

IF YOU'RE HEADING TO ORLANDO THIS YEAR MAKE SURE YOU DRIVE DOWN TO THE **FLORIDA KEYS**. WITH THIS PERFECT WEEK-LONG ITINERARY YOU KNOW YOU CAN HIT THE ROAD, SAFE IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT YOU'RE GOING TO EXPERIENCE THE VERY BEST THIS UNIQUE AREA HAS TO OFFER..

Dude South

WORDS: ABIGAIL KING





DAY ONE:

Orlando to Miami

One look at Miami's South Beach lets me know how cool the place is. One look in the mirror lets me know how cool I'm not.

"Hot water, clean sheets and stiff drinks," promises the barman at the Whitelaw Hotel, as he slices watermelon and peach for the frosted cocktail glasses. In South Beach, the people are beautiful, the air is warm and a smoky lilac sunset accompanies clinking cutlery, rumbling jazz and cheek to cheek air kisses. Pastel pink Cadillacs glide past art deco buildings and I feel myself relax.

South Beach marks the breathing spot after the four-hour drive from Orlando. It's a chance to freshen up, feel the sand beneath your feet and get ready to head into nature's own theme park: the Florida Keys. These 45 islands, linked by the Overseas Highway, promise one of America's greatest drives, laced with Caribbean sunshine.

After the Whitelaw's three signature traits, I'm ready to hit the road.

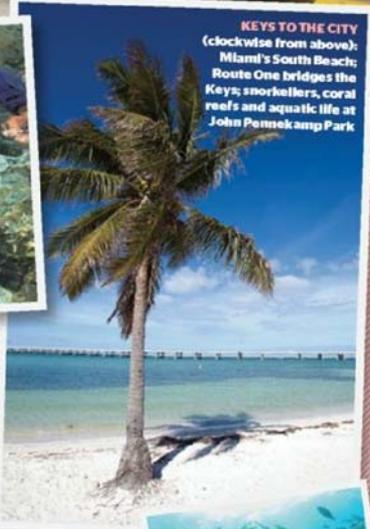


DAY TWO:

Key Largo to Marathon

One of the first things you'll notice about a trip to the US is the attention to detail, particularly when it comes to people not being sued. At the edges of the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, my signature graces more pages for my snorkelling tour than it did for my mortgage application back home. A swimming and snorkelling lesson later, a step-by-step guide to lifejacket application followed by a tour of the boat's safety apparatus and we're finally ready to zoom off through the mangroves.

I look out for Flipper (he isn't there.)



KEYS TO THE CITY
(clockwise from above):
Miami's South Beach;
Route One bridges the
Keys; snorkellers, coral
reefs and aquatic life at
John Pennekamp Park

crocodiles (nor are they) and finally my eyes rest on what we've come to see: a

vast clump of coral, home to thousands of tropical fish. Purple stranded seaweed and luminous yellow cauliflowers bring the underwater world to life, making those reams and reams of paperwork more than worthwhile. ▶





Conch fritters and coconut shrimp



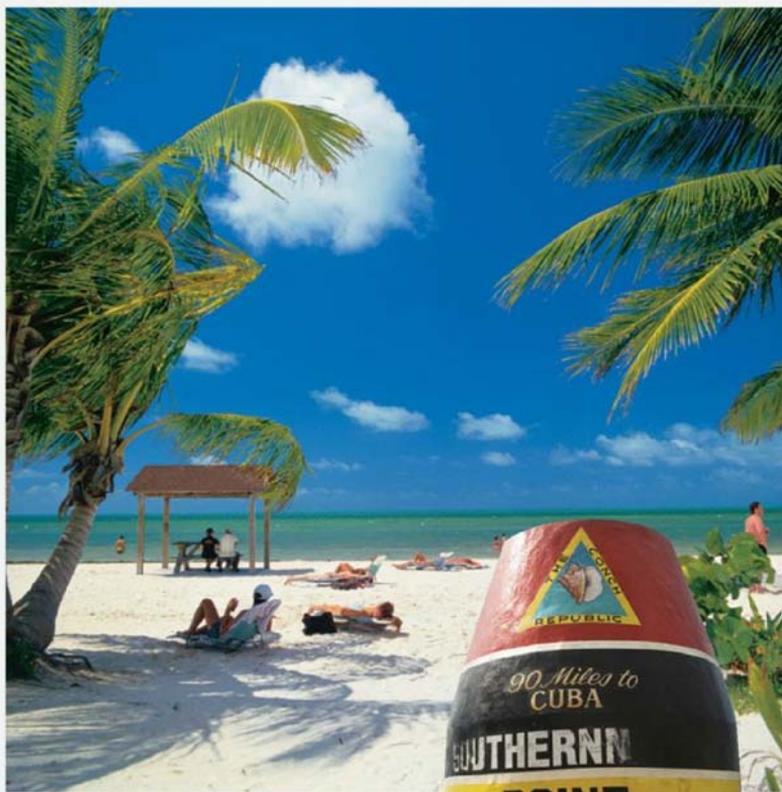
DAY TWO CONT'D:

