



Photo by Andy Newman/Florida Keys News Bureau

Let my Florida Keys vacation serve as a suggestion to “do as I say, not as I did.”

I allowed only three days to explore the island chain from Key Largo to Key West during my recent road trip in South Florida. Instead of fully embracing the Florida Keys’ languid and laid-back lifestyle, I packed in a pile of activities. The speedy schedule left me with a brilliant overview of this scenic southernmost section of the continental United States, yet I wished I had more time to fully appreciate its historic sites, ecological treasures, and darn good seafood.

First-time visitors to the Florida Keys typically sightsee in Key West, an upbeat city well known for its vibrant nightlife. By day, tour Ernest Hemingway’s home and get friendly with the resident six-toed cats; admire the gingerbread-trimmed buildings and blooming bougainvillea along narrow streets; and snap your souvenir photo next to the southernmost point marker, a striped concrete buoy.

Of course, it’s easy to explore the other islands in the archipelago, since they are conveniently connected by the Overseas Highway

(U.S. Route 1). Find attractions or restaurants via their mile marker numbers: Key Largo visitor center in the Upper Keys stands at mile marker 106, and the highway stretches south-southwest to Key West to mile marker 0 (its sign is another popular photo op). Every bridge you cross -- there are 42! -- brings a new panoramic vantage point and splashes of color: green mangroves, golden beaches, and turquoise waters.

Find even more vibrant hues under the water, as colorful marine life abounds in the United States’ only living-coral barrier reef just a few miles offshore. No matter where your home base is in the tropical Keys, you’re never far from water adventure -- after all, the small islands are flanked by the Gulf of Mexico to the north and the Atlantic Ocean in the south. If snorkeling is not your thing, consider chartering a fishing boat, booking a kayak tour or even renting a kite board.

Of course, settling into a chaise lounge underneath swaying palm trees is a perfectly acceptable daily activity here, as well. In fact, a relaxed Florida Keys vacation sounds just right.



Photo by Bob Care/Florida Keys News Bureau

## >> 2. WHERE TO PLAY

Rent a kayak or snorkel gear to explore the crystal-clear waters around Bahia Honda State Park, accessible between mile markers 36 and 37. Stroll the mile-long Sandspur Beach, and stick around until evening, when visitors gather on the old Bahia Honda Bridge for a front-row seat to the radiant Keys sunset. [bahiahondapark.com](http://bahiahondapark.com)



## >> 4. WHERE TO SHOP

Duval Street in Key West is known for its lively nightlife (i.e. “the Duval bar crawl”). But the main drag is probably the best place to shop for souvenirs, with its T-shirt shops, jewelry stores, art galleries, cigar stands and much, much more. Browse for key lime taffy, key lime salsa and chocolate-covered key lime pie at Kermit’s Key West Key Lime Shoppe on the corner of Elizabeth and Greene streets in Old Town. [keylimeshop.com](http://keylimeshop.com)



## >> 1. WHERE TO STAY

For the ultimate in exclusivity, book your own one- to four-bedroom, pastel-colored cottage at Westin’s Sunset Key Guest Cottages just a 10-minute water-taxi ride from downtown Key West. The upscale accommodations on the 27-acre island are tranquil and sophisticated, featuring “Old Florida” décor and Adirondack chairs on wraparound porches. [westinsunsetkeycottages.com](http://westinsunsetkeycottages.com)



Photo by Bob Krist/Florida Keys News Bureau

## >> 3. WHERE TO EAT

If you fly into Miami and rent a car for your Florida Keys vacation, fuel up with hearty -- mostly fried -- Southern specialties at Alabama Jack’s on Card Sound Road, an alternative entrance to the Keys, north of Key Largo. The digs are hardly upscale, but the “honky tonk” restaurant/bar is highly entertaining, with its frequent live music and tables on the water -- an ideal place to sit to watch boats pass by, seabirds fly overhead and fish hover for fallen morsels below. Order meaty conch fritters, sweet potato fries, tart key lime pie and refreshing Florida Avenue Ale.

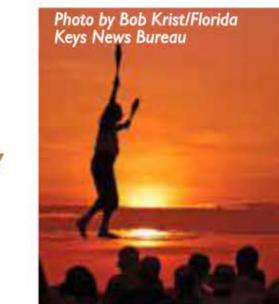


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## >> 5. WHAT NOT TO MISS

While there are dozens of fabulous spots to watch the renowned sunsets in the Florida Keys (see “Where to Play” above), the gathering at Mallory Square each evening is probably the most popular. An hour before sunset, hundreds of visitors gather to watch magicians, acrobats and jugglers entertain the crowds.

The sunset celebration is free, but bring along some bills to tip the hardworking entertainers -- then ready your camera for Mother Nature’s brilliant display, as a giant fiery-orange sphere sinks into the sea. [fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com)