



*Travel Section
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The Purple Isle

Islamorada in Spanish literally means "Purple Island," a name that contains some truth when the western sky glows with the fading tropical colors of a Florida Keys sunset. Unlike Key Largo, which increasingly resembles a South Dade suburb, and Marathon, with its working class ethos, Islamorada maintains a more sophisticated façade. Touted as the "Sport Fishing Capital of the World" it welcomes anglers worldwide for bonefish and tarpon on the flats and sailfish or dolphin (mahi-mahi) off the ocean reefs. It is no surprise that strict building codes have created a more gentrified community of snowbirds and affluent tourists where most fast food restaurants are prohibited and garish highway frontage is kept to a minimum.

Increasingly, the community encourages an upscale hostelry. The latest member of this select club, the 16 all suite **Casa Morada**, is directly located at 136 Madeira Road (mile marker 82.2) next to the late baseball great Ted Williams' home on Florida Bay off busy U.S.1 and a short walk north from the popular and casual Lorelei restaurant and bar. Guests are immediately greeted by three solid pink, rose red and burnt orange sentinels that bespeak a chic tone to an otherwise tony but bourgeois township, Landscaping by noted architect/artist Raymond Jungles exhibits similar élan with a grotto sculpted out of limestone, a bocce ball court and 650 tons of powder sand for the delightfully sculpted island beach, freshwater pool and old fashion whitewashed wood gazebo. A small post-modern reception offers guests bottled Fiji water and sodas, advice on local restaurants, babysitting, complimentary bikes, spa services, laundry, DVD rentals (\$5 per movie) and facilities for boats and pets.

Casa Morada is owned and run by three former Manhattanites and famed hotelier Ian Schrager (New York's Studio 54, South Beach's Delano) ex-employees: Terry Ford, President, Heide Praver, V.P. of operations, and Lauren Abrams, V.P. of marketing. Says Praver, "All three of us looked at dozens of properties up and down the Florida Keys. It seemed Islamorada had a niche available for the upscale service oriented product we envisioned. Our clients can feel free to be left alone with a book on the beach, order yummy key lime pie from nearby Manny & Isa's Kitchen, or hop on a bonefish skiff with a guide from our dock". The trio has retained much of the former owner/designer Robert Partiente's iron beds inspired by the Greek Islands, ottomans and black and white photographs.

My garden suite (#7) - half the units face the bay - was equipped with a Jacuzzi surrounded by a lovely cork floor, a deck with modern Italian lounge chairs, and 1950s style gold, gray and black speckled terrazzo floors. A gorgeous orchid decorated the living room, a nice touch that is incorporated in all the rooms. A King size bed with lush comforters and 100% cotton duvets is bordered by excellent high intensity reading lamps. Besides the well stocked mini fridges, guests can take complimentary breakfast overlooking the tiny wooden footbridge to the beach island and enjoy homemade croissants, muffins, bagels, cereal, freshly squeezed orange juice,

hot tea and freshly brewed Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee. For the persevering, a huge manatee often appears next to the bridge for his daily spraying from a garden hose.

A short bike ride or walk from Casa Morada on the same side of U.S.1 stands Islamorada's most popular fishing emporium, **World Wide Sportsman**, with the Zane Grey Lounge on the second floor and the adjoining Islamorada Fish Company. In its handsome, airy display area are arrayed a bazaar of items, from fishing rods and reels, lures and baits, casual apparel, footwear, and Guy Harvey fish drawings, to wonderful live fish aquariums (snook and tarpon), art gallery and an outstanding fly shop. More importantly, for fishing fans, a replica of Ernest Hemingway mahogany boat "Pilar" anchors the building in all its nostalgic glory. Upstairs the Zane Grey Lounge pays homage to the great author of westerns (Riders of the Purple Sage) and pioneer sports fisherman who caught permit, sail and bonefish off Long Key from 1912 - 26. Memorabilia includes a painting above the fireplace mantle of Grey and a world record 1,040- pound striped marline caught off Tahiti. For a great snack next door the **Islamorada Fish Company** serves fish spread (amber jack), scrumptious fried, boiled or broiled seafood, stone crab claws, and Florida Lobster in full view of Florida Bay and the fully-equipped marina and guide boats.