Marathon

Back on dry land, we tuck into coconut shrimp and conch fritters at the Key Fisheries Market & Marina in Marathon. Slurping on a giant cup of soda, the poster for a stone crab eating contest catches my eye:

- The first to finish 25 claws will win
- 30 Second deduction for each claw not picked and cleaned
- Safety glasses will be provided and must be worn
- Must crack your own claws
- Over 18s only

To my disappointment, the contest isn't for weeks. To get a glimpse of the wackier side of the Keys a bit sooner than that we need to keep on driving to reach the furthest Key in the chain: the wild west that is Key West.



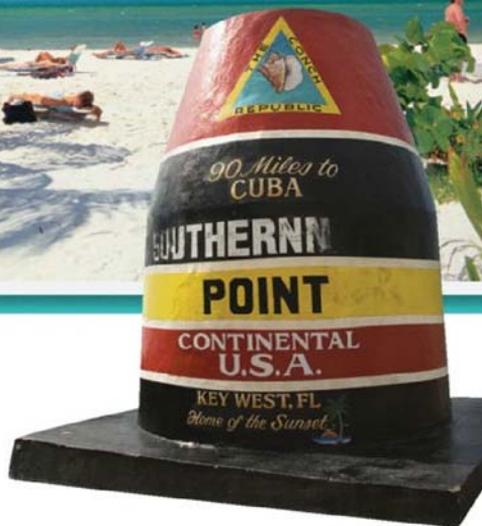
DAYS THREE & FOUR:

Key West

"We think of it as almost another country down there," says Margo, when I mention where I'm going.

At first glance, I'm not sure what she means. Sure, the palm trees and conch shells make Key West look a little different. And there is that landmark that reminds you you're only 90 miles from Cuba. But the America of the movies is also in rich supply: picket fences and mailboxes, brunch with blueberry pancakes and canary-yellow schoolbuses roaming through the streets.

Brunch at *Blue Heaven* gives me a clearer idea of what Margo had in mind.



While sipping a milkshake, something fluttered at my ankles. Delusions of a jet-lagged mind, I thought at first, until it happened again, came with a brief pause and then crescendoed into a lung-curdling, alarm-clock beating cock-a-doodle-doooooooooooo!

There, at my feet, was a bona fide rooster, clucking and strutting around like it owned the place. The kids loved it. And, after the initial shock, so did I. ▶



Stone Crab claws



Hemingway's house



Key Lime Pie

DAYS THREE & FOUR CONT'D:

Key West

Such quirkiness feels right at home in Key West. Men wear make-up and read from tarot cards, teens juggle with fire and old men stand on tightropes as the sunset flames across the sky. Each night in Mallory Square, the performances are different but the spirit remains the same.

A low, throaty sound reverberates through the air as a man breathes into a salmon-pink conch shell. His name is Chuck and he invites me to have a go.

The technique sounds simple. The execution, as ever, brings problems. The shell is the size of a cannonball, rippled with toffee-coloured stripes. You need to take a deep breath, clasp it with both hands and blow the loudest, soggiest raspberry you can muster right into the curled and crispy mollusc.

I think you can imagine the results - but perhaps I need to fill in the gaps. Picture, if you will, a dribbling disgrace of a raspberry, a whoopee cushion in front of the cool kids instead of a stylish

saxophonist set free.

I wash away the embarrassment with a lime soda cocktail and a slice of Key Lime Pie. Lime, let me tell you, is a big deal in the Keys. Lime in pies, lime in drinks, lime in jams (sorry, jelly) and everything in between. Kermit's Key West Key Lime Shoppe stocks them all: lime pepper, lime soap and the lime dish that started it all, the Key Lime Pie.

You'll also find lime in the Cuban bars and restaurants offering a night out in Key West. Former haunts of Ernest Hemingway (whose colonial style villa today houses a museum) now entertain a Bohemian group of rock stars and vagabonds, a snapshot of those mainstream America left far behind.

