



NEWS



STAY

Great escapes

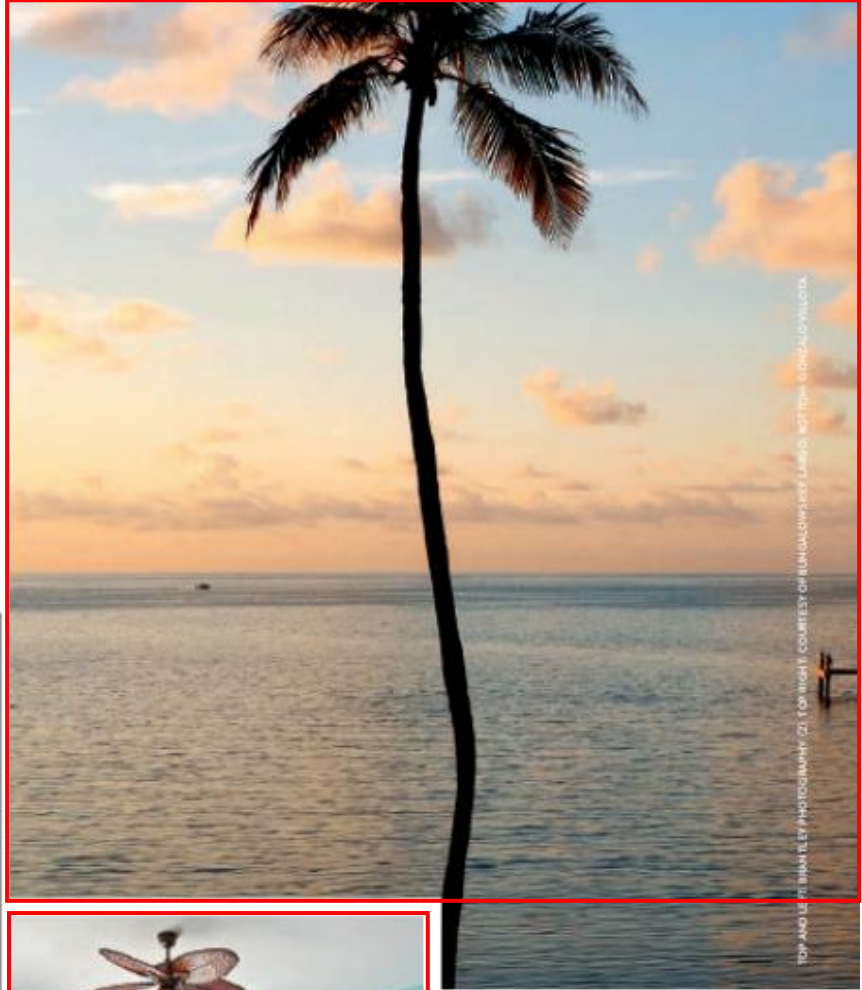
Two years after Hurricane Irma, the Florida Keys have rebounded with new hotels and a heightened level of luxury

The Florida Keys have always been a laid-back counterpoint to neighboring Miami. Extending 120 miles from Key Largo to Key West, this string of islands lies in the Florida Straits, between the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Known for its beaches, mangrove swamps, excellent fishing and rustic-boho sensibility, the archipelago is in the midst of a subtle but significant shift, which has picked up pace in the two years since Hurricane Irma left its trail of destruction.

The most visible aspect of this change is an increasing emphasis on luxury accommodations. The old roadside motels and RV lots are still there, of course, but alongside these are properties catering to those who want the flavor of the Keys but not the discomfort.

Closest to Miami is the Bungalows Key Largo, featuring 135 private cottages with wood-decked front porches accessorized with blue Adirondack chairs. Each 850-square-foot bungalow offers an outdoor terrace with circular soaking tub, double-pillow-top beds and 60-inch smart TV. All face either the garden or the bay.

The Bungalows' take on outdoor living is an infinity-edge pool fronting a man-made beach and bay, various champagne and Bloody Mary stations and a



TOP AND LEFT: BILLY BEY PHOTOGRAPHY; (2) TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF BUNGALOWS KEY LARGO; (3) TOP: THE CHEECA LODGE



Clockwise from top: Pier at Cheeca Lodge & Spa; Bogie & Bacall's restaurant at Bungalows Key Largo; terrace at Isla Bella Beach Resort; guest room at Cheeca Lodge



Cheeca. Amenities include see-through kayaks, water trikes, private guided Jet Ski tours, fishing, parasailing, tennis, golf, pickleball, basketball and beach volleyball. The rebuilt 525-foot pier—the longest in the Keys—provides stunning ocean views, and the premier restaurant Atlantic's Edge specializes in fresh seafood and prime steaks.

Just east of the famous Seven Mile Bridge lies the Isla Bella Beach Resort, the newest hotel to open in the Keys. Launched last spring, this 24-acre oceanfront expanse evokes a cool coastal beach house with luxurious amenities and a charming ambience. Each of the 199 guest rooms has a sea view, balcony and a warm blue-and-white color palette. With nearly a mile of private beach and 1,000 palm trees, the lushly landscaped property features tiki huts, hammocks, five pools, three bars, three restaurants and a full-service spa and fitness center.

While strolling around the property is a joy, there are also electric open-top cars for hop-on, hop-off transportation. Kayaks, paddleboards and bicycles are complimentary, and the concierge can arrange eco-kayak tours, scuba diving, sunset cruises and fishing excursions. Foodies will savor Il Postino, a Neapolitan-style Italian restaurant with a traditional wood-fired pizza oven, and The Beach Bar, with ocean-to-table tapas-style bites. Isla Bella's pet-friendly policy means that the family dog, too, can try out the new wave of Keys accommodations.

—JACQUELYNN POWERS MADRICE

THE REBUILT 525-FOOT PIER IS THE LONGEST IN THE KEYS.

state-of-the-art fitness center covered only by a straw *palapa*. Guests also have access to bicycles, kayaks, paddleboards and snorkeling equipment, along with fishing excursions, scuba-diving trips and sunset cruises. Food and drink options include elevated Mexican and margaritas at Sea Señor, creative seafood dishes at Bogie & Bacall's, and the waterside Sunset Tiki Bar.

Farther south is the grande dame of Keys hotels, Cheeca Lodge & Spa, which debuted in 1946. This historic property, which was frequented by Presidents Harry S. Truman and

George H.W. Bush, has withstood multiple hurricanes, most recently in 2017, when it was battered by Hurricane Irma with an eight-foot ocean surge. Cheeca Lodge reopened with a bright, modern decor that pays homage to its fishing-lodge heritage, but with an open feel and a green, coral and turquoise color scheme that reflects the islands' natural environment.

Cheeca Lodge appeals to everyone from honeymooners—who enjoy the adults-only pool and tropical cocktail culture—to families, with the environmentally focused kids' program Camp

