

# Keys Traveler

The Magazine

*Overseas Highway  
Is 'All-American'*

Keys for Kids  
The Grey Ghost  
Key West Garden  
A New Dive Wreck  
Key Largo's Avian Acres

[fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com)

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# Keys Traveler

The Magazine

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STEPHEN FRINK

## CONTENTS

- 4 Traveling the Highway that Goes to Sea
- 5 Keys Highway is 'All-American'
- 6 Bring the Kids; Marathon Offers Family Fun
- 7 Nature's Palette Thrives at Key West Botanical Garden
- 8 Into the Briny Deep
- 10 Studios of Key West Offers Artistry and Inspiration  
Islamorada's Cheeca Lodge Transformed
- 11 Bahia Honda Ranks Among America's Finest Beaches  
Bike, Stroll or Paddle the Keys Overseas Heritage Trail
- 12 Islamorada Bones
- 14 For the Birds on Key Largo
- 15 Seafood and Comfort Food Flavor the Keys



The Florida Keys  
& Key West



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Cover photo of the modern (left) and  
historic (right) Seven Mile bridges  
in Marathon  
by Andy Newman

Studios of Key West

# Traveling...



**The road unrolls like a long dark ribbon in front of the car,**

with immense vistas of turquoise water and paler blue sky stretching endlessly on either side.

Driving from mainland Florida down the Overseas Highway, it's easy to understand why the southernmost leg of U.S. Highway 1 is often referred to as the "Highway that Goes to Sea."

In fact, from Key Largo to Key West, the 113-mile road incorporates an astonishing 42 bridges over the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean, Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. From the top of some of the larger spans, particularly in the Upper Keys, the individual islands in the sprawling Keys chain look tiny and fragile against the sea and sky.

Yet despite their small size, these islands support lively, picturesque

*By Carol Shaughnessy*

communities. The highway winds past Upper Keys marinas housing sportfishing fleets and sailing yachts, oceanfront villas surrounded by palms and flowering plants, enticing seafood restaurants and resorts both upscale and funky.

"Cruising" farther down the highway, with passing miles marked by small green signs on the road's shoulder or median, the tang of salt air wafts in through the open car windows. The Upper Keys, including Key Largo and Islamorada, give way to the Middle Keys and Marathon, a family-friendly community whose top draws include charter fishing and environmental attractions like the unique Turtle Hospital.

Just southwest of Marathon lies the undisputed jewel of the Overseas Highway: the Seven Mile Bridge. Driving across the 6.79-mile span over water, you realize why the original bridge was nicknamed "the eighth wonder of the world" after its completion in the early 1900s.

Yet the Seven Mile Bridge wasn't always a highway bridge — and the Overseas Highway wasn't always a road. It began as a railroad, the brainchild of millionaire Henry Flagler, who envisioned a train route connecting all the Florida Keys and mainland Florida. Flagler inspired an army of men to spend seven years constructing the railroad's bridges and land-based tracks, and in 1912 the first train pulled into Key West.

After only two-plus decades of

## ...the Highway that Goes to Sea

carrying freight and wealthy vacationers, much of the railroad was badly damaged in a 1935 hurricane. Three years later the Overseas Highway debuted, built on a foundation that incorporated some of the original railway spans.

In 1982, 37 original bridges, including the Seven Mile Bridge, were replaced with wider ones. Today, drivers see many of the old bridges stretching alongside their modern counterparts. Some have become popular sportfishing piers.

Chief among the original bridges is the Old Seven Mile Bridge, a weathered expanse of majestic arches and cracked roadway that parallels the new bridge — though its center span has been removed to allow



*The Overseas Highway bisects the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico in the photo above that was shot high above the Lower Keys. Below, the recently completed Jewfish Creek Bridge is a spectacular scenic entrance to Key Largo and the rest of the Florida Keys.*

boat traffic. Once a vital link between islands, it's now a walking trail leading to Pigeon Key, a pocket-sized island with a restored railroad camp and museum showcasing Flagler's achievement.

