

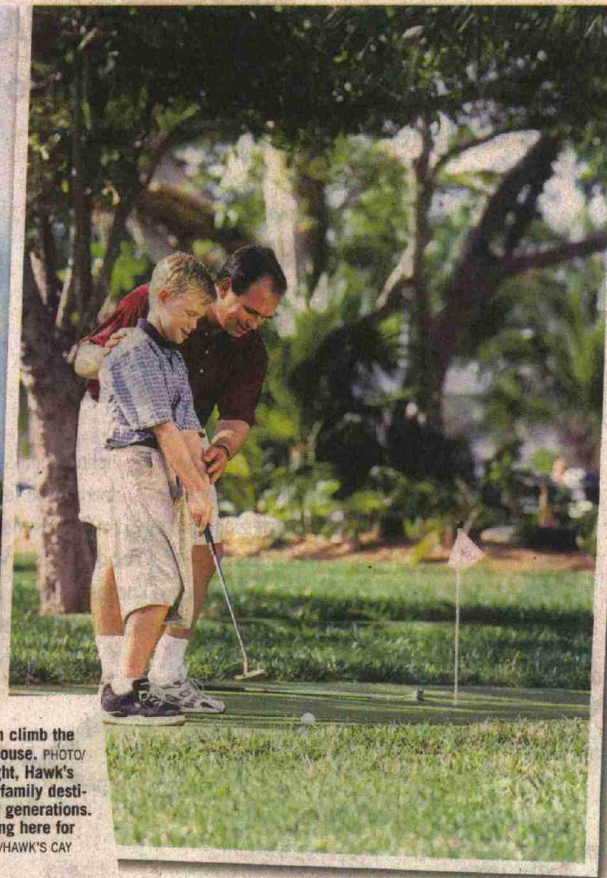
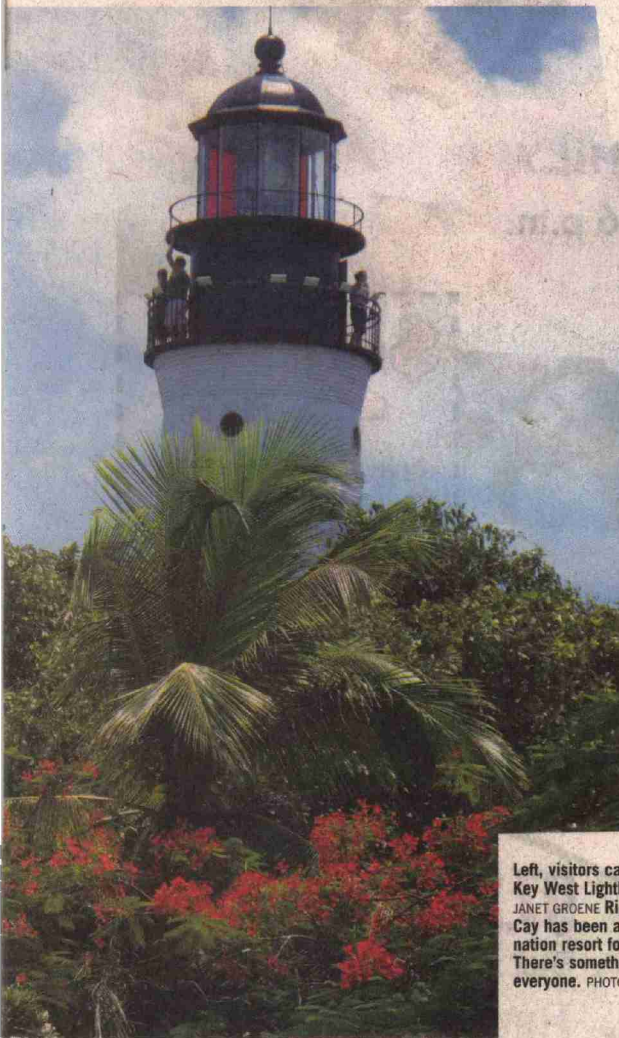
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The Florida Keys

A SMART SUMMER DESTINATION FOR SOUTH FLORIDA FAMILIES

BY JANET GROENE

Scuba diving, boardsailing, offshore sport fishing, eco-tourism, sandcastle-building. When it comes to sea sports and nature study, the Florida Keys shine brightest in summer when waters



Left, visitors can climb the Key West Lighthouse. PHOTO/ JANET GROENE Right, Hawk's Cay has been a family destination resort for generations. There's something here for everyone. PHOTO/HAWK'S CAY



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Accommodations at Hawk's Cay range from hotel rooms to tropical villas. Below, while you're in the Keys, try every eatery's key lime pie and vote on the best one. PHOTOS/CASA MARINA, HAWK'S CAY



are warmer and clearer. There's a good chance summer rates are discounted at your favorite family resort, and your fellow travelers are more likely to be savvy seadogs rather than those pesky snowbirds. Best of all, the islands are only a few gallons of gas away.

Whether you come for fishing, festivals, bargain camping, a deluxe resort or educational travel, this chain of islands hold the key. Sure it's hot during the day, but the Keys are cooler than the mainland thanks to steady sea breezes and, on most days, afternoon showers.

