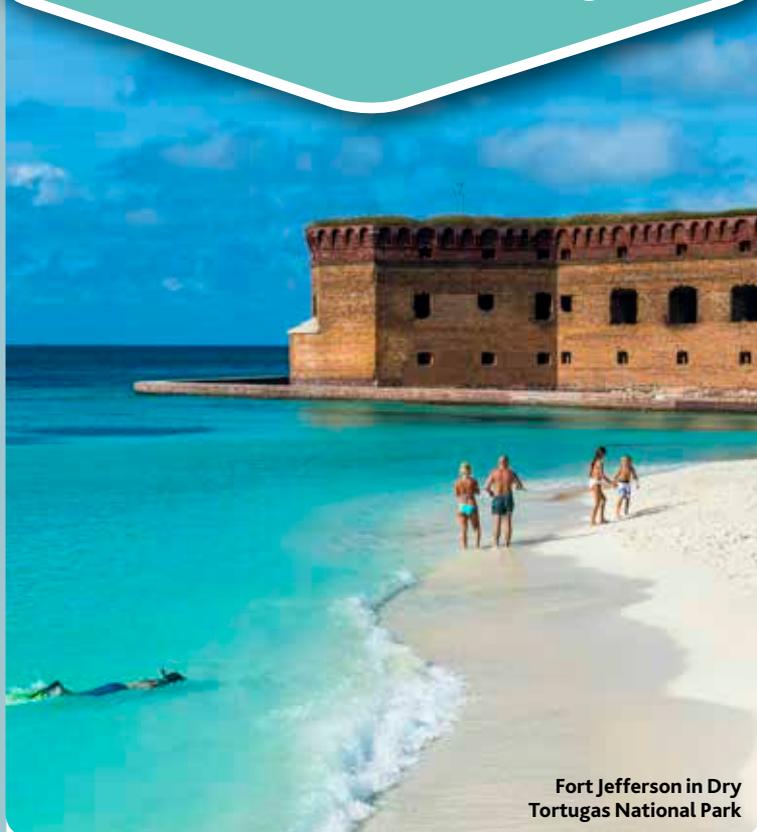


# Outdoors in the Florida Keys



Fort Jefferson in Dry Tortugas National Park

*Sandbar islands, turquoise water and deep green mangroves: the Florida Keys is ideally equipped for wonderful outdoor experiences. This guide picks out the best activities at the Sunshine State's south tip.*

## 👁️ SIGHTS

### Bahia Honda State Park (bahiahondapark.com; Mile 37)

This park, with its long, white-sand (and at times seaweed-strewn) beach, named Sandspur Beach by locals, is the big attraction in these parts. As Keys beaches go, this is probably the best natural stretch of sand in the island chain. There's also the novel experience of walking on the old Bahia Honda Rail Bridge, which offers nice views of the surrounding islands. Heading out on kayaking adventures is another great way to spend a sun-drenched afternoon.

### Blue Hole (off Mile 30.5)

This little pond (and former quarry) is now the largest freshwater body in the Keys.

That's not saying much, but the hole is a pretty little dollop of blue (well, algal green) surrounded by a small path and information signs. The water is home to turtles, fish and wading birds. A quarter-mile further along the same road is Watson's Nature Trail (less than 1 mile long) and Watson's Hammock, a small Keys forest habitat.

### Dry Tortugas National Park (nps.gov/drto)

Dry Tortugas National Park is America's most inaccessible national park. Reachable only by boat or seaplane, it rewards you for your effort in getting there with amazing snorkelling amid coral reefs full of marine life. You'll also get to tour a beautifully preserved 19th-century brick fort, one of the

largest such fortifications in the USA despite its location 70 miles off the coast of Key West.

### Indian Key Historic State Park (floridastateparks.org/indiankey)

This quiet island was once a thriving city, complete with a warehouse, docks, streets, a hotel and about 40 to 50 permanent residents. There's not much left at the historic site – just the foundation, some cisterns and jungly tangle. Arriving by boat or kayak is the only way to visit. Robbie's Marina hires out kayaks for the paddle out here – around 30 minutes one way in calm conditions.