Islamorada, part of Upper Matecumbe Key, Windley Key to the north and Lower Matecumbe and Long Key to the south, communally share a fascinating history. Just south of Islamorada between the Matecumbe Keys tiny Indian Key State Historic Site on the ocean side of U.S.1 was the original county seat for Date County in 1836; four years later botanist Dr. Henry Perrine was killed by Seminoles and the stone foundation and streets of the 50 - inhabitant settlement are the ghostly reminders. The fascinating islet provides an observation tower, dock, shelter and trails (no restrooms or picnic tables), accessible by boat from **Robbie's Marina and Boat Rentals**, (M.M. 77.5) on Lower Matecumbe where visitors for a small fee can feed tarpon and large jacks from the dock. A more vigorous but exciting alternative would be to take a kayak tour (\$49.00 for three hours) or go solo (\$15.00 per hour) from **Florida Keys Kayak & Sail** next door to Robbie's.

Bayside just off Robbie's Marina lies Lignumvitae Key State Botanical Site, a mirror of early Keys life and rare flora. Via Kayak or tour boat from Robbie's or marinas in Islamorada the 280-acre island magically preserves its native vegetation like the hardwood lignumvitae (once used for bearings in ships), mastic, strangler fig poisonwood, pigeon plum and gumbo-limbo. Ancient Indian shell heaps or middens are on the site as well as the Matheson House (1919) with a windmill and cistern and the remains of a purported Spanish wall. The Island also boasts the highest elevation in the Keys; a mighty 18 feet! One hour guided walks are given at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., Thursday through Monday. A tour boat departs a half-hour before tour times on the mainland; for reservations, call 305-664-9814. If you rent your own boat pay strict attention to channel markings (Red Right Return), shallow flats (Brown brown, run aground), restricted access signs (bird roosting), and fragile sea grass beds (propeller scarring).

Just north of Islamorada, Windley Key gives a fascinating glimpse into prehistory through its underground Key Largo lime-stone Formed over 125,000 years ago, the limestone has been for over a century cut out of quarry that was active until the 1960s. Open to the public the Windley Key Fossil Reef State Geological Site exposes the limestone cuts with their embedded fossilized coral ancestors. Self-guided walks in the quarries and hammock cost \$1.50 per person; guided tours at 10 am and 2 pm, \$2.50 per person. The polished limestone or "keystone" decorates public buildings nationwide, including the St. Louis Post Office and the handsome Art Moderne styled Hurricane Monument (MM 81.5) that commemorates the 400 victims of Islamorada's 1935 Hurricane.

What draws visitors to Islamorada unquestionably is the fishing. Cowboy author Zane Grey in the winter of 1922 described a 17-pound permit caught from a canoe off Long Key as

“exceedingly beautiful, an exquisite shade of silver opal not possible to describe. The black markings were the most wonderful I ever saw on a fish, and resembled the loveliest of Japanese decorative art.” While overfishing has become a major concern to conservationists and boat captains alike, both flats and ocean fishing remain excellent. I’ll go out late in the afternoon in my flats skiff for bonefish or tarpon and realize there is no place in the world as beautiful,” says Richard Stanczyk, owner of **Bud N’ Mary’s Fishing Marina**, Islamorada’s premiere headquarters at MM 79.8 for Florida bay back country guides, off shore charter boats, boat rentals and storage, yellowtail party boat the 65-foot air-conditioned **Gulf Lady with Captain Walter** Mason and Jimmy Stanczyk, an accomplished fisherman, guided customer Vic Gaspeny several years ago to a bonefish fly rod record of 14 lb., 6 oz.

In fact, I fished with Bud N’ Mary charter boat captain Alex Adler on his 48-ft. custom boat **Kalex** on an all-day excursion out to the Hump 13 miles off shore. After mate Jamie tied Bimini twists for the Daiwa spinning gear for dolphin, he started letting out the electro-mate reel with a kite and a Yummie artificial flying fish connected to a short line on a clip that danced on the waves like the real critters. Although the Hump was crowded with nearly 20 boats, Captain Adler’s skill and knowledge resulted in at least a dozen black fin tuna, up to 30 pounds, striking the lure as Jamie unwound the kite and flying fish method much more exciting than the usual boring troll in a chair.

