

# ... other Keys

Instead of racing to Key West, explore gems along the way

DOUG WALLACE  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

With an official slogan of “Come as you are,” the Florida Keys are always ripe for a road trip. The famous Overseas Highway, spanning 182 kilometres from Key Largo to Key West, is the longest over-water road in the world, complete with 42 bridges. The archipelago is perennially popular, especially among snow-fleeing Canadians; the ideal window to go is March to May for great weather, smaller crowds and lower travel costs. And while fantastic Key West gets most of the attention, each of the often-overlooked upper and central Keys has its own fun-loving flavour.

The water is the real draw here, so snorkelling, fishing, paddling, diving and sunset cruising are the order of the day. But you can fill the rest of your time with memorably quirky spots, plus a little eco-adventure thrown in for good measure. This tip sheet should keep you busy as you head for the southernmost tip of the continental U.S. and back.

Just remember, it’s the journey that matters — and splurging for the convertible Mustang is a no-brainer.

**For roadhouse-style refuelling:**

**The Fish House, Key Largo**

Make your first pit stop at this roadside icon serving right-off-the-boat grouper, yellowtail snapper, mahi mahi and more. At the Fish House, you can choose which type of fish you’d like, then how you want it prepared: grilled, blackened, breaded, pan sautéed, jerk or the signature Matecumbe-style (topped with tomatoes, shallots, basil, capers and lemon). Most of the Keys eateries have their own take on old favourites, including conch chowder, lobster done in myriad ways, stone crab and, naturally, key lime pie.

**For quiet time with a paddle:**

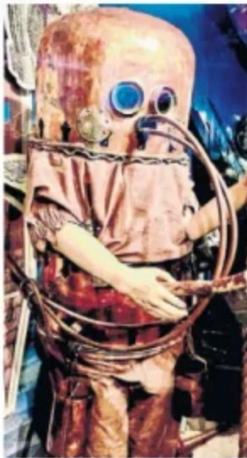
**John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, Key Largo**

Home of the famous “Christ of the Deep” underwater statue, John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park offers 70 nautical square miles of marine recreation. Explore aboard a high-speed glass-bottom catamaran, or go snorkelling and scuba diving along part of the only living coral reef system in the continental U.S. The expanse of mangrove wilderness also provides ample space for kayaks and paddleboards.

**For the complete scuba story:**

**History of Diving Museum, Islamorada**

Artifacts tell an international tale of adventures under the sea, and how the Florida Keys are a big part of the narrative, at the non-profit History of Diving Museum. Along with a thorough timeline of diving and a large collection of rare diving helmets, exhibits delve into the history of pioneering underwater photography, commercial diving and marine biology. A treasure room displays the loot of famous salvagers.



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Artifacts at the unusual History of Diving Museum tell an international tale of adventures.



VISIT FLORIDA

The public can meet sea turtles recovering at the Turtle Hospital in Marathon, Fla.

**For a quirky brush with nature:**

**Robbie’s Marina, Islamorada**

People have been stopping at Robbie’s Marina for years to buy a little bucket of fish to hand-feed the giant tarpon fish that gather at the pier specifically for this snack (little wonder they can weigh up to 275 pounds). You can also hop on a boat tour, rent a kayak, shop the outdoor market or chow down at the aptly named Hungry Tarpon restaurant, which will even cook your catch if you go fishing. (Bring earplugs to muffle the cries of the children not paying attention to the big sign: “The Pelicans Bite.”)

**For an eye-opening wildlife**

**experience: The Turtle Hospital, Marathon**

Kid-friendly educational tours at the Turtle Hospital introduce you to the resident loggerhead, green, hawksbill and Kemp’s ridley turtles. The small non-profit rescues and rehabilitates sea turtles suffering various sicknesses and injuries, including trauma caused by boats and fishing gear, and illness from water pollution. The public regularly turns out for the happy endings, too — cheering on the turtle releases, which have numbered more than 3,000 since the hospital opened in 1986. Book ahead.

DOUG WALLACE TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF THE FLORIDA KEYS AND KEY WEST, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.



KEMTER GETTY IMAGES

The Seven Mile Bridge leads drivers onto Marathon Key. The Overseas Highway is the longest over-water road in the world at 182 kilometres, complete with 42 bridges.

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