

Keys Traveler



Florida Keys Celebrate 100 Years of Conservation

Visitors from around the world are drawn to the Florida Keys to experience the island chain's priceless natural resources. Protection of these resources began a century ago, demonstrating the region's long-term commitment to environmental stewardship.

In 1908, in response to a fashion trend that was decimating migratory bird populations — the hunting of birds for feathers used to decorate women's hats — then-President Theodore Roosevelt created the Key West National Wildlife Refuge to protect and preserve a breeding ground for migratory species.

Today, the refuge provides nesting, roosting and foraging habitat for more than 250 species of migratory birds such as the roseate tern, osprey, bald eagle and magnificent frigate bird.

In 1938, the Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge was established, encompassing open water and islands in the Gulf of Mexico between Key West and Marathon. This preserve provides safe nesting and breeding areas for great white herons and other migratory birds and wildlife.



A Keys great white heron observes its surroundings.

The Lower Keys are home to the National Key Deer Refuge, established in 1957 to protect and preserve habitats for wildlife, most notably the diminutive Key deer.

The Florida Keys chain is paralleled by the continental United States' only living

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A Five Sixes Taxi hybrid vehicle rolls past the Southernmost Point marker in Key West.

Photo by Rob O'Neal

Florida's First Hybrid Taxis Hit Key West Streets

Key West's hot-pink taxis have gone "green."

Five Sixes Taxi debuted 10 environmentally friendly hybrid vehicles in July 2008 as the first step in converting its entire fleet. According to a representative of the Taxi, Limousine and Paratransit Association, Five Sixes was the first taxi company in Florida to roll out hybrids.

The fuel-efficient vehicles get approximately 28 to 30 miles per gallon in the city. Taxi company officials report that passengers have shown enthusiastic support for the cabs and the company's pro-environmental effort.

The Florida Keys Taxi Dispatch fleet currently includes 23 sedans and 23 larger "Maxi Taxis" that can

accommodate up to seven passengers.

The company plans to replace all the sedans with hybrids by April and replace the "Maxi Taxis" with hybrids when a suitable hybrid alternative becomes available.

For more information, visit keywesttaxi.com.

Transforming a Rusted Relic Into a Keys Artificial Reef

By the summer of 2009, a retired military ship that had been rusting away in a Virginia river for almost a quarter-century should be serving as a new habitat for marine life and a new attraction for divers.

The former U.S. Air Force missile-

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Photo by Rob O'Neal

A diver explores the underwater beauty of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary off Key Largo.

Environmental Stewardship a Century Old in Keys

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coral barrier reef. The extraordinary reef ecosystem, much like a tropical rainforest, supports a unique diversity of plants and animals.

To protect a portion of this reef, John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park was established off the Upper Keys in 1963 as America's first underwater preserve.

Today Pennekamp is incorporated into the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, established in 1990 by

the U.S. government. The sanctuary encompasses 2,800 square nautical miles of coastal and oceanic waters and submerged lands.

Not only does this area surround the entire land mass of the Florida Keys, it also includes vast stretches of Florida Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Within its boundaries lie mangrove islands, historic shipwrecks filled with rare artifacts, tropical fish and other marine life.

Experience the World of Marine Mammal Researchers

Imagine delving into the world of marine mammal science, working hand-in-hand with researchers to unlock the mysteries of dolphin and sea lion behavior.

At Dolphin Research Center in the middle Florida Keys, a unique Researcher for a Day program means marine mammal enthusiasts can participate in projects that explore the intelligence of DRC's marine mammal inhabitants.

Founded in 1984 as a not-for-profit teaching and research facility, DRC is home to a family of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins and California sea lions.

The center and its staff specialize in behavioral research, and maintain liaisons with university

research programs and independent scientists around the world.

Participants in DRC's Researcher for a Day program work alongside the facility's research team members on current, hands-on studies involving dolphins and sea lions.

They learn how to arrange research sessions, compile data and help prepare test questions within study parameters. In addition, they enjoy "playtime" with dolphins and a Dolphin Dip, where they join dolphins in the water to interact with the intelligent marine mammals.

For more information about Dolphin Research Center's Researcher for a Day program and other educational opportunities, visit dolphins.org.



Marathon Aqua Ranch Offers Fish-Filled Fun and Learning

Marathon Aqua Ranch and Symbiologies, open to the public at mile marker 59.3 on Grassy Key, offers intriguing eco-tours and other enjoyable educational activities.

Created to advance the fields of aquaculture and sustainable fishing, the facility features large tanks where indigenous marine life can be viewed.

Highlights include tours of a seven-acre saltwater lake that is up to 60 feet deep. From a lookout deck, visitors can see cobia, mutton and mangrove snapper as well as blue tang and angelfish.

Scuba certification is offered year-round.

Visit marathonaquaranch.com or call (305) 743-6135 for more information.

Keys Traveler

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Florida Keys Eco-Attractions Abound

From Key Largo to Key West, the Florida Keys offer a wide variety of environmental attractions.

Among them is the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center, MM 93.6 bayside. The facility's primary purpose is to rescue, rehabilitate and release ill, injured and orphaned wild birds. A boardwalk winds through cages that house wild hawks, ospreys, spoonbills, egrets and more — some recuperating before being released, and some unable to survive in the wild and have become lifelong inhabitants.

For more information, visit fkwbc.org.

The Turtle Hospital, opened in 1986 at MM 48.5 bayside in Marathon, is the only facility of its kind in the world. Hospital founder Richie Moretti and his staff treat injured sea turtles and, when possible, return them to the wild. Educational tours are offered to introduce visitors to the resident sea turtles and to the hospital's curative programs for loggerhead, green, hawksbill and Kemp's ridley turtles.

