



Indulge./Travel/

On the Road

Movin' Up in the Keys

Popular islets get buffed and shined

FLORIDA'S KEYS have long drawn mainstream dropouts, from Blackbeard to Jimmy Buffett. But the landscape has changed in the past year or so as resorts have renovated and upscaled, putting new polish on the stereotypically scruffy islets scattered along the Overseas Highway southwest of Miami. Roadside kitsch remains, but we've done the legwork to find the best detours, guides, buys, and eats — as well as the upgraded stays — that refine this classic road trip. — ELAINE GLUSAC



KEY WEST

Checking in: The biggest tourist draw in the Keys has grown up significantly with the upgrade of three resorts. In 2009, Hilton Worldwide spent \$85 million to promote two Key West classics to Waldorf-Astoria status, including the 1920s-era, 311-room **Casa Marina** (Mile Marker 0), which was restored to grandeur with a light-filled lobby, lush landscaping, and reflecting pools separating two swimming pools. Rooms from \$229. 888-303-5717, casamarinaresort.com

RELAX: A new four-bedroom Sunset Key Guest Cottage with private pool

Hilton Worldwide also overhauled the Casa Marina's breezier neighbor, **The Reach**. It relocated the lobby and trimmed the 150 rooms in coconut-shell headboards and tropical tones. Just off the hotel's beach — the islet's best stretch of sand — a branch of the Manhattan steak-centric **Strip House** makes a seductive date-night destination with bordello-inspired décor designed by David Rockwell. Rooms from \$249. 888-318-4316, reachresort.com

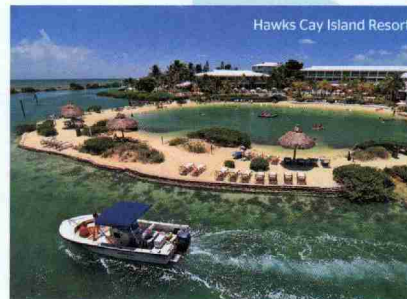
From the harbor next to carnival-esque Mallory Square, it's a tranquil seven-minute boat ride to Westin's **Sunset Key Guest Cottages** on secluded, 27-acre Sunset Key. In 2010, the resort added two four-bedroom cottages, each with its own plunge pool and island décor. The new spa soothes waiting customers with melted chocolate shots, and the restaurant, **Latitudes**, offers refined fare in a relaxed

setting open to the ocean breezes. Cottages from \$795. 305-292-5300, westinsunsetkeycottages.com

The find: Sun-kissed coastal paintings by island Impressionist Peter Vey at **Gallery on Greene**, where Key West native Nance Frank represents the islet's best artists. Also, eye the work of model-boat builder Bruce McGarey, writer-turned-painter Annie Dillard, and the late Mario Sanchez, the highly collected Cuban folk artist. 305-294-1669, galleryongreene.com

Insider tip: The best of Key West, from a natural perspective, lies offshore in 200,000 acres of water and undeveloped islets deemed the Key West National Wildlife Refuge. Captain Victoria Impallomeni of **Dancing Dolphin Spirit Charters** (MM 5) guides custom tours there in her 25-foot powerboat to spot dolphins and visit deserted islets. From \$500 for up to six people. 888-822-7366, captainvictoria.com

THE MIDDLE AND LOWER KEYS



Checking in: The 425-room **Hawks Cay Island Resort** on Duck Key (MM 61) channels the spirit of all the Keys on a 60-acre islet. A \$35 million refurbishment includes newly decorated rooms with expansive glass showers, new kiteboarding and stand-up paddling programs, and a fire pit that is the center of resort social life after dark. Among the generous amenities: an extensive spa offering everything from boot-camp fitness classes to caviar facials, a marina harboring a kayak-to-cabin-cruiser fleet, a Cliff Drysdale tennis academy, a beach-ringed swimming lagoon, and a dolphin swim program. Rooms from \$199. 888-395-5539, hawkscay.com

The find: Private dinners at the new Chef's Table at **Little Palm Island Resort & Spa** (MM 28.5), a 30-room luxury resort located on Little Torch Key, where private parties — non-guests welcome — toast on five to seven courses while watching chef Luis Pous and team at work. 800-343-8567, littlepalmisland.com

Insider tip: Keys kayak guide Bill Keogh, owner of **Big Pine Kayak Adventures** on Big Pine Key (MM 30), wrote the book, literally, on paddling the backcountry. Book his tour to Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge to stroke among mangrove islands; nurseries for stingrays, sharks, and sea turtles; and rookeries for wading birds. Rates from \$50 per person for three hours. 305-872-7474, keyskayaktours.com



DINE: Seared scallop from the Chef's Table at Little Palm Island Resort & Spa



MICHAEL MARRERO (COTTAGE); KEVIN WIS (SCALLOP)



Cheeca Lodge & Spa

ISLAMORADA

Checking in: Following a devastating fire that shut it down for nearly a year, the popular 1946-vintage **Cheeca Lodge & Spa** (MM 82) reopened last year with a 212-room, \$38 million LEED-certified inn. There's still plenty of history — black-and-white photos in the corridors attest to its fame — but the improvements, including soaking tubs on oceanfront balconies and showers with floor-to-ceiling views outdoors, have boosted the pampering factor of the 27-acre resort. Diversions abound, from a nine-hole Jack Nicklaus golf course and six tennis courts to a saltwater lagoon stocked with reef fish. Rooms from \$199. 800.327.2888; cheeca.com

The find: A "grand slam" — tarpon, permit, and bonefish — hooked in the backcountry

flats and via boat charters from the marina at **World Wide Sportsman** (MM 815), a warehouse-sized fantasy store for fishermen. From \$375 for two for a half-day. 305-664-4615; basspro.com

Insider tip: Keys cuisine tends to the casual, making **Pierre's Restaurant** (MM 816) a dinner destination for those seeking style both on the plate — try the hogfish meuniere — and in the décor, featuring Moroccan and Indian artifacts in a West Indies-style great house. 305-664-3225; pierres-restaurant.com



KEY LARGO

Checking in: A boutique hideaway on the first islet of a southbound trip, **Kona Kai Resort and Gallery** (MM 978) will open a small but diverse botanic garden — two acres of lush tropical plantings surrounding 13 rooms — in March. A smart-phone app is in the works to introduce visitors to the bamboo gardens, Zombie palm, fruit trees, and bromeliads on property. Rooms from \$259. 800-365-7829; konakaioresort.com

The find: The latest batch of cargo ship paintings by Dutch artist Dirk Verdoorn in

the **Kona Kai Gallery**, a European-focused showcase that stands out from the common Keys kitsch.

Insider tip: Preserving the only living reef in the continental United States, **John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** (MM 1025) offers popular 2 1/2-hour snorkel tours to the inner reef three or four miles offshore. But rangers recommend the park's little-known boat-rental program; you can then troll the coral heads as far as six miles from shore in a 20- or 23-foot powerboat. Rentals start at \$160 for four hours; \$359 for eight. 305-451-6300; pennekamppark.com



EXPLORE: From top, brain coral in John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park; and artist Dirk Verdoorn's painting *Pride* at Kona Kai Gallery

NICK GREAVES/LAMY (CORAL)