

Ultimate Winter Road Trip



By Liz Mitchell



For the ultimate winter road trip, drive to the Florida Keys. Drive from wherever you are, and plan to enjoy the experience of the road trip itself as well as the end destination which is Key West.

While winter is an ideal time to escape from a northern climate, it's also a treat for a road tripper to slow down the clock and enjoy the relaxed lifestyle of the Keys. Winter weather ranges from the 70s to the low 80s. Sunrises and sunsets beckon, while rum bars or raw bars help travelers unwind.

The Overseas Highway, the southernmost leg of U.S. Highway 1 and sometimes called the Highway That Goes to Sea, is a modern wonder.

The road follows a trail originally blazed in 1912 when Henry Flagler extended his Florida East Coast Railroad from Miami to Key West. The railway ceased operation after severe damage to the infrastructure in a 1935 hurricane.

Construction of the highway began in the late 1930s. Its foundation incorporated some of the original railway spans as well as the coral bedrock of individual keys and specially constructed columns. Completed in 1938, the highway created an adventure for the road trip lover.

The Overseas Highway represents an incredible engineering feat: 113 miles of roadway and 42 bridges leapfrogging from key to key in a series of giant arches of concrete and steel over the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico.

Mile markers are placed along the route and are the only sure way to get directions when locating something between Florida City and Key West. The keys are recognized by five distinct regions beginning at the north with Key Largo.

Key Largo's star attraction is John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park — the first underwater preserve in the United States — and the adjacent Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary. These two refuges, part of the Keys' marine sanctuary, feature 55 varieties of delicate corals and almost 500 different species of fish.

Snorkle and scuba are popular activities when an estimated 800,000 people each year explore the amazing coral reefs, shipwrecks and marine life under the waters. Rental equipment and instruction are available in many locations. The truly adventurous water lovers should inquire about an underwater wedding or a music festival. Mermaids reportedly have been in attendance. No kidding!

Friendly residents welcome visitors and gladly share their tips for favorite local eateries. This magazine's featured beachcomber family, Carroll and Dori Pensinger, might be spotted in their Key Largo winter home where they are socializing during beach walks and neighborhood events. They'll tell you, "We love it. There's always something to do."

Islamorada is the centerpiece of a group of islands called the purple isles. Spanish explorers named the area morada, the Spanish word for purple — either for the giant sea snail, *janthina*, found on the seashore here, or for the native purple bougainvillea flowers.

Known as the Sportfishing Capital of the World, Islamorada features the Keys' largest fleet of offshore charter boats and shallow-water back-country boats.

Numerous celebrities including former President George Bush visit Islamorada annually to compete in fund-raising fishing tournaments. The largest bonefish in the world — up to 14 pounds — are caught near Islamorada.

Traveling south, Conch Key is a historic fishing village reminiscent of the early Florida Keys. Small cottages that date back to 1925 are home to commercial trap and line fishermen who work from their backyards.

Marathon is the heart of the Florida Keys and is centrally located between Key Largo and Key West. Marathon is home to Crane Point Hammock, an important historical and archaeological site which contains evidence of pre-Columbian

and prehistoric Bahamian artifacts and was once the site of an Indian village.

Marathon also features the Dolphin Research Center, actually on Grassy Key, one of five Keys facilities that provide visitors an opportunity to swim and interact with the intelligent mammals. One of the first Flippers of television fame is buried beneath the large dolphin statue here.

A drive across the Seven Mile Bridge, the longest segmental bridge in the world, leads to the Lower Keys.

Big Pine Key is a national refuge for miniature Key deer, tropical forest and a few alligators. Kayak tours offer unforgettable opportunities to view the unique flora and fauna.

Key West is the country's southern most spot, closer to Cuba than to Miami, and offers a casual lifestyle for hundreds of writers, artists and entrepreneurs as well as visitors from cruise ships and road trippers. Shipwreck salvaging made it the richest city per capita in the United States in its early days.

The Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum, the Audubon House & Tropical Gardens and the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum are well known stops for visitors. The city's literary history is showcased at the Heritage House Museum & Robert Frost Cottage. Key West's Cuban heritage is represented by the San Carlos Institute, an affiliate to the Smithsonian Institution, founded in 1871. In 1892, Cuban patriot José Martí launched his drive for Cuba's independence from the institute. The Key West Lighthouse Museum offers a panoramic view up the 88-step spiral stairway.

Conch, stone crab and Key West pink shrimp are among the popular delicacies found in restaurants here, along with the many fish which are brought fresh daily from the local waters. Be sure to enjoy the robust Cuban coffee along with key lime pie which is a favorite topper for any meal. It's made from the small yellow limes which grow in Florida, and a factory tour can entice anyone to sample dessert.

