

Go Florida

From sports fishing to sailing, scuba diving, bird watching, gourmet tours and chilled-out loafing on dreamy tropical strands, Florida Keys has it all, writes **Paddy Woodworth**

THE FLORIDA Keys are a happy freak of geology, a spine of coral reefs exposed by falling sea levels millennia ago, and slowly transformed into limestone cayos, or islets. They stretch from Key Largo, an hour south of Miami, across 107 miles of clear blue water to Key West, almost as close to Cuba as to the mainland US.

There are said to be 4,500 keys, give or take. In colonial times they were notorious havens for pirates and ship-wreckers. Even in the 19th century, Key West made its fortune – it was once the richest town per capita in north America – from the (more or less) legitimate salvage of rich cargoes, storm-driven onto the treacherous shallows that surround all the keys.

Today, the town dines out – and it dines very well indeed – on its close association with literary figures like Ernest Hemingway, Zane Grey and the great bird artist John James Audubon. But there is still a hint of banditry about the place, as the maze of remote coastlines densely packed with mangroves is a magnet to drug smugglers. The ubiquitous police checkpoints that used to obstruct traffic on Highway One in the 1980s, though, are long gone. They did far too much damage to the burgeoning tourist industry to survive.

That industry now caters to a range of tastes, from hard-core sports fishing to leisure sailing, from scuba diving to bird watching, from gourmet tours to chilled-out loafing on dreamy tropical strands.

But because the keys are made up of a large number of mostly very small places, it is important to pick a spot – and a time – that suits you. Unless beered-up partying is your thing, you would be wise to avoid the noise – and the traffic jams – of major holidays and college breaks.

We chose Islamorada, partly because it sits roughly midway along the keys, and partly because of its relatively quiet reputation. We stayed there, longer than we had intended, largely because it is home to Casa Morada.

This is a little miracle of a motel, converted into luxury suites. For the first three days we only left it to go out to dinner.

Each suite has its own character, with simple and elegant decor. We enjoyed a generous second floor deck among the palm tops in one, infinite sea views from a smaller deck in another.

A small but cleverly designed garden offers several cool green bowers between the main building and the little quayside. Its lovely plantings include the golden tree known in central America as the Indio desnudo, because of the exquisite sensuality of its limbs. On the keys they call it, a little less romantically, the tourist tree, since its skin-like bark is always peeling.

Beyond the quay is the hotel's real treasure, an artificial island. I thought I might hate it,



but its sand is richly planted with palms and succulents, and it is home to iguanas and a family of racoons. The loungers face north across the iridescent blue-grey-green-blue spectrum of Florida Bay, broken only by an occasional patch of mangroves. Next stop the Everglades, if you had a powerful boat, and they will rent one to you, with guide, at the reception desk.

We weren't that adventurous, but occasionally we took one of the hotel's kayaks out into the channels between the mangroves, gliding over a couple of feet of crystal clear water and seagrass meadows, among flocks of busily feeding white ibis. Or we snorkelled among the red snappers around the quay. Or just lay on the loungers and read.

TEARING OURSELVES away on the fourth day, we set off for Key West, our hopes deflated by a Texan couple at breakfast, who described it as a "tacky town".

Driving Highway One – the "highway that goes to sea" – is an odd mixture of breathtaking surprises and grim banality. Most of the long stretch through Marathon Key is strip-mall hell, the forest of franchises making you feel you might as well be on any other anonymous road in Deadzone, USA.

But then you are suddenly ascending Sevenmile Bridge, driving suspended above the Gulf of Mexico and feeling as though you are on a stairway to the sky. More remarkable still is the fact that there is another huge but derelict structure running parallel to you. It's like a ghostly mirror, helping you imagine how precariously high and slim the arches under your own wheels must be.

This is, in fact, the ghost of the Overseas Railroad, the ambitious last throw of Henry Morrison Flagler, a quintessential American tycoon and partner of John D Rockefeller. It was the first transportation system to link all the islands of the quays, but lasted only from 1913 until a devastating hurricane wrecked it in 1935.

As we entered Key West, we were delighted to find that our Texan friends had only been to the wrong bit of town. The



Keys open door to

new cruise liner trade has certainly brought a surfeit of souvenir shops and ersatz eateries to Duval Street north of Eaton. Further south, however, there are entire streetscapes of delightful 19th century houses. Clapperboard and pastel colours dominate, but each home is an eccentric individual, sporting irregular eaves, dormer windows and quirky turrets. There is lots of porch decking for those lazy, broiling Keys afternoons.

The house Ernest Hemingway acquired in 1931 is among the grandest of these, in Spanish colonial style and boasting the town's first swimming pool. No-one who has read a line of his will want to miss it. Though it is now a busy museum, it remains imbued with a sense of his presence. This is not just because of the marvellous collection of photographs, evoking his adventures from the first World War through Spain, Africa, and Cuba. It is due also to his annotated book collection, and his curious objets d'art and furnishings. And, not least, to the ubiquitous snoozing cats, descendants of his own beloved

Clockwise from above: relaxing by the beach; charter sailing; home of Ernest Hemingway, Key West; Duval Street, Key West; Bayside Marina; and marker of the southernmost point of continental USA, Key West. Photographs: Photographer's Choice; Bert Budde/AFP/Getty Images; Altrendo, Robert Harding World Imagery, Tim Graham/Getty Images; and iStockphoto

pets.

The so-called Audubon House is another fine building and also has lovely gardens, but is a rather stately and less personal affair. The artist only stayed here for a few months in 1832. It does, however, house a fine exhibition, not only of his extraordinary images of local birds, but also of his notes on how he found and – usually – shot them.

To see the birds themselves, there is no better place than the Everglades, the vast though

Florida Keys where

Stay

Casa Morada, Islamorada (casamorada.com). It offers one-bedroom suites, both in the garden and directly on the water, from \$229 (€158) per night. Includes breakfast, weekend yoga classes, use of kayaks, bicycles and snorkeling gear, and in-room snacks and movies.

Many other options are available on Islamorada, see islamorada-hotels.keysdirectory.com.

Eat

Islamorada: Lorelei's (see loreleifloridakeys.com) – good bar food, great views; Kaiyo Grill (kaiyokeys.com/menu.html) – good sushi and Asian dishes but can be noisy; Green Turtle (see greenturtlekeys.com) – classic American-style food, superb fish, salads, and key lime pies with great service and great atmosphere make this one of the best restaurants we know, period; Spanish Gardens (see spanishgardenscafe.com) –

