

WEEKEND

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THE NEW ISLAMORADA



LESS KITSCH, MORE HIP,
PAGE 6

WEEKEND GETAWAY

The 'new' Islamorada - not your father's key



CHRIS AMOROSO/FOR MIAMI.COM

The purple island, more than any other Key, is trading a bit of kitsch for a bit of hip - and it's working.



Florida Keys Brewing Company

BY BILL KEARNEY
Miami.com

Islamorada's kinda got it going on.

Somehow, without much fanfare, it's reached a tipping point where, because of a batch of new eateries and resorts, it feels like the "cool" Key.

That wasn't always the case — in the past, the town's venues had tried to out "Key" each other with tired nautical themes, conch shells galore, fried food and steak (not that there's anything wrong with steak.). Now you'll find two local beer producers, a global eatery with a whiskey bar, an olive oil shop, a taco spot that would be at home in Wynwood, serious sea-to-table cuisine, and a new crop of stylish places to crash.

A PLACE TO LAY YOUR HEAD

The property that arguably stated the uptick in Islamorada's hipness is Casa Morada (136 Madeira Rd., Islamorada; 305-664-0044; casamorada.com), a 16-room micro-resort renovated in 2003 where mid-century modern simplicity meets oversized palm fronds (think Margaritaville and more Palm Springs). Outdoor showers lead out to a Raymond Jungles-designed garden, which in turn leads to a bayside bar where sunsets will crush your cynicism. It's pet-friendly, yoga-friendly, cell phone-discouraging, and there are no kids under 16, all of which leads to a sense of camaraderie among guests. Don't leave without borrowing the free snorkeling gear to hang with the lobsters and snappers along the sea wall.

The renovation race picked up this year as both Amara Cay (8000 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-664-0073; amaracayresort.com) and Pelican Cove (84457 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-664-4435; pelicancovehotel.com) opened after profound gut rebuilds.

Amara was once a Hampton Inn with a big Outback Steakhouse. Now it's an open, airy boho-beachy 110-room hotel with interiors by Edge of Architecture out of Coral Gables. There's a tongue-in-cheek image of a square grouper on the back bar, earth tones all over the place, wood-finished flooring and a facade of beautiful cypress trunks in the lobby along with really fun basket chairs dangling from the ceiling. The place strikes a nice balance between elevating its environs, and keeping things accessible — families loaf at the pool while hip travelers snag beach chairs and veg out with views of the grass flats — more serene than anything on South Beach.

And the property is large enough to support a sophisticated restaurant, Oltremare Ristorante, which plates contemporary Italian fare. Chef Dario Oliveira sources clams from Cedar Key, runs up to Key Largo Farmers Market for fresh fish, and is keen on Homestead for produce. Pelican Cove, once an uninspired white-tile kinda place adjacent to the formerly notorious Holiday Isle (slated for a big renovation this fall), was gut-renovated last year and offers 66 rooms in a modernist rustic mood via sandy wood, pops of color, and surprisingly slick walk-in showers done in subway tile. Though not a huge property, it would be pretty easy just to chillax here—they've got a marina, a cool little pool area, paddleboards, and Wild & Lime, an eatery geared toward drinking while gazing at the ocean.

A PLACE TO FEED YOUR MOUTH

It's hard to keep culinary talent in a small town, and Islamorada is

certainly a small town, but chef Michael Ledwith chose to buck the trend. He opened **Chef Michael's** (81671 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-664-0640; foodtotal-kabou.com) three years ago, borrowing farm-to-table methods and applying them to the sea. His relationships with local captains bring left-of-center species such as tilefish, tripletail, snowy grouper, mystic grouper, hogfish, and even lionfish to the table. And don't leave without trying the chocolate mousse cake.

Though not new, **Pierre's** (81600 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-664-3225; moradabay.com/pierres/), across the street, was rumored to be for sale a few months back. Instead, the plantation-style restaurant procured a new chef, Ismael Toro (formerly of Miami's Novecento), who's bringing stuff such as mofongo lobster to the menu.

Just down US-1, **Oo-Tray** (80900 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-922-2027; ootray.com) aspires to "global cuisine with a local farm-to-table flavor" fueled by chef David Mallock, an alum of Thomas Keller's Bouchon in Yountville, Napa. He whips up outside-the-box items such as duck wings with bourbon and caramel; bahn mi sandwiches; and a bone-in pork entrée with bacon jam and pineapple chimichurri. The bar (above) is all about whiskey, with esoteric stuff like Willett and Belle Meade bourbon, and Balcones True Blue whiskey from Texas.

Hailing from Key West, **Bad Boy Burrito** (8368 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-440-3951) would work in Wynwood, but is instead hidden in the Village Square, a shady alcove behind the Trading Post. They opened last month and offer delicious



Olive Morada



JUAN FERNANDEZ / FOR MARLM.COM

A room inside Amara Cay Resort

Cal-Mex-style grub with a Floribbean influence. Try the Key West pink shrimp taco with charred pineapple habanero sauce, or the Baja fish tacos: beer-battered local mahimahi, shaved cabbage and chipotle aioli. Drinks rock as well, with offering such as local mango smoothies, star fruit juice, and Mexican ice coffee made with dulce de leche. Also in the

Village Square alcove sits **Urbn Grdn** (305-537-6770; urbngdn.org), a juice bar that moved from US-1 in early July, and crafts juices from South Florida produce. The Katy Pear (kale, pear cucumber, lime) and the Blue Maca (blueberry, banana, vanilla, fresh almond milk, maca) shine.

Just up the street find **Olive Morada** (82229 Overseas Hwy., Islamo-

da; 305-735-4375; olivemorada.com), an olive oil and gourmet emporium that opened in December. They've got 42 oils and balsamic vinegars, but be sure ask for a sample of the Jimmy Buffett special—Persian lime olive oil mixed with coconut white balsamic vinegar, and keep and eye out for other goods, like Key Lime Curd and wild hibiscus flowers in syrup.

Next door, the **Islamorada Beer Company** (82229 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada; 305-440-2162; islamoradabeerco.com), which brews upstate and opened its doors here in October, offering flights of brews like their Sandbar Sunday American Wheat Ale, or Channel Marker IPA, a light noted pale ale.

For a microbrewery that brews on-site, hit **Florida Keys Brewing Company** (200 Morada Way, Islamorada; 305-996-5206; floridakeysbrewingco.com), situated off the strip in a row of funky warehouses. Though they opened just five months ago, the tasting room already feels homey, and their brews are gaining local love. Try the Honey Bottomed Blonde, made with local Keys honey, or the Hogfish Amber, an American amber with floral and citrus notes. They've even occasionally age their Run Aground Brown ale in rum barrels for two months—if you're lucky they'll have some in stock.

Of course if you just have to get your fix of "old" Islamorada, then belly up to the bar during sunset at **Lorelei Restaurant & Cabana Bar** (96 Madeira Rd., Islamorada; 305-664-2692; loreleicabana-bar.com), watch the fishing charters pull in, and witness why this hamlet is known as a "quaint little drinking town with a fishing problem."



Bad Boy Burrito