

# Florida Keys

## a snorkelling road trip

The Florida Keys offer superb snorkelling opportunities, as **Lauren Jarvis** discovers on a tour taking in some of the region's natural wonders

For many visitors, a holiday in Florida means one thing: theme parks. But while almost 60 million visitors roll in to the rollercoaster capital of the world, Orlando, each year, the Sunshine State has a network of reefs and islands that offer a more natural experience. South of the bright lights and Art Deco delights of Miami, Florida reveals its flip-side, with

sun-drenched islands, golden beaches and marine marvels in shallow water.

The coral islets of the Florida Keys offer opportunities to snorkel or dive the days away with dolphins, turtles and sharks, while laid-back beach communities will embrace you like a local after your first spectacular sunset and slice of Key Lime Pie.

This archipelago of over 1,700 islands

stretches south west from the tip of mainland Florida, with the major isles linked by the 113-mile-long Overseas Highway, which stretches from Key Largo to the historical and cultural hub of Key West. Life here is inextricably linked to the ocean, the marinas buzzing with gleaming white boats and no shortage of dive centres.

Offshore lies the world's third-largest barrier reef, seagrass beds and mangroves, protected by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, which runs from south of Miami to the remote Dry Tortugas. And with more than 6,000 marine species out there, there are endless underwater wonders to discover.



Driving the Overseas Highway in style







Christ of the Abyss statue



French angelfish



Aerial image of Looe Key

### Stop 1: Key Largo

An hour's drive south of Miami, Key Largo is the first stop on my Florida Keys road trip. The archipelago's longest Key is the access point for John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the United States' first marine reserve, which covers 70 nautical square

miles of coral reefs, three to eight miles offshore. Key Largo has more than 100 dive sites – including several wrecks – many of them shallow enough for snorkellers.

Joining a tour with Horizon Divers, I head to Key Largo Dry Rocks Reef and slip into the warm, clear water to explore the Keys' famous man-made structure: the

3m-tall coral-sprouting statue, Christ of the Abyss, hands raised eternally to the heavens as it shimmers in the blue. Look out for green, hawksbill and loggerhead turtles, spotted eagle rays, schooling fish and barracudas swimming through the nearby gardens of elkhorn corals and purple sea fans.



Green turtle on the reef



Great Egret at Key Largo

### Stop 2: Big Pine Key

Lying within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, Looe Key Reef\* offers some of the most exciting snorkelling in the Florida Keys. Dive operators, including Captain Hook's in Big Pine Key, run regular boat trips to explore the Sanctuary Preservation Area, which helps to sustain critical marine habitat and species. Caribbean reef and nurse sharks, colossal groupers, spotted eagle rays, turtles and tarpons all swim amid the spur and groove formations; my morning snorkel tour reveals several reef sharks patrolling the sandy channels below.

Home to over 150 species of fish, exploring this stunning underwater realm reveals rainbow and midnight parrotfish, angelfish, yellowtail snapper, butterflyfish and shoals of inquisitive sergeant majors. Delicate Christmas tree worms also vie for attention with the U-shaped reef's 50 kinds of coral. A NOAA conservation initiative, Mission: Iconic Reefs, is working to re-establish elkhorn and staghorn thickets along the reef crest.

\* Site of the sinking of HMS Looe in 1744



Five-band surgeonfish





Aerial image of Key West, the southernmost point of continental USA

### Stop 3: Key West

The southernmost point of mainland USA, Key West is one of those places where people visit on holiday and end up staying for life: there's a character with a story in every bar, and distractions galore to enjoy when you're not off on an ocean adventure. There are plenty of operators to help you explore Key West – some more concerned with sangria

than snorkelling – but family-run Honest Eco offers (in)credible Dolphin Watch & Snorkel tours on their catamaran, *Squid*.

One of the first electric-powered passenger boats in the USA, running on lithium batteries and solar, this quiet vessel is perfectly adapted for an ethical encounter with the resident population of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins, which

ride the bow with abandon. With vegan food, a strict plastic-free policy, plus knowledgeable marine biologist snorkel guides, Honest Eco are the real deal. Their snorkel experience showed me another side of the Keys marine sanctuary: a beautiful sponge garden, with lobsters, crabs and starfish, plus an incredible sighting of a bonnethead shark.



Lined seahorse



Exploring a sponge reef





An aerial perspective on the lonely Dry Tortugas



Fort Jefferson



## Stop 4: Dry Tortugas

A 70-mile seaplane-hop [keywestseaplanecharters.com](http://keywestseaplanecharters.com) or ferry ride [drytortugas.com](http://drytortugas.com) from Key West, the Dry Tortugas National Park is a remote wonderland comprising of seven keys, plus the largest all-masonry fort in the USA, Fort Jefferson. Living up to its Spanish name, the region is a hotspot for turtles, which nest on its beaches from March to October. Five of the world's seven species of turtle can be found in southern Florida's seas, and the Tortugas' abundant coral reefs and

seagrass beds provide a playground for loggerhead, leatherback, green, hawksbill and Kemp's Ridley turtles.

Snorkelling so far from civilisation takes the thrill level up a notch, although even first-time snorkellers will enjoy the warm waters and more than 30 species of corals on display from just under the surface to a depth of five metres. With snorkel spots accessible from the sandy Fort Jefferson beach, highlights include the Windjammer wreck at Loggerhead Key, ruins of historic coaling docks, nurse sharks, octopuses, and thousands of tropical fish.