Past the bridge, the scenery becomes wilder and more deserted. This is Big Pine Key and the Lower Keys, a realm of small communities, ecotourism and wildlife refuges created to protect species including the miniature Key deer. Beautiful Bahia Honda State Park and the Old Bahia Honda Bridge beckon to the left of the road, inviting exploration.

Eventually the Lower Keys segue into Key West, where the highway ends amid 19th-century charm and contemporary attractions. The ambiance of continental America's

southernmost city — situated closer to Cuba than Miami — is embedded in its quaint, palm-shaded streets, century-old gingerbread mansions, superlative sunsets and flourishing creative community.

It is, of course, possible to leave Miami and travel the entire length of the Overseas Highway, through all the Keys to Key West, in less than four hours.

But veteran Keys travelers know a hurried approach is not the way to experience this laid-back destination. Take it easy. Experience the true flavor of each region of the Florida Keys. Take pleasure in the ever-changing land- and seascapes to be viewed from the "Highway that Goes to Sea."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDY NEWMAN

## Keys Highway Is 'All-American'

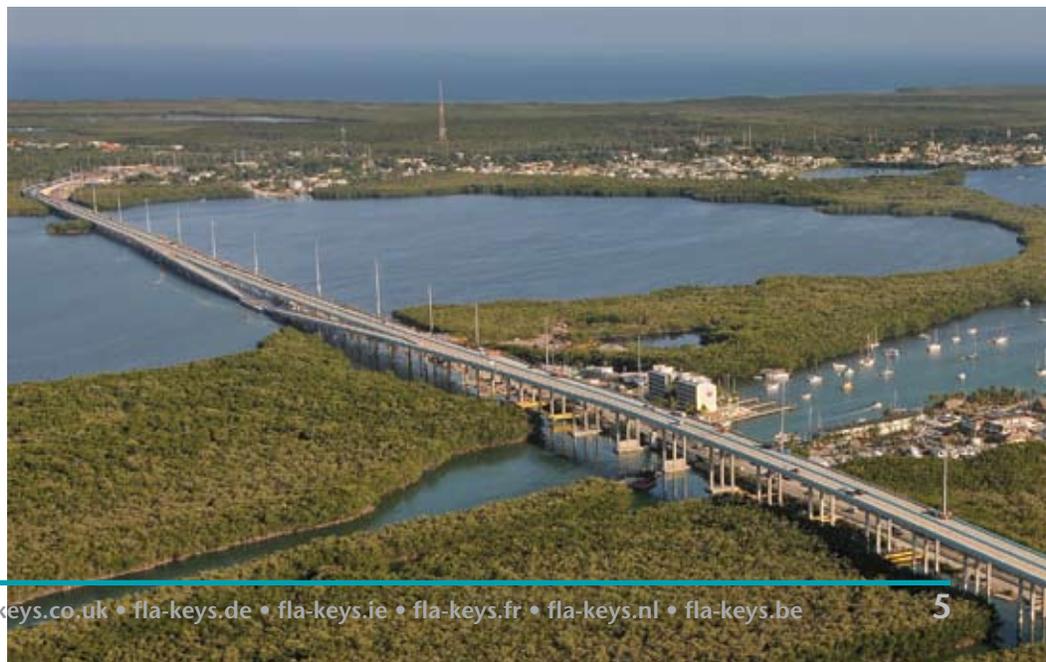
The Overseas Highway has been named an All-American Road, the highest honor a United States roadway can earn under the National Scenic Byways program.

To earn All-American Road status, a thoroughfare must possess characteristics of national significance and one-of-a-kind features, making it a visitor destination in itself. Designation also is based on a roadway's cultural, historic, natural, recreational, scenic and archeological qualities.

"The Overseas Highway provides a one-of-a-kind driving experience through some of the nation's most spectacular scenery," said Judy Hull of the Florida Keys Scenic Corridor Alliance. "It's a road known around the world."



significance and one-of-a-kind features, making it a visitor destination in itself.



# Bring the Kids

## *Marathon Offers Family Fun*

DOLPHIN RESEARCH CTR.



Located at the middle of the Florida Keys, Marathon offers activities for people of all ages. Spectacular boating, fishing, diving, snorkeling and marine-based and eco-attractions are among the popular draws of this family-friendly paradise.

