



NEWS

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44 Islands and 42 Bridges: A Florida Keys Road Trip

It's only 113 miles from Key Largo to Key West, but take it slow and savor the subtropical, sometimes kitschy, flavor, of these fragile isles.

Seagulls and squadrons of brown pelicans flew alongside my rented Hyundai as I drove across the astonishing seven-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 1 that runs across Moser Sound, just south of Marathon, in the Florida Keys. The proximity of birds and water blurred the distinctions between sea and sky, drive and flight.

The string of coral islands that arc from the Florida peninsula south toward Havana has a long history of attracting pirates, profiteers and seekers of a Caribbean lifestyle within the United States. Henry Flagler, an early developer of the Florida Keys, inadvertently gave the country one of its most scenic roadways when his Overseas Railway, running from mainland Florida down to Key West, was destroyed in a 1935 hurricane. That land route eventually became the Overseas Highway, or U.S. 1, vaulting across channels, and linking 44 islands, via 42 bridges.



I first drove the route with my sister in the early 1990s with a beer-filled cooler, tanning ambitions and the kind of dropout, sunbaked attitude that still drives the party crowd to the Keys, particularly Key West. The distractions along the way haven't changed much. Local police and sheriff's vehicles are still parked on the sides of the highway, jittery reminders that speed limits are strictly enforced. Cyclists share narrow shoulders over the 113-mile route from Key Largo to Key West. Manatee-shaped mailboxes, fishing marinas and seafood shacks proliferate. But most distracting are the views themselves, with the sparkling Atlantic to the left and the aquamarine Gulf of Mexico to the right as the road skips across scores of breezy, swim-inviting straits.



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| 1. Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park | 9. Curry Hammock State Park |
| 2. John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park | 10. Dolphin Research Center |
| 3. Fish House | 11. Bahia Honda State Park |
| 4. Bungalows Key Largo | 12. Big Pine Kayak Adventures |
| 5. Playa Largo Resort & Spa | 13. National Key Deer Refuge |
| 6. Robbie's | 14. Matt's Stock Island Kitchen & Bar |
| 7. Indian Key Historic State Park | |
| 8. Alligator Tree Lighthouse | |

Over the course of repeated trips, I've come to appreciate the nature and wildlife of the Keys, home to endangered Key deer, mangrove forests and the only living barrier reef off the continental United States.

Hurricane Irma, which struck in September 2017 with Category-4 fury, threatened the delicate balance by which so many humans and animals exist amid the mangroves and bays. In November — 14 months and much cleanup later — I drove the route to assess the scars as well as the renewal, from recently opened (or about to open) resorts to a new coterie of mermaids.

Below is a guide to this classic coastal road trip. You could drive it in a single afternoon, but you won't want to. Three languid days is more like it.

Islamorada

The everyday — in the form of schools, grocery stores and one very large Starbucks — mingled with signs for bird sanctuaries and state parks over the next 20 tropical miles from Key Largo to Islamorada.

Spread across six lush islands, the community has an old-money heritage and a reputation as the sport fishing capital of the Keys, both of which came together in the bonefishing tournament that the late President George H.W. Bush ran for a decade from [Cheeca Lodge & Spa](#), a vintage property with roots that go back to 1946. It's no wonder the recent Netflix series "Bloodline," a dark story built around a prominent Keys family, was based in affluent Islamorada.

https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/travel/key-west-road-trip.html?fbclid=IwAR1PG1voe5pYoIBZji_mJPBNGPmHHBrjqC1-rlwbtgNYbktS57VcKFel60