

Keys Traveler

Dive Edition

Wreck Trekking In the Florida Keys

fla-keys.com/diving

Underwater Hijinks
Dive 'Voluntourism'
Learn to Dive in the Keys
America's Coral Barrier Reef

Keys Reefs ...

Carlos Estape

Blue-striped grunts gather at Snapper Ledge off Key Largo.

... Abundant and Diverse

The Florida Keys boast an unparalleled variety of marine life, abundance of fish species and consistently clear, warm waters to suit virtually every diver.

As well as their accessibility, the Keys' diversity sets them apart as one of the world's most popular dive destinations. Harboring the only living coral reef in the continental United States, these small islands are largely devoted to maintaining the region's offshore environment — a focus of conservation efforts for more than a generation.

Keys conservation efforts began in 1960 when widespread public support laid the foundation for John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park at Key Largo, named for a Miami newspaper editor who championed local environmental preservation.

The undersea park's waters are adjacent to the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, established in 1990 as a marine preserve. Today the sanctuary comprises 2,900 square nautical miles of coastal waters along the island chain from northernmost Key Largo south to the Dry Tortugas.

Marine conservation efforts include the establishment of Sanctuary Preservation Areas, no-take zones that have allowed fish and crustacean populations to grow and thrive.

Iconic blue-striped grunts are typically seen in large numbers around protective elkhorn and high-profile coral heads, as well as other Keys critters such as glass minnows, goatfish, gray snappers, Atlantic spadefish, horse eye jacks, Bermuda chubs and sergeant majors. French and small-mouth grunts are nearly as plentiful, and yellowtail snapper, a favorite of local anglers, cruise the reef in astonishing numbers.

It is not unusual for divers and snorkelers to spot sea turtles, stingrays, goliath groupers, nurse sharks or bright-

green moray eels on a single trip to the reef.

The Keys have a tradition of preserving marine life. With divers and snorkelers educated in reef responsibility, everyone involved benefits, and the coral reef can remain the Keys' greatest environmental treasure for generations to come.



The Florida Keys & Key West



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Printed in the U.S.A. By Original Impressions



Keys Traveler

Dive Edition

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"Keys Traveler" is published and ©2013 by the Monroe County Tourist Development Council, the official visitor marketing agency for the Florida Keys & Key West. Director: Harold Wheeler; Sales Director: Stacey Mitchell; Dive Market Sales Manager: Yves Vrielynck; Keys Dive Umbrella: CeCe Roycraft, Kim Roney, Tom Timmerman, Amy Slate and MaryAnne Rockett

What's This?

You'll find this QR code accompanying several stories in this issue of "Keys Traveler." The QR codes can be scanned by most smart phones. Activate the app, aim your smart phone at the bar code and you'll be automatically taken to a website or video for more information. For iPhones and iPads, QR readers can be downloaded for free at the Apple App Store.



Cover photo of the Duane, now a 26-year-old shipwreck off Key Largo, by Stephen Frink

Learn to Dive in the Florida Keys

The Florida Keys, a 126-mile island chain located parallel to the continental United States' only living coral reef, offer perfect teaching grounds to learn new skills or perfect abilities as a scuba diver, providing a lifetime of fun, adventure and memories.

Learning options range from introductory one-day experiences, full certification and various specialties to professional diving career opportunities, all with personalized training. Here are some basic facts.

Who can learn to dive? Scuba diving is a sport, an investment in adventure that any healthy and active individual as young as age 10 can enjoy.

What classes are available? The Florida Keys have it all. Entry-level, "open-water" certification involves three to five days of training and classroom work covering concepts such as basic physics and physiology, ocean waves, marine life, monitoring dive time and depth, followed by pool and open-water dives at the reef. You'll also learn about navigation around natural formations.

Upon passing a knowledge test and completing the required number of dives, students become certified

recreational scuba divers, eligible to rent dive gear and book dive trips to depths of about 60 feet with most operations worldwide.

At-home online learning through computer programs enables students to complete classroom work required, then schedule time in the Keys to obtain certifications.

Refresher courses review diving knowledge and water skills for occasional divers. Dozens of specialty courses include navigation, night diving, wreck diving, digital photography, coral reef conservation and professional career training as a dive instructor.

Where do students receive their dive training? Some of the first businesses offering recreational dive training in America were opened in the Keys. Dozens of dive shops, staffed with working professionals, actively teach and train each day, not just intermittently or seasonally.

When are classes offered? A primary



Stephen Frink

Successful completion of pool-based classes leads to open-water training and certification for scuba divers.

advantage of the Florida Keys over any other U.S. destination is year-round tropical weather and clear, warm seas to practice skin diving and scuba skills virtually any day of the year. Training conditions are nice and easy, with light currents and great underwater visibility.