Away from the parties, Key West still welcomes families, as the Key West Butterfly and Nature Conservatory makes clear. The only thing you can't do here is get away from it all. For that, you need to hop in the car, head back up the Keys and enter that chunk of America known as the backcountry.

FLORIDA KEYS

ARUBA

JAMAICA

BERMUDA

BAHAMAS

KEY LARGO

MONTEGO

KOKOMO

KEY WEST

DAY FIVE:

Bahia Honda State Park

Bill Keogh throws us a Kevin Costner smile and launches our kayaks into the water. "I just love to get out among nature," he says in a straight-from-the-movies drawl.

"Out there among the mangroves with the great big sky above," he goes on, "you ain't got nothing to worry about! Cept what you wanna do next."

I dip in a paddle and head for the mangroves, knowing exactly where I want to go next.

Bahia Honda State Park has won bucket loads of awards, including one for "Florida's Best Beach." The sand is white, the water clear, and the vegetation suitably tropical. You can even pick up choc 'n' cherry cookies at the Sugar Loaf Food Company en route.



PHOTOS: © BIGSTOCK / CLEANPIX

Road Rules

MAKING THE MOST OF THE KEYS...

FEEL THE LOVE

Soak up stunning sunset views from these palm-fringed, sandy beaches. These romantic spots are meant for sharing...

- **Latitudes Beach Restaurant** at the Westin Hotel on Sunset Key
245 Front Street
Key West, FL 33040
www.westin.sunsetkey.com/offices/latitudes
- **Morada Bay Café**
8159D Overseas Highway
Islamorada, FL 33036
<https://moradabay-restaurant.com>

HAVE FUN OUTDOORS

Kayak through the backcountry...

- **Big Pine Kayak Adventure**
1791 Bogle Drive
Big Pine Key, FL 33034
www.keyskayaktours.com

Snorkel past coral reefs...

- **John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park**
Mile Marker 102.5
Key Largo
www.pennkamppark.com

FIT IN WITH THE LOCALS

- Say 'conch' with a hard 'ch' so that it sounds more like 'cork'
- Help pilot whales with the Marine Mammal Conservancy Group
www.marinemammalconservancy.org
- Chill out at sunset in Mallory Square, Key West

EAT WELL

For a flavour of the Florida Keys, try:

- **Keys Fisheries - for Coconut Shrimp**
3502 Gulfview Avenue,
Marathon, FL 33050
www.keysfisheries.com
- **Meson de Pepe - for a taste of Cuba**
410 Wall Street
Key West
www.elmesondepepe.com
- **Blue Heaven - for blueberry pancakes & roosters**
729 Thomas Street
Key West

WHAT TO PACK

- Long sleeved cotton tops, insect repellent and tiger balm to fight off the mozzies.
- Plenty of sunscreen - you are in the Sunshine State after all
- Your camera - sunsets here are among the best in the world.



DAY SIX:

Grassy Key

The Dolphin Research Center in Grassy Key allows you to ponder the significance of those *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* quotes, while swimming or painting with the dolphins, provided you book in advance. Yet these are no ordinary dolphins. They hail from a pedigree that includes Flipper him or herself (the stunt dolphin, apparently, was a girl called Mitzl) and they come complete with a team of professionals who whoop, holler and howl their support from the sidelines, armed with buckets and buckets of fish.

Here, mankind has learned that dolphins can count, imitate one another and even teach men to pick up their socks from the bathroom floor. No wait, sorry, that last one was just a dream I had. Back to reality in the Laura Quinn Wild Bird Sanctuary, we watch non-famous birds in silence. Pelicans nuzzle against one another, while egrets, ospreys and saucer-eyed owls wait behind lattices of protective wire. All have been rescued and are too injured to return to the wild - a situation that repeats with the pilot whales we find the following day.

DAY SEVEN: Cocoa Beach & Home

Six volunteers from the Marine Mammal Conservancy Group hold the baby whale at the surface while their team leader fills a syringe for her nebuliser.

"Captivity is an ugly word," he says, when I ask when the whales will be set free. "But sometimes these animals are too sick to survive on their own. I'll never send them to a theme park, though. They were born to travel across water."

I remember his words as we speed along the Overseas Highway towards Cocoa Beach. Puffed clouds and blue water stretch away on either side and it's obvious that whales aren't the only ones born to travel across water. People are too, at least in the Florida Keys. 🌊



MONARCH FLIES TO ORLANDO
FROM CARDIFF, LONDON GATWICK, MANCHESTER AND NEWCASTLE VISIT MONARCH.CO.UK FOR THE LATEST DEALS