Festivals are often underway in the streets of Key West. The Key West Offshore World Championship brings powerboat racers to town for a week in November. Pirates celebrate the



Andy Newman/Florida Keys News Bureau



Andy Newman/Florida Keys News Bureau



Bob Krist/Florida Keys News Bureau



Bob Krist/Florida Keys News Bureau

rowdy maritime heritage of the city with living history during Pirates in Paradise festival in late November and December. Yacht racing and sailboat regatta racing take over the waters in January. A literary seminar also brings international attention to the city in January. Art and writing workshops are spring events, and the quirky Conch Shell Blowing Contest is an annual spring competition judging the sound of the Conch Honk while celebrating the importance of the sea mollusk.

The drive from Miami to Key West is less than four hours with a continuous showcase of natural beauty along the way. Don't rush. Plan to stop a couple of days along the way to experience the variety presented by the different islands. Dive, fish, kayak or stop whenever the conch calls. Flying into Marathon or boating to the

Keys are options, but no one should be in a hurry for this type of travel.

Winter is a perfect time for road tripping into the sunny south of Florida. ■

For information:

www.fla-keys.com

1-800-FLA-KEYS (800-352-5397)

Key Largo Chamber of Commerce
(800) 822-1088 or (305) 451-4747

Islamorada Chamber of Commerce
(800) 322-5397 or (305) 664-8516

Lower Keys Chamber of Commerce at
(305) 872-2411 or (800) 872-3722

1-800-LAST-KEY (800-527-8539)

EVENTS

ISLAMORADA

DECEMBER 01 TO JANUARY 31

Florida Gold Cup Sailfish Championship

Anglers pursue sailfish, the most plentiful billfish in the waters off the Keys, in a series of competitions.

Contact: (305) 852-2102

Email: ditournaments@aol.com

KEY WEST

DECEMBER 01

Key West Holiday Parade

The island city shows its holiday spirit with this annual 7 p.m. home-town parade featuring marching groups, motorized and non-motorized floats from churches, civic organizations and businesses.

Contact: (305) 809-3881

ISLAMORADA

DECEMBER 05 TO DECEMBER 06

Islamorada Fishing Club Captain's Cup Sailfish Tournament

Anglers are to pursue sailfish in the waters surrounding the Sport Fishing Capital of the World in an event sponsored by the area's historic fishing club.

Contact: (305) 664-4735; fax (305) 664-8060

Email: fishclubtheresa@bellsouth.net

ISLAMORADA

DECEMBER 07 TO DECEMBER 09

Captain Don Gurgiole Sailfish Classic

This all-release tournament offers the ever-popular ugly sport coat award in honor of Captain Don.

Contact: (305) 852-9337

Email: fishbully@msn.com

KEY WEST

DECEMBER 07 TO DECEMBER 15

Historic Lighted Inn Tours

Discover the history and holiday spirit of Key West by touring beautifully decorated historic inns each Friday and Saturday evening. The tours include creative offerings by local chefs, artists, writers and performers.

Contact: (305) 295-1334

KEY LARGO

DECEMBER 15

Holiday Boat Parade

The waters of Blackwater Sound are to shimmer as decorated boats parade along the shoreline in celebration of the holiday season. The best viewing can be found at Sundowners, Senior Frijoles, the Marriott Key Largo Bay Resort and Caribbean Club, mile marker 103-104 on U.S. 1.

Contact: (305) 451-4502

KEY WEST

DECEMBER 15

Key West Lighted Boat Parade

Decorated and lighted boats are to cruise through Key West Harbor and the waters of the Historic Seaport. Musical guests are featured in this event sponsored by Schooner Wharf Bar and Captain Morgan.

Contact: (305) 292-3302

KEY LARGO

DECEMBER 31

New Year's Eve Fireworks on Blackwater Sound

The back bay is the setting for the annual New Year's Eve fireworks extravaganza hosted by Sundowners, Senior Frijoles, Cactus Jacks, Gus' Grille at the Marriott Key Largo Beach Resort and the Caribbean Club, mile markers 103-104 on U.S. 1.

Contact: (305) 451-4502

KEY WEST

DECEMBER 31

Key West New Year's Eve Celebrations

The festivities include a "conch shell drop" at Sloppy Joe's Bar, 201 Duval St.; the descent of a 6-foot red high heel shoe carrying drag queen Sushi at the Bourbon Street Pub/New Orleans House complex, 724 Duval St.; and the descent of a pirate wench from the mast of the tall ship Liberty Clipper in the island city's Historic Seaport.

Contact: (305) 296-2388; (305) 293-9800; (305) 292-3302