Why dive the Keys? Ocean depths from the shoreline to the reef rarely reach 20 feet. The reef lives in waters as shallow as five feet and as deep as 50 feet, but most reef divers log a maximum depth of 20 to 30 feet. Keys shallow diving offers two immediate benefits: longer time safely spent on the bottom exploring and brighter and more vibrant colors because more natural sunlight reaches shallow depths.

Keys Feature Blue Star Program for Operators

Blue Star-recognized dive charterers are dedicated to coral reef education and conservation.

The voluntary recognition program established by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary promotes responsible tourism, teaching divers and snorkelers in-water etiquette such as practicing good buoyancy, careful hand and fin placement, and avoiding contact with coral.

Blue Star-rated operators display a flag or decal with the Blue Star logo on their charter vessel.

floridakeys.noaa.gov/onthewater



Keys Famous for Quirky Underwater Fun

The Florida Keys are noted for offbeat celebrations and quirky marine activities that also carry messages of reef preservation and diver awareness.

The Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival is held each July at Looe Key reef, in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary six miles south of Big Pine Key.

Subsea challenges include Key Largo's Underwater Pumpkin Carving Contest, "egg-sploring" for hidden eggs during



Divers pretend to play "musical instruments" at the Underwater Music Festival.

Bob Care

the Underwater Easter Egg Hunt and diver propulsion vehicle racing at the annual Vandenberg Underwater Grand Prix.

On a more serious note, the continental United States' only living coral barrier reef offers wedding parties and guests an opportunity to tie the knot with exotic sea creatures in attendance, notably near the welcoming arms of the 9-foot-high "Christ of the Abyss" statue near Key Largo's John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park.

Scattered along the length of the Florida Keys island chain in ocean depths ranging from 20 to 130 feet are several notable historic shipwreck and artificial reef sites, some centuries old. From a maritime heritage perspective these ships are considered some of the Keys' most valuable underwater assets.

Some vessels date back to early 1700s Spanish explorers, while others are modern cargo and U.S. military ships intentionally sunk to create artificial reefs. Bookend shipwrecks off Key Largo and Key West support this unique collection.

Most notable is the Spiegel Grove, a 510-foot Navy landing ship dock and the third-largest ship ever intentionally sunk to create an artificial reef. It has rested in 130 feet of water about six miles off Key Largo since it was sunk in 2002.

Also off Key Largo are the remains of the City of Washington, a two-masted sailing vessel used for passenger transport and cargo trade between New York, Cuba and Mexico. It sank in 1892 in waters 25 feet deep. In 25 to 45 feet of water is the Benwood, a merchant marine freighter that sank in 1942 after a collision with another vessel.

Twin "Treasury Class" 327-foot U.S. Coast Guard cutters, dubbed the Duane and Bibb and scuttled in 1987, rest in nearly 130 feet of water one mile south of Molasses Reef, off Key Largo.

With separated front and rear sections, the Eagle is a 287-foot-long cargo transporter sunk off Islamorada in 1985. The artificial reef lies in 110 feet of water.

The three-masted bark Adelaide Baker lies south of Duck Key in 20 feet of water and a wreck believed to be the North America lies in 14 feet of water on Delta Shoals east of Sombbrero Light.

Off Marathon, the easily navigable 188-foot Thunderbolt, donated by Florida Power and Light to the Florida Keys Artificial Reef Association, was originally named Randolph. The cable layer was used in researching electrical energy and lightning strikes. Considered the queen of the Middle Keys wreck fleet, "T-Bolt" was scuttled in 1986 and lies in 120 feet of water.

In the Lower Keys lies the 210-foot freighter Adolphus Busch Senior. Since late 1998, divers have been exploring this artificial reef five miles southwest of Big Pine Key.

Joe's Tug was actually once a hard-working shrimp boat. The 75-footer is one of Key West's most popular dive spots, and was scuttled in 1986 in 65 feet of water. Among marine life on the wreck is a resident goliath grouper named Elvis.

The 524-foot Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, a former Air Force ship that once tracked Florida space launches and Russian satellites, was sunk in 140 feet of water off Key West in 2009. The second-largest ship in the world ever scuttled to become an artificial reef was used as a set in the 1999 movie "Virus."

A diver inspects the 510-foot-long Spiegel Grove off Key Largo.

