devoid of superhighways or urban sprawl to absorb and radiate the sun's heat. And the subtropical islands are cooled by sea breezes.

In the winter, the Keys are typically the warmest region in the continental U.S. There has never been a frost in Key West, according to the U.S. Weather Service.

Below are the average monthly air temperatures for the past 30 years, according to the Key West weather office. Temperatures in blue shades are Fahrenheit and those in light red are Celsius.



## Help and More Information

If you're traveling in the Keys and need any help, call the toll-free Visitors' Assistance line at 1-800-771-KEYS. It's staffed 24 hours a day. To contact visitor offices in the Keys, call 1-800-FLA-KEYS. The Keys website at [fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com) has a live chat feature with visitor information specialists available during regular U.S. weekday business hours to aid travelers in vacation planning.