Later on, we trolled further south and caught a 40 pound Wahoo which lived up to its name by initially stripping a large amount of line off the reel. The same dolphin were taken on spinners from drifting debris. Towards noon we motored back past Alligator Lighthouse and anchored in 80 feet of water. This time Jamie and Alex created a chum slick with the outgoing tide and soon we were hauling in a 1-3 pound yellowtail. To finish off the awesome day we used live pilchards to catch a few grouper and a mutton snapper. At the dock Captain Alex gave us a satisfying amount of fish fillets and kept the rest for sale as has become the custom on most charter boats here in the Florida Keys and much of Florida.

A more economical fishing solution, especially for families solution, especially for families, is to take a half-day or evening party boat like the **Capt. Michael**, owned by the Robbie’s group, out of Holiday Isle Docks (MM 84.5). Alternatively, you can drive north to Key Largo and fish all day with Captain Chan on the **Gulfstream 111** from Ocean Bay Marina (MM 99.5) Chan takes passengers to the outer reefs and ledges for yellowtail, snapper and grouper for a day’s fishing (9:30 am - 4:30 pm) for \$50 per person. I fished with Captain Chan where we used a technique called “sandballing” for yellowtail in over 100 feet of water. Explained Chan “ Yellowtail cover the reefs in the summer but so do blue runners and other less desirable fish. Sandballing consists of mixing oats, fish oil and sand in a concoction that is cupped together in a ball to wrap up the angler’s hook, bait and sinker. Then you throw out the ball into the water with your bail open on your spinning reel and feed the line quickly. If things go on schedule, the ball will open up past the “undesirables” and the yellowtail will be waiting for their tempting morsel.”

Eating fresh fish - yours or the restaurant’s - is a cinch in Islamorada, At the 1,100-foot oceanfront Cheeca Lodge’s (MM 82) **Atlantic’s Edge** Executive Chef Andy Niedenthal uses farm raised seafood like shrimp and Taylor Bay scallops instead of endangered species like swordfish caught in seine nets. Says Chef Andy, “ As a child growing up in Baltimore I watched the decrease of rockfish or striped bass and saw that a ban actually brought the species back. But ban or not, I still make the best Baltimore crab cakes in Florida Keys.” Niedenthal’s signature dishes include Florida lobster with mushroom ragout, mascarpone and truffle hollandaise and crispy snapper with fresh arugula, risotto and lemon glaze. Niedenthal will also cook your fish grilled, sautéed, meuniere, steamed, blackened, onion-crust, plaintain-crust or deep fried. (The Cheeca Lodge has the only full spa in Islamorada called Avanyu with custom massages, facials, aromatherapy, lap pool, and salt scrubs.)

A few doors down on U.S. 1 former Cheeca Lodge Executive Chef and James Beard award winner Chef Dawn Sieber continues her class act in her own restaurant **Kaiyo** (MM 82). Here, a Japanese touch with extensive sushi/sashimi and sake is informed by environmental concerns. Appetizers or "small tastes" include: farmed Turks & Caicos baby conch tempura, fresh farmed raw oysters, and pearl sake steamed whitewater farmed clams. I especially enjoyed her green tea crepes garnished with duck confit and togarashi calamari seasoned with Japanese 7 spice and deep fried with wasabi mayonnaise. Entrees featured tempura fried whole bass and jumbo sea scallops wok seared with mirin butter. Over a cool glass of green tea she said, "As a child growing up in the Keys, I used to wade in shallow waters and collect Queen Conch to use in recipes for my family. I watched the gradual disappearance of that species. We must learn to give something back."

At night, after a delicious meal from Chef Sieber, I walked out on the Casa Morada gazebo to "catch and release" small snappers and grunts. The Florida Bay breeze was gentle, the moon in half eclipse, and the waves a soothing murmur. The lights from moored sailboats blinked in lazy intervals. I thought of Zane Grey nearly one hundred years ago who wrote: "What of the mystery of the sea? It can never be known. It is endless, infinite." But on that finite evening all seemed possible.

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