



48 HOURS IN

Key West

SLOW DOWN · STAY AWHILE

WELCOME

Welcome to Key West.

Key West is the last island in a 125-mile chain of coral and limestone that trails off the tip of Florida into the Gulf of Mexico. It is 90 miles from Cuba, four miles long, and two miles wide. You cannot drive any further south in the continental United States. The island has been, at various points, a wrecking capital, a cigar manufacturing centre, a sponge-diving hub, a military outpost, and the home of Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, and a long