By Julie Botteri • Photograph by Tim Grollmund




Become a Keys Wreck Trekker
The "Wreck Trek Passport Program" rewards certified divers who complete a series of wreck dives.
Divers who are advanced or wreck certified can join more than 30 participating dive operators and liveaboard vessels to dive any or all of nine of the island chain's most iconic wreck sites listed in the Official Florida Keys Wreck Trek logbook: Spiegel Grove, Duane, Benwood, Eagle, Thunderbolt, Adolphus Busch Senior, Cayman Salvager, Joe's Tug and Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg.
Divers who complete at least five dives receive a personalized print of Florida Keys shipwrecks. Dives can be accomplished in one or several visits to the warm Florida Keys waters.
fla-keys.com/diving/wrecktrek

Trek Florida Keys Shipwrecks

Snorkeling: Easy to Explore Subsea World

Featuring vivid coral reefs teeming with exotic sea creatures, the Florida Keys offer a vacation paradise that attracts almost a million snorkel and scuba aficionados each year who can't wait to get into the water and explore — even as first-timers.

Snorkeling primarily requires a mask, snorkel, fins for propulsion and inflatable snorkeling vest to enjoy a day of underwater sightseeing. Professional snorkel charters rent equipment and provide instruction. Add a T-shirt or sunblock and you're set to go.

Spectacular coral reefs are a short boat ride from the islands, located in shallow water that's often just 10 to 15 feet deep.

Some favorite marine sites include the nation's first undersea park, Key Largo's John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, and nearby, the 9-foot-tall 4,000-pound bronze statue known as "Christ of the Abyss." The underwater

shrine stands on a concrete base in approximately 25 feet of water and is one of the most photographed underwater sites in the world.

French Reef and Davis Reef, also off Key Largo, are easily navigable along the top of the reef and sandy ledges. Grouper and moray eels cruise among the cliffs and canyons, gullies and archways at depths from 15 to 40 feet.

Off Islamorada, Alligator Reef boasts huge populations of yellowtail snapper, grunts, goatfish and damselfish and a mini-wall where lobsters hide in crevices



Stephen Frink (2)

Alexa Frink explores a shallow water wreck off northern Key Largo.

Key Reef is one of the most spectacular shallow-water undersea environs. Its reef fish annually play host to an unusual, event for snorkelers and divers: the Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival.

Key West's largest protected coral reef is Western Sambos. The popular snorkeling site is part of an ecological reserve created in 1997. Several other extensive shallow reefs off Key West including Eastern Dry Rocks, Rock Key and Sand Key are abundant in corals, gorgonians and fish, and range from 5 to 45 feet in depth.

Snorkeling is the perfect family activity for visitors to the Keys for close, calm observation of the inhabitants of one of the world's most diverse, complex and beautiful ecosystems.

fla-keys.com/diving

Among Marathon's notable patch reefs and spur-and-groove formations is Sombrero Reef, marked by a large lighted tower. You might see a pair of spotfin butterflyfish circle in their courting dance, French angelfish nip and peck at reef plants, a huge school of grunts slide back and forth in a gentle tidal surge or a stingray scour the sandy bottom for a snack.

The Lower Keys' Looe



Snorkelers explore coral formations in the clear shallow waters off the Florida Keys.

Museum Showcases Man's Quest to Dive

The Florida Keys History of Diving Museum is filled with unique artifacts, antiques and photographs relative to diving and its heritage.

Since 2005 the museum's 3,000 square feet have featured the world's largest and most comprehensive collection of diving artifacts representing more than 30 countries, in addition to the Bauer Diving History Research Library, a world-class facility containing rare historical materials.



Museum visitors can come within inches of the earliest diving machines, including a full-scale replica of an all-wood diving bell, and view the Parade of Nations, an unparalleled collection of historic hard-hat dive helmets from 25 countries around the world.

Open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., as well as during free monthly evening lectures, the museum is located at mile marker 83 bayside in Islamorada.

divingmuseum.org



Tim Grollimund

Keys Divers Volunteer To Restore Coral Reefs

Divers assist staff members with cultivation of young corals at the Coral Restoration Foundation's coral nursery off the Upper Keys.

Divers can help keep Florida Keys reefs healthy through "voluntourism" vacations, doing things to protect the reef while volunteering for the greater good, up close and purposefully.

Recreational sport divers can join ongoing coral restoration and propagation efforts with marine scientists from Key Largo's Coral Restoration Foundation. They learn about environmental impacts on Florida's reefs through education and participate in hands-on dives to restore endangered staghorn and elkhorn corals. The two are among the reef-building species with the best chance to propagate and create new habitats.

Volunteers go on working dives to coral nurseries to clean and prepare corals for planting. An orientation dive at a restoration site shows firsthand the evolution of corals over time.

"This is something the average person can get their hands on and do," said foundation director Ken Nedimyer.

"Volunteers can take the experience back to their home communities — it

is a grass-roots way of giving people ownership."

Capturing lionfish helps prevent the invasive Indo-Pacific species from voraciously preying on invertebrates and juvenile fish such as grunts and hamlets, and stealing resources from domestic species like grouper and snapper. The popular aquarium fish, probably introduced to Florida waters in the 1980s, has no natural reef predators except humans.