For more information, visit turtlehospital.org.

At the Keys' southwestern tip lies the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center, located on the Key West waterfront at



Photo by Andy Newman

Located in Marathon, the Turtle Hospital offers daily educational tours of the popular facility.

Truman Annex. The 6,400-square-foot center showcases the underwater and upland habitats that characterize the Keys, with an emphasis on the coral

reef that parallels the island chain. The center includes the Living Reef Exhibit, featuring a 2,500-gallon reef tank with marine life indigenous to the Keys.

For more information, visit floridakeys.noaa.gov/eco_discovery.html.

Keys Cuisine is Naturally Green

For decades Florida Keys chefs have embraced the "green cuisine" concept of relying on indigenous ingredients. In the Keys, that means focusing on the abundant fish and seafood harvested from surrounding waters.

Favorites include sweet Key West pink shrimp, clawless "spiny" Florida lobster, yellowtail snapper, hog snapper, mutton snapper, grouper and mahi-mahi. Also popular are stone crabs, a "renewable resource" renowned for the sweet and succulent meat in their grappels or claws. Keys fishermen harvest only the claws and return the crabs themselves to the sea — where, over the course of up to two years, the claws regenerate.

The "green cuisine" mindset is particularly strong at Help Yourself Foods, recently

opened in Key West's historic Old Town by chefs Paul Menta and Charlie Wilson.

Menta and Wilson share a philosophy that healthy eating can be relatively easy if people just eat "real food"

— unprocessed food free of pesticides, chemicals, preservatives, hormones and antibiotics. They created their restaurant to serve natural, organic, healthy and flavorful dishes.

For more information and a complete menu, visit helpyourselffoods.com.



Stone crab claws are harvested from the crab before it is returned to the water to grow new extremities.

Night Kayaking Turns Into Keys Sleigh Ride

Sit-atop ocean kayaks are wide and steady, easy to stabilize as an angler pops a gurgling plug along a mangrove island at dusk and waits. In an instant, a tarpon flashes in the headlamp for a dramatic strike at the bait. The mammoth tarpon pulls angler and kayak across the black waters of the Florida Bay for the thrill known as the Key West sleigh ride.

When Captain Dave Dlugitch of KeysKayakFishing.com guides, he paddles alongside in his own kayak and watches the angler literally "be the drag" on the reel in a backcountry thrill ride.

This exciting style of night kayak fishing is done in isolated areas where fish are energetic and aggressive

Dlugitch's favorite spot is west of Key West in the Marquesas Keys. This ring of islands is teeming with prized gamefish.

To facilitate night kayak fishing there or in other remote locations, a mother ship is loaded with kayaks and groups head out for an extended stay to enjoy life with 360-degree oceanic vistas from sunrise to sunset.

Night kayaking also can be a tranquil rather than adrenaline-inducing experience. For those desiring a relaxing natural experience, or a romantic getaway for two, moonlit paddling excursions are offered throughout the Florida Keys.

Daytime kayaking in Keys' backcountry waters also provides a fascinating adventure — and the opportunity to view one of the world's most diverse marine life ecosystems.

Other resources for Keys kayaking include floridakeyskayaktours.com and kayakfloridakeys.com.



Photo by Andy Newman

The Vandenberg is moored in a Norfolk, Va., shipyard where it has been cleansed of contaminants to prepare it to be sunk as an artificial reef off Key West.

Former Military Ship Set to Serve Final Duty as Keys Artificial Reef

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tracking ship Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, a 523-foot vessel that also monitored American spacecraft blastoffs, has been cleansed to remove all contaminants so it can be intentionally sunk in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

After it is scuttled, algae will form on exposed surfaces of the ship,

providing the foundation for coral-building organisms. The accumulation of attached marine life in turn provides habitat and food for many species of fish. The ship should benefit the underwater environment by taking sport-diving pressure off coral reefs.

The Vandenberg will not be the first American military ship to serve as an

artificial reef in the Keys. U.S. Coast Guard cutters Bibb and Duane, and the U.S. Navy's Spiegel Grove were sunk off Key Largo as artificial reefs.

Non-military vessels also serve as artificial reefs in the Keys. Most notable is the Adolphus Busch Sr., a 210-foot former island freighter that was sunk in late 1998 off Big Pine Key.

Florida Keys Properties Rewarded for Going "Green"

Accommodations from Key Largo to Key West are becoming certified members of the Green Lodging Program, created by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to recognize environmentally conscious lodging facilities in the state.

The program establishes environmental guidelines for hotels and motels to conserve natural resources and reduce waste.

To earn Green Lodging certification, properties are evaluated in categories including water and energy conservation, waste reduction, indoor air quality and communication of green practices to guests. They also must have goals for continued improvements.

For more information about the Green Lodging Program, visit dep.state.fl.us/GreenLodging.

THE TEN KEYMANDMENTS

1. Don't anchor on a reef. (Reefs are alive. Alive. A-L-I-V-E).
2. Don't trash our place. (Or we'll send Bubba to trash yours).
3. Don't speed. (Especially on Big Pine Key where Key deer reside, and tar-and-feathering is still practiced).
4. Don't collect conch. (This species is protected. By Bubba).
5. Don't damage the sea grass. (And don't even think about making a skirt out of it).
6. Don't feed the animals. (They'll want to follow you home, and you can't keep them).
7. Don't touch the coral. (After all, you don't even know them).
8. Don't catch more fish than you can eat. (Better yet, let them go. Some of them support schools).
9. Don't disturb the bird nests. (They find it very annoying).
10. Don't drink and drive. On land or sea. (There's absolutely nothing funny about it).

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