

Welcome to the Conch Republic – What Locals Call Key West

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September 17,
2019



The Florida Keys are a string of tropical islands stretching 125 miles off the southern tip of the US state of Florida between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. Until 1912, they weren't connected to the rest of the world as there was no bridge. A recently rebuilt 7-mile bridge stretching over the vast ocean brings you to at a completely separate destination from the rest of the US, and that is how the local "Conchs" want it to be. There is a different feel to the Keys as soon as you are removed from the hustle and bustle of Miami. A soft breeze, gentle murmur of voices and a relaxed island vibe is felt everywhere you turn.

Thirty years ago, in protest to a US Border patrol roadblock that shut down tourism, the then mayor “ceded” Key West from the US to become the “Conch Republic” even going so far as declaring war on the US. Although a totally tongue-in-cheek demonstration and a perfect example of Key West’s quirky spirit, the act was effective in that the roadblock was immediately and quietly suspended. Today Key West features its own flag and passports. It has its own Air Force, consisting of one bi-plane, its own navy, one tall ship.



Every year they have a ten-day Conch Republic independence celebration, which kicks off with a conch blowing contest, a parade down Duval Street, victory parties and the Pirate’s ball finale.

Key West is close to Cuba—closer than to a Walmart—which explains a cigar connection. In the 1800s, it was the cigar making capital of the world, hand-rolling one million cigars annually. Cigar makers are still prevalent, but the numbers have dwindled.

Key West’s diverse and colourful history has formed the southernmost US city into a diverse assortment of attractions. Water activities come in the form of snorkelling, parasailing, sunset cruises, kayaking, paddleboarding and deep sea fishing, while the main artery Duval Street beats with a variety of street cafes, art galleries, world class restaurants and nightlife. But one thing is always constant. At the end of every day, locals and tourists gather for the colours found in the famous Key West sunset celebration.



A local initiative “ConnectandProtect” was explained by Carol Shaunessy, Editor of Keys Voices. It’s about reef preservation and taking care of our creatures in a natural world. Our focus is to encourage visitors to make their own connection by doing voluntourism, snorkelling, wearing reef safe sunscreen and visiting the turtle hospital to see the work being done. Restoration of coral reefs involving volunteers is popular. Volunteers can snorkel to see the transplanted coral (from a local coral nursery from which the coral is transplanted) to a reef, which spawn in two years.”

The entire island is a bird sanctuary and volunteers are welcome to contribute to the efforts as well. Local fishing captains pioneered the catch and release program.