No matter where you stay in the Keys, you're never far from a charter boat skipper or outfitter who can take you bone fishing in the flats, deep-sea fishing, diving, sea kayaking or on some other outdoor adventure. You're never far from a nature preserve or wildlife rescue operation. Historic spots dot the Keys, too, going back to days when only a handful of islands were inhabited and reachable only by water.

So, what's here for South Florida families?

THE MIDDLE KEYS

Stop in Islamorada on the way down for great seaside dining and a visit to the massive Bass ProShop. There's a big selection of gear for campers, anglers and boaters plus gifts, sportswear, books, an art gallery, footwear and a sister ship of Pilar, Hemingway's immortal fishing boat. Kids

are welcome to go aboard. Snap their picture at the ship's wheel. In the heart of the Keys at MM 61, Hawk's Cay Resort is a 60-acre destination, an upscale family resort favorite for four or more generations. Accommodations range from oversized hotel rooms to spacious suites and villas with up to four bedrooms. Do some of your own cooking if you like and dine in a choice of on-site eateries, including the sophisticated Alma, the Beach Grill or Tom's Harbor House for steaks and seafood. Expect all the features of an AAA Four Diamond resort; it's also a member of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts family.

Kids love the many swimming pools and the big choice of supervised activities for groups ages 5 to 8, 9 to 12 and 13 to 17. While other Keys resorts offer children's programs sometimes, Camp Hawk offers supervised programs daily. There's also a spa, Snuba (a cross between snorkeling and scuba diving), Segway tours,

tennis and tennis instruction. Golf can be arranged. The resort has an extensive water sports menu, including self-drive equipment, crewed offshore sport fishing and guided light tackle fishing inshore.

Marathon, the Keys major settlement (hospital, supermarkets, hardware store), offers accommodations in all price ranges plus restaurants, activities, marinas and much more. Spend a day at 63-acre Crane Point Museum and Nature Center to hike the trails, see wildlife, learn about life cycles in the Butterfly Garden and see the hospital where more than 6,000 birds have been rescued, treated and, where possible, returned to the wild.

Island Hoppers helicopter tours leave from the Marathon airport for sightseeing the exquisite Keys shorelines, charters, looking over the Everglades or a trip to Cabbage Key in Pine Isle Sound. The Key has some small Calusa Indian mounds and a historic resort where lunch is included in the flight package.



Robbie's Marina at Islamorada is one of the Keys' tarpon feeding stations. Buy a bucket of bait, and let these magnificent fish come and get it. PHOTO: JANET GROENE

20th-century historic spots such as Harry Truman's Winter White House. It's a long drive to the end of the road, but because Key West also has air service and is a cruise ship stop, many visitors see it without driving the Overseas Highway.

On your first day, take one of the train or trolley tours even if you've been here before. Key West is primarily a walking or bicycling city, so taking a tour first is good orientation. Besides, drivers' patter is informative and funny. Climb the lighthouse. See butterflies in all life stages at the Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory. Take a sand sculpture workshop. Be on hand for shark and turtle feeding times at the Key West Aquarium.

Take a seaplane or high-speed ferry out to Fort Jefferson to explore its dark dungeons and hear its roistering history. If you're on a day trip, bring a picnic and swim gear. If you want to camp overnight, plan carefully because everything must be brought with you.

Sightseeing in Key West could fill many days, each of them ending with the funky Sunset ritual at Mallory Square. There are also endless outdoors and sports activities, special events and temporary museum exhibits. Through early 2012, a special exhibit at the Key West Museum of Art and History depicts the history of the railroad that ran the length of the Keys

from 1912 until it was destroyed in a hurricane that killed hundreds.

A good choice for a family stay in Key West is the elegant, historic 1920s-era Casa Marina Waldorf-Astoria Resort. It has two sparkling swimming pools, a choice of dining venues, spa, a long list of watercraft rentals and 1,100 feet of private, sandbox beach. If you have a lucky day angling, the chef will prepare your catch for dinner. Another good choice is the Westin Sunset Key, a separate island with its own beach, spa, fine dining, activities and fully equipped cottages. It's cumbersome to take the free ferry in and out, but the island setting keeps the family together. The key is especially popular for family reunions.

Janet Groene is a professional award-winning travel writer. She blogs for campers and RV travelers at www.campandrvcook.blogspot.com.

IF YOU GO

For more information: Visit www.fl-keys.com or call 800-352-5397.

Getting there: Drivers note that the last leg of Florida's Turnpike, known as the Homestead Extension, now accepts only electronic toll payments between exits 1 and 47. If you don't have Sunpass, get it at one of the turnpike plazas on your way south.

It's hard to beat the scenic drive down the Overseas Highway, but those in a hurry can fly into Marathon and Key West. Greyhound has three departures from Miami Airport to the Keys and a sea ferry runs to Key West from Ft. Myers and Marco Island.

Finding your way: Addresses in the Keys are expressed in mile markers that are clearly displayed along the highway. If you're going to MM 88.8, it's 88.8 miles north of Key West. If you're southbound at MM 50 and want to go to MM 45, you know you have five more miles to go. At wider places along the highway, addresses are also indicated as Bayside (Florida Bay) or Oceanside.

If you're a boater, note that many Keys resorts have marinas. Cruise in, dock and use the boat for exploring and fishing while staying in a first-class resort.