Visitors can swim year-round with gentle, ever-curious dolphins at two Marathon-area facilities while learning about their behaviors and how to interact with them.

Based at Hawk's Cay Resort on Duck Key, Dolphin Connection offers supervised contact with dolphins in programs such as Dolphin Discovery and Dockside Dolphins, an adventure for family groups with children age 5 and older.

Dolphin Research Center on Grassy Key is a teaching and re-

search facility. Fun-filled interactive programs include Dolphin Encounter, Meet the Dolphin, Trainer for a Day, Dolphin Dip and Paint with a Dolphin.



Turtle fans are fascinated by Marathon's Turtle Hospital, the only facility of its kind in the world. Caring staff treat sick and injured sea turtles and return them to the wild whenever possible, or give them a permanent home. Educational tours introduce visitors to loggerhead, green, hawksbill and Kemp's ridley turtles.

Families also can enjoy Crane Point, a 63-acre park that's home to the Museum of Natural History, Ad-derley Town Historic Site, Marathon Wild Bird Center, Children's Museum and navigable nature trails that lead through a dense tropical forest to Florida Bay. Kids and adults alike love the marine touch tanks and popular 17th-century "galleon," an interactive vessel complete with pirate garb and treasure.

– Julie Botteri

ANDY NEWMAN

# Nature's Palette Thrives at Key West Botanical Garden

An oasis of natural tranquility, the Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden is the only frost-free tropical moist forest garden in the continental United States.

Founded in the 1930s and maintained primarily by volunteers, the 15-acre garden is just off U.S. Highway 1 near the entrance to Key West.

It features more than 6,000 plants and trees — including tropical fruit trees, native fragrant plants, native palms, champion trees, tropical spices and local herbs — and provides habitat for 35 butterfly species and more than 270 migratory bird species.

Visitors can tour the unique site daily, enjoying a short film, four self-guided tours, two miles of boardwalk trails and a courtyard with a waterfall wall of orchids.

— Carol Shaughnessy



All photos courtesy Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden



The Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden is a 15-acre natural enclave of colorful plants, above, as well as native palms, fruit trees and indigenous and rare vegetation. At left, visitors explore the garden along shaded nature trails. The secluded site also features a one-acre butterfly habitat (right).

[keywestbotanicalgarden.org](http://keywestbotanicalgarden.org)

# Into the Brim



**T**he top of the vessel's superstructure is still visible from the water's surface, punctuated by the platform-like kingpost and iconic parabolic antennae, glowing white and beckoning from below.

But algae and soft corals are beginning to grow and cover the hull and eventually the white will fade to blend in with colors of the ocean life.

Over the course of decades the ship's hull is likely to become densely populated with species of coral, sponges, invertebrates, sea fans and sea whips.

The fish have already moved in, but many more are likely to take up residence.

For safety and ease, divers descend along a lead line attached to one of the wreck's six mooring lines placed intermittently along the 523 feet that stretch from bow to stern — and the adventure of diving the Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg begins.

Lying in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, seven miles south of Key West, the Vandenberg is the second-largest ship ever purposely scuttled to become

# Deep



STEPHEN FRINK



HAIG JACOBS



an artificial reef. The hull rests on sand at depths averaging 145 feet, but the ship is so massive that the superstructure begins about 45 feet below the surface.

Rich in history, the Vandenberg once tracked the U.S. space program's launches off Cape Canaveral, monitored U.S. defense missile test launches and eavesdropped on Russian missile launches during the Cold War. It even starred as a Russian science vessel in "Virus," a 1999 film featuring Jamie Lee Curtis, William

Baldwin and Donald Sutherland.

The former U.S. Air Force missile-tracking ship was scuttled in May 2009, after 13 years of effort, completing the Florida Keys Shipwreck Trail. The Keyswide trail of intentionally sunk vessels begins off Key Largo with a former Navy landing ship dock, the Spiegel Grove, and ends with the Vandenberg, the Keys' newest paradise for divers.

– Julie Botteri



Artist Rick Worth instructs a painting 'boot camp' at The Studios of Key West.