## Meet a manatee

Florida's warm waters are home to the West Indian manatee, and snorkellers can enjoy a close-up encounter with them at Crystal River, known as the Manatee Capital of the World. From mid-November until the end of March, as the sea temperature in the Gulf of Mexico drops, hundreds of manatees find sanctuary in the warm, spring-fed waters of Kings Bay and Three Sisters Springs on Florida's west coast. Now a National Wildlife Refuge established to protect the manatees, this is the only place in North America where it's legal to swim with the marine mammals. Join an early-morning guided snorkel tour with Plantation on Crystal River Adventure Center [plantationadventurecenter.com](http://plantationadventurecenter.com) to watch them graze the seagrass beds in the calm, shallow waters of the bay.



PHOTO: ALEX TATTERSALL





## Topside attractions

The Florida Keys are as beautiful above the waves as below, with clean, golden beaches and some captivating sanctuaries and attractions to explore. Not far from Key Largo, the spectacular UNESCO World Heritage Site, Everglades National Park,

covers 1.5 million acres of subtropical wilderness, including wetlands, mangroves and the stunning Ten Thousand Islands [nps.gov/ever](https://www.nps.gov/ever) On Big Pine Key, the lush National Key Deer Refuge [fws.gov/refuge/national-key-deer](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/national-key-deer) protects the Keys' small, endemic species



Key deer



Marathon  
Turtle Hospital

## Essentials

**When to go:** The Florida Keys enjoy a tropical climate with hot summers and mild winters, a wet season from May to October, and a hurricane season from June to November. Key West has an average high temperature of 28°C, and a low of 23°C, with water temperatures reaching a high of 31°C in August and a low of around 21°C in January.

**Getting there:** Airlines including Virgin Atlantic [virginatlantic.com](https://www.virginatlantic.com) American Airlines [aa.com](https://www.aa.com) and British Airways [britishairways.com](https://www.britishairways.com) fly non-stop from the UK to Miami. Flights with Virgin Atlantic start from £357 return.

### Eats and treats

**Miami:** Nikki Beach Miami [miami-beach.com](https://www.miami-beach.com)

**Key Largo:** Sundowners [sundownerskeylargo.com](https://www.sundownerskeylargo.com)

Islamorada: Ciao Hound [ciaohound84.com](https://www.ciaohound84.com)

**Marathon:** Key Largo Conch House [keylargoconchhouse.com](https://www.keylargoconchhouse.com)

Butterfly Café [tranquilitybay.com](https://www.tranquilitybay.com)

**Key West:** Opal Key Resort & Marina's Bistro 245

[opalcollection.com](https://www.opalcollection.com)

Sloppy Joe's

[sloppyjoes.com](https://www.sloppyjoes.com)  
Old Town Tavern & Beer Garden  
[oldtowntavernkw.com](https://www.oldtowntavernkw.com)

### Operators:

**Key Largo:** Horizon Divers  
[horizondivers.com](https://www.horizondivers.com)

**Marathon:** Captain Hook's

of deer, and more than 20 species of endangered plants and animals. Big Pine Kayak Adventures offers fascinating paddling ecotours of the Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge with naturalist guide, Captain Bill Keogh  
[keyskayaktours.com](https://www.keyskayaktours.com)

In Marathon, be sure to visit The Turtle Hospital to learn more about the rescue, rehabilitation and release of the region's sick or injured turtles [turtlehospital.org](https://www.turtlehospital.org) and take some time out in the party town of Key West to explore The Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum [hemingwayhome.com](https://www.hemingwayhome.com) where the author penned some of his best-loved works, including For Whom the Bell Tolls, when he wasn't downing Papa Dables in the town's now-iconic Sloppy Joe's bar. Before you leave, head out on a Wind & Wine cruise with Danger Charters [dangercharters.com](https://www.dangercharters.com) to see your last sunset over the Keys.

[captainhooks.com](https://www.captainhooks.com)

**Big Pine Key:** Big Pine Kayak Adventures  
[keyskayaktours.com](https://www.keyskayaktours.com)

**Key West:** Sebago Watersports  
[keywestsebago.com](https://www.keywestsebago.com) ;

Honest Eco [honesteco.org](https://www.honesteco.org)

### Where to stay:

**Miami:** Arlo Wynwood  
[arlohotels.com/wynwood](https://www.arlohotels.com/wynwood)

**Key Largo:** Bay Harbour & Coconut Bay  
[bayharborkeylargo.com](https://www.bayharborkeylargo.com)

**Islamorada:** Postcard Inn Dive Resort & Marina [holidayisle.com](https://www.holidayisle.com)

**Marathon:** Banana Bay Resort & Marina  
[bananabay.com](https://www.bananabay.com)

**Key West:** The Gardens Hotel  
[gardenshotel.com](https://www.gardenshotel.com)

**Tour operator:** Specialist North America tour operator, America As You Like It, offers a 10-night Florida holiday from £2,359 per person, based on two sharing, including return flights from London Heathrow to Miami with Virgin Atlantic, 10 days fully inclusive car hire, two nights at the Arlo Wynwood in Miami, two nights at the Bay Harbour & Coconut Bay in Key Largo, two nights at the Postcard Inn Dive Resort & Marina in Islamorada, two nights at the Banana Bay Resort & Marina in Marathon and two nights at The Gardens Hotel in Key West.  
[americasyoulikeit.com](https://www.americasyoulikeit.com) / 020 8742 8299

**Further information:** Discover more snorkelling and scuba diving destinations in Florida at [visitflorida.com](https://www.visitflorida.com) and find out more about the Florida Keys at [fla-keys.co.uk](https://www.fla-keys.co.uk). Download the free Visit USA 2023 Travel Planner at [visitusa.org.uk](https://www.visitusa.org.uk) 