The Keys' Reef Environmental Education Foundation, whose mission is to conserve marine ecosystems, partnered with the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and the dive community to educate divers on how to capture and remove lionfish from Keys waters.

Lionfish need to be removed regularly in order to fish down the species and reduce its Atlantic population.

Recreational lionfish roundups provide divers a chance to earn prizes, sample the edible, tasty fish and help preserve reef ecosystems.

REEF also enlists divers for volunteer reef survey and annual fish count projects to help collect and report data on marine fish populations.

Divers also can contribute through everyday conservation actions to leave an area cleaner than they found it.

Cutting and removing monofilament fishing line eliminates a potential entanglement for other divers. Picking up other lost fishing tackle, such as hooks and sinkers, as well as removing cans, bottles, plastic and refuse makes a huge difference over time.

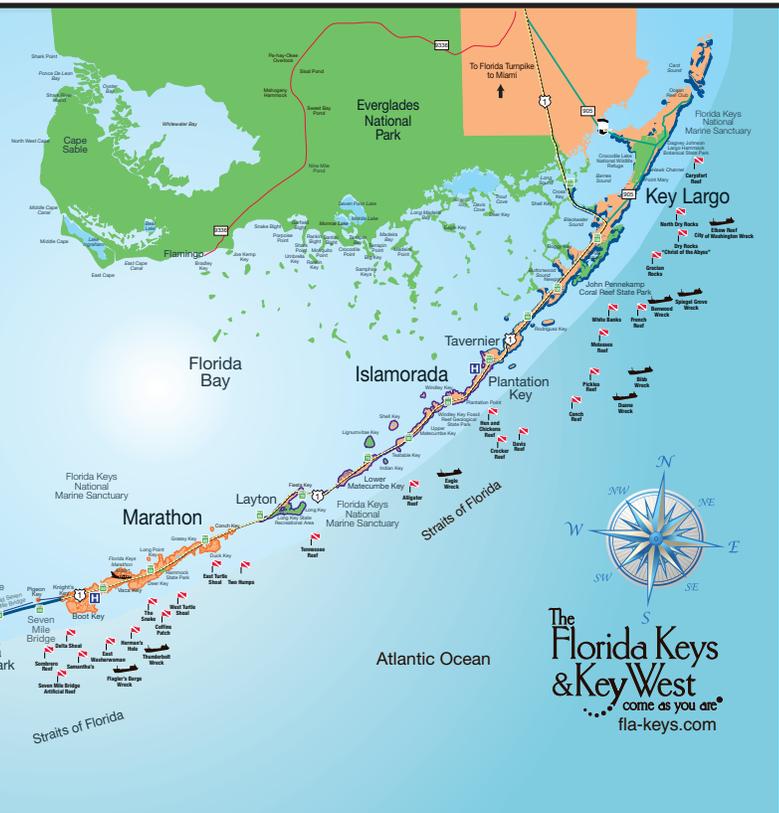
coralrestoration.org
reef.org
fla-keys.com/volunteer



David Gross

Diver Patti Gross shows her success in capturing several invasive lionfish off the Keys.

Traveling Tips to the Florida Keys



The Florida Keys & Key West
come as you are.
fla-keys.com

The 120-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.

Commercial Airlines Serving Key West International Airport

American Airlines	aa.com
Cape Air	capeair.com
Delta	delta.com
Southwest	southwest.com
United Express	united.com
US Airways	usairways.com

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 595 West. Take 595 to the Florida Turnpike and follow the signs for the Florida Keys.

From the north, take the Florida Turnpike south to just below Fort Lauderdale, where Exit 4 joins the southern portion of the Turnpike. The Turnpike 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) south and to the Florida 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 Florida Keys without renting a car.

Via Boat

Ferry connections from Fort Myers or Marco Island to Key West are offered via the Key West Express. Voyages take approximately 3.5 hours.

Extensive details on getting to the Florida Keys & Key West are available at:

fla-keys.com/gettinghere.cfm

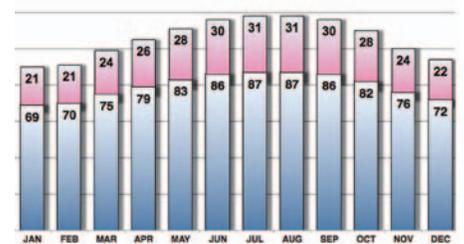
Weather/Climature

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. Sea breezes cool the subtropical islands.

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 average monthly water temperatures, according to the Key West weather office. Temperatures in blue shades are Fahrenheit and 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 Florida Keys websites at fla-keys.com and fla-keys.co.uk have a live chat feature with visitor information specialists during regular U.S. weekday business hours to aid travelers in vacation planning.