## Studios of Key West Offer Artistry and Inspiration

Though established just three years ago, The Studios of Key West have become an integral part of Key West's artistic and cultural identity — offering stimulating workshops and programs, exhibitions of fine art and photography, concerts and creative opportunities for artists and art lovers.

Headquartered in a meticulously restored historic armory building at 600 White St., the not-for-profit cultural organization is dedicated to supporting Key West's creative community, fostering new artistic projects and partnerships, and advancing the cultural life of the island.

Today, its campus includes a main hall for workshops, lectures and exhibitions, 12 studios for local artists in varying disciplines, a landscaped sculpture garden, an artist-residency cottage and four affordable living spaces for Key West artists.

Despite a relatively brief history, The Studios have earned a reputation as an innovative and intriguing artistic hub. The organization's art, music, theater and literature programs are designed to entice and inspire.

Creative spirits can expand their talents through one-day or multiday workshops conducted by acclaimed artists and writers, lectures and free professional development opportunities.

[tskw.org](http://tskw.org)

## Islamorada's Cheeca Lodge Transformed

Islamorada's landmark Cheeca Lodge & Spa, originally opened as the Olney Inn in 1946, is celebrating its rebirth and construction of a new main lodge building.

The historic property, which closed for almost a year after a New Year's Eve fire in December 2008, is to provide enhanced offerings while maintaining its signature leisurely elegance.

Cheeca's new four-story main lodge is built to LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) specifications set forth by the U.S. Green Building Council.

The new building includes 62 oceanfront and island view suites. At 840 square feet, including 24-foot-wide balconies, they feature floor-to-ceiling glass walls opening to panoramic ocean or island views, private lanais, open-air round tubs for two with dramatic overhead tub fillers and marble and glass rain showers for two.

[cheeca.com](http://cheeca.com)



Cheeca Lodge & Spa



*Big Pine Key and the Lower Keys*

# Bahia Honda Ranks Among America's Finest Beaches

**F**lorida Keys vacationers eager for the sun, sand and a prime beach experience can find it at the beaches of Bahia Honda State Park in the Lower Keys.

Recently the Bahia Honda beaches were ranked second on a list of best United States beaches by the popular international online travel community TripAdvisor.

The 524-acre Bahia Honda State Park, one of the Keys' most popular camping and recreation areas, offers deep near-shore waters for swimming and snorkeling as well as camping, picnicking, watersports, a marina and rental cabins.

Against a background of coconut palms, sand dunes and sea oats, three natural coral-sand beaches provide an optimal setting for sunning and swimming in warm, crystal-clear water. Beachgoers often spot wading and shore birds, especially during migration season, in the

unspoiled surroundings.

Sandspur Beach slopes gently into the sea while Loggerhead features a sandbar that is exposed at low tide to reveal different natural treasures each day. Caloosa, popular with families, is located conveniently

close to the restrooms, snackbar and parking area.

Bahia Honda concessions operators offer snorkel gear and kayak rentals, as well as boat trips to the coral reef that parallels the Keys.

– Kate Burgess-Craddy

## Bike, Stroll or Paddle the Keys Overseas Heritage Trail

**B**egun in 2000 and targeted for completion in 2013, the Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail is being built on U.S. Highway 1, the roadway that extends the entire length of the Florida Keys.

The trail is billed as a multiuse bicycle and pedestrian facility that ultimately will extend 106 miles from Key Largo to Key West. It will serve as a route for alternative transportation between island communities and a recreational greenway for hiking, running, bicycling, in-line skating, fishing and kayaking.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is incorporating 23 historic bridges, no longer used for traffic, into the project that is to connect existing pathways for bicyclists and others. The trails also are being incorporated into the Keys' state parks to allow boaters and kayakers to access sections of the trails within those parks.

By Andy Newman

# Islamorada Bones

All was quiet, except for the gentle slapping of the water against the small boat's hull. I looked below, mesmerized by the shallow gin-clear waters with turtle grass on the sand seemingly waving us on.

A crab scurried to get out of our path. A wading heron looked at us and then gracefully took off into the blue sky.

