


The Florida Keys – it doesn't get much better

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A sailboat at sunset in the Florida Keys (Melody Wren photo)

The Florida Keys are a 200-kilometre long chain of islands. A recently rebuilt 11-kilometre long bridge connects the mainland to a unique destination that is distinct from the rest of the United States – and that is how the local “conchs” want it.

The Keys have a much different feel than the hustle and bustle of Florida’s mainland cities. A soft breeze, the gentle murmur of voices and an island vibe is felt throughout.

At the tip of the island chain is Key West. Its colourful history has turned the southernmost American city into a diverse assortment of attractions. There are many water activities to choose from – including snorkelling, parasailing, sunset cruises, kayaking, paddle boarding and deep-sea fishing – while the city’s main artery, Duval Street, beats with a variety of street cafes, art galleries, world-class restaurants and a vibrant nightlife. But one thing is constant: at the end of the day, locals and tourists gather for the famous spectacle of the Key West sunset celebration.

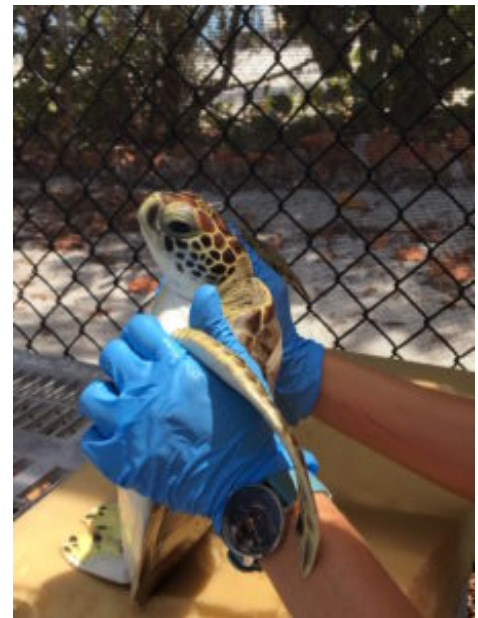
The conchs (descendants of Bahamian immigrants) are proud that Key West is closer to Cuba than to a Walmart. In the 1800s, the Cuba connection made the island the cigar-making capital of the world, producing a million hand-rolled cigars a year. Cigar makers are still prevalent, but the numbers have dwindled.

On the way to Key West, it's natural to explore the nearby city of Marathon, which is spread across 13 islands, the village of Islamorada, which is located on five islands, and the island known as Big Pine Key.

The Turtle Hospital in Marathon became popular with the rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in the 1980s and hasn't stopped, receiving approximately 320 visitors every day.

Leading our tour of the facility was its manager, Bette Zirkelbach. The hospital's main focus is the rescue and rehabilitation of sea turtles, a large part of which is educating the general public so they know how to spot an injured or sick turtle. Virtual field trips conducted over the Internet helps the hospital spread its message the world over.

The day we visited, there were over 60 turtles, with six out of 10 of them having been rescued as a direct result of people who had visited the hospital. With three ambulances on hand, its staff can respond to calls immediately. Most of the turtles are juvenile greens or huge loggerheads, with the largest weighing in at 144 kilograms. The turtles live to be 75 to 100 years old, so if a juvenile comes in and is rehabilitated and then released, it can go on to have a long life. The hospital holds a turtle release every six months, which is open to the public. Some of the turtles released are given satellite tags, so they can be tracked.



The Marathon Turtle Hospital
(Melody Wren photo)

Located in Morada Way's Arts and Cultural District, the Florida Keys Brewing Company, which opened four years ago, is owned and run by Craig McBay, a fellow Canadian from Burlington, Ont. It has 20 beers on tap and three core beers, which it distributes to over 200 bars, as well as a tasting room where one can order a flight of 10 beers to sample. The brews are infused with local flavours, such as Key limes, citrus and honey.

Our half day of kayaking offered a great perspective of the marshy mangroves in the area. Bill Keogh guides kayak groups across the channel into the backcountry, weaving through mangroves and touching on the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico.

Keogh is a natural instructor who gently guides amateurs through the best kayaking techniques for getting through the challenging mangrove roots. Taking paddles apart and paddling canoe-style made it easier, though it was still an obstacle course. Upside-down jellyfish, cormorants, black crabs, a cave of luma worms and a school of mullet were among the fascinating things we saw on the trip.

As another way to get time on the water, a morning dolphin watching outing and snorkelling through the clear, calm turquoise waters is hard to beat. A perfect ending to a day is relaxing on a fast 69' sailing catamaran to watch the sunset. We enjoyed drinks served by several bartenders and delicious canapés as the sun sank behind the clouds. It truly doesn't get much better than that.

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A local program, called Connect & Protect, aims to protect the area's natural environment, so future generations can enjoy it, as well. As Carol Shaunessy of Florida Keys & Key West Tourism explains, "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 volunteerism, wearing reef-safe sunscreen, visiting the Turtle Hospital to see the work being done and being a part of it."

Some of the work involves restoring coral reefs with the help of volunteers, who transplant coral from a nursery into the reefs. There is also a bird sanctuary and local fishing captains pioneered a catch-and-release program to help maintain the fish stock.

After staying on Duck Key for two nights, exploring Marathon and Islamorada, and kayaking at Big Pine Key, we made our way to Key West.

Shaunessy summed up the energy in Key West beautifully: "Key West is not about what you own, but who you are. It's not about what's in your bank account, but what's in your heart."