### John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park (pennekamp.com)

John Pennekamp has the singular distinction of being the first underwater park in the USA. There's 170 acres of dry parkland here and over 48,000 acres (75 sq miles) of wet: the vast majority of the protected area is the ocean. Before you get out in that water (there are kayaking, snorkelling, boating and diving providers) be sure to take in some pleasant beaches and stroll over the nature trails.

### Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory (keywestbutterfly.com; 1316 Duval St)

This vast domed conservatory lets you stroll through a lush, enchanting garden of flowering plants, tiny waterfalls, colourful birds and up to 1,800 fluttering butterflies made up of over 50 different species – all live imports from around the globe.

### Laura Quinn Wild Bird Sanctuary (keepthemflying.org)

This seven-acre sanctuary is a refuge for a wide variety of injured birds. A boardwalk leads through various enclosures where you can learn about some of the permanent residents – those unable to be released back in the wild. The species include masked boobies, great horned owls, green herons, brown pelicans, double-crested cormorants and others. The same organisation also

runs a bird hospital just south along the main highway.

### Long Key State Recreation Area (floridastateparks.org/park/ Long-Key)

The 965-acre Long Key State Recreation Area is much of Long Key. It's about 30 minutes south of Islamorada, and comprises a tropical clump of gumbo-limbo, crabwood and poisonwood trees; a picnic area fronting a long, lovely sweep of teal water; and lots of wading birds in the mangroves. Two short nature trails head through distinct plant communities. The park also has a 1.5-mile canoe trail through a saltwater tidal lagoon and rents out ocean-going kayaks.

### National Key Deer Refuge Headquarters (fws.gov/refuge/National\_Key\_ Deer\_Refuge)

What would make Bambi cuter? Mini Bambi. Introducing the Key deer, an endangered subspecies of white-tailed deer that prance about here. The folks here are an incredibly helpful source of information on the deer and all things Keys. The refuge sprawls over several islands, but the sections open to the public are on Big Pine and No Name.

## Don't miss

The best way to see the Keys is from the water. Garl's is an excellent ecotour operator that gets customers into the Everglades backcountry and mangrove islets of Florida Bay via kayak and canoe. It also provides reasonable equipment rentals (garlscostalkayaking.com).



## OUTDOORS IN THE FLORIDA KEYS



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- 9 National Key Deer Refuge Headquarters
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- 11 Conch On Inn
- 12 Deer Run Bed & Breakfast
- 13 Lime Tree Bay Resort Motel
- 14 Mermaid & the Alligator
- 15 Sea Dell Motel

TOP PICKS

## 🛏 Sleeping

### Bay Harbour Lodge

Best for value  
([bayharborkeylargo.com](http://bayharborkeylargo.com))  
This property has its own private beach and tropical gardens alive with birdsong.

### Conch On Inn

Best for wildlife spotting  
([conchoninn.com](http://conchoninn.com))  
A motel popular with yearly snowbirds, Conch On Inn has simple, cheerfully painted rooms. Look for manatees: up to 14 have been spotted off the dock here!

£ **Deer Run Bed & Breakfast** £££  
Best for picturesque views  
([deerrunfloridabb.com](http://deerrunfloridabb.com))  
This state-certified green lodge is isolated on a lovely stretch of Long Beach Dr and the views from the garden are stunning.

£ **Lime Tree Bay Resort Motel** ££  
Best for sports lovers  
([limetreebayresort.com](http://limetreebayresort.com))  
Balconies overlook the water and there's access to tennis courts, bikes and kayaking and several other water activities.

£££ **Mermaid & the Alligator** £££  
Best for modern luxury  
([kwmermaid.com](http://kwmermaid.com))  
Each of the nine rooms is individually designed with a great mix of modern comfort and Keys Colonial ambience.

££ **Sea Dell Motel** ££  
Best for a family holiday  
([seadellmotel.com](http://seadellmotel.com))  
Bright, low-slung rooms have a pastel color scheme and floral bedspreads. A small pool entices after a day exploring.



### FURTHER READING

Our *Florida* guidebook (£15.99) has a chapter on Florida Keys and Key West, which you can also download as a separate PDF (£2.99).