"There he is," Jim whispered from his perch atop a platform just above the outboard motor. "Eleven o'clock. About 75 feet."

I looked just to the left of the front of the boat and saw a tail waving like a small silver flag above the water's surface.

I cast. It wasn't perfect, but close enough.

There was complete silence, but I swear I could hear my heart pumping. The water boiled and I was on. The drag screamed. I looked at my spinning reel and within seconds the spool was half empty and line continued to disappear.

I was hooked up to a bonefish and this guy was headed faster than an F-18 fighter jet winging its way to Naval Air Station Key West.

The flats surrounding Islamorada and the rest of the Florida Keys provide grazing areas for what many backcountry anglers consider the holy grail of flats fishing — *albulavulpes*, the hard-to-find, hard-to-see, hard-to-catch bonefish.

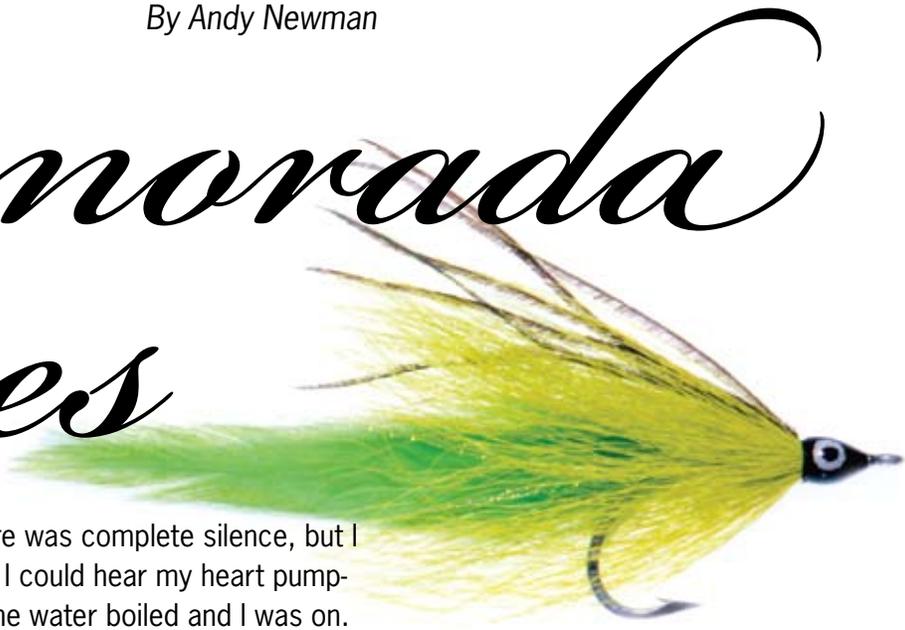
Bonefishing easily can become an

obsession. The thrill of casting to the most skittish fish on the flats, watching it approach a bait or fly, feeling it eat, then hanging on as it takes off on a drag-burning high-speed run across the flat is what brings anglers back time and again. Every bad cast, finicky fish and broken leader is a tease of what "coulda been."

Bonefish are not known for their beauty. Blue-greenish on top, with silvery sides, the bonefish looks like a medium-gray shadow in the water, which explains its nickname "grey ghost of the flats." They have an inferior mouth and conical nose that give them the look of a doofy cartoon character. But pity the angler who fails to respect the grey ghost.

Bonefish are built for speed. Not the short, darting speed of reef fish, but the long-distance run of prey avoiding a tenacious predator.

The feel of a hook launches a bonefish into escape velocity. Bonefish have been clocked at 40 miles per hour, according to OceanLink, an educational program





of the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. There's no other inshore species that comes close.

There are eight to 10 specific, genetically differentiated bonefish species, depending on whose science you prefer to believe. But all scientists (and anglers) agree that the world's largest (and some say smartest) bonefish live between Biscayne Bay and Marathon in the Middle Keys.

Islamorada is "bonefish central." It's not unusual to hear of 13- or 14-pound bonefish being caught in the area, though the average bone is in the 9- to 10-pound range.

But bonefishing is not about biology. It's about success and failure,

exhilaration and despair, pride and frustration. And about satisfaction after successfully landing a fish and then releasing it to live and provide another angler enjoyment and memories that will last a lifetime.

It's also about humor. Writer and professional fly fisherman Lefty Kreh once said that bonefish "can sure make a good angler look dumb."

In the Keys, a basic knowledge bank has evolved that can help the fledgling bonefisher.

Rule number one: hire a guide. You can't cast to a bonefish unless you can find one, and they're not easy to find. Especially for the first-timer.

Rule number two: memorize a clock face. Your guide is suddenly going to lean over and point,

whispering something like, "Eleven o'clock, 40 feet." You have to know where eleven o'clock is located because you probably won't see the fish.

Rule number three: make your cast within three seconds. Don't think. Just cast.

Then accept success or failure with a happy heart. As country music legend Dolly Parton said, "The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain."

*Islamorada journalist and angler Bob Serata contributed to this story.*

*At left, a bonefish is shown for a photograph just before it is dehooked and released. Top, the sun sets off Islamorada as a guide points to a tailing bonefish.*

# For the Birds on Key Largo



*A flock of flamingos takes flight in the Everglades near Key Largo.*

Whether temporarily injured or permanently disabled, wild birds are helped and healed at the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center at mile marker 93.6 in Tavernier, on the island of Key Largo.

Located in a natural setting adjacent to Florida's Everglades, the center is dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing ill, injured and orphaned wild birds. Some birds, unable to survive in the wild, become lifelong inhabitants.

The center's founder, Laura Quinn, was once a statistician and mathematics teacher. After relocating to the Upper Keys, she began crafting woodcarvings of Keys native birds and then collaborated with a veterinarian to provide modest avian rehabilitation facilities behind her home.

In 1991, she opened the center on 5.5 acres of lush native vegetation,

mangroves, hammocks and wetlands. She even learned how to operate on her feathered patients, repairing broken wings and removing fishhooks and monofilament line.

The center's staff feeds a variety of egrets, owls, herons and cormorants that are either transient or injured, and bird-watchers and ecotourists are afforded an up-close and personal interaction. In addition, visitors can watch dozens of pelicans that search inquisitively for fish buckets.

A self-guided tour along boardwalks and nature trails provides a good look at resident hawks, ospreys, spoonbills, egrets and more.



BELINDA SERATA

*Laura Quinn began the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center in 1991.*

The scenic route also features minnows and crabs along with colorful bromeliads enhancing the landscape and water's edge. Catching a late afternoon bird feeding is another highlight at this natural habitat.

– Julie Botteri

# Seafood and Comfort Food Flavor the Keys

In typical Keys fashion, some of the best restaurants along the island chain look quite unassuming or are tucked away in hard-to-find locations. Yet each one is a unique, unexpected treasure whose offerings reflect the personalities of its owners, managers and chefs.

Key Largo is home to a pair of restaurants called the Fish House Restaurant & Fish Market and the Fish House Encore, situated on the Overseas Highway at mile marker (MM) 102.4 oceanside. The menu epitomizes fresh Keys fish and seafood at their best.

Farther down the highway in Islamorada stands the Island Grill, offering seafood and other enticing fare. The restaurant is perched at the water's edge at the foot of Snake Creek Bridge at MM 85 oceanside.

Marathon is home to a little gem of an eatery: Leigh Ann's Coffee House at MM 50 oceanside, marked by a billboard featuring a giant coffee cup (or teacup). Hungry visitors will find down-home cooking with an Italian twist and carrot cake to die for.

The quirky No Name Pub lies off the Overseas Highway in the Lower Florida Keys, down a winding road and over a humpbacked bridge. The out-of-the-way location doesn't keep people from discovering the local landmark, or falling in love with its world-class pizza.

The Lower Keys also features a hideaway just outside Key West — Hogfish Bar & Grill on Stock Island. This proudly ramshackle watering hole is a true locals' spot alongside a working marina. Its signature dish is hogfish, a diver-caught fish with a light but unparalleled flavor.

— Kate Burgess-Craddy

*A hogfish snapper is headed to the grill at the Hogfish Bar & Grill.*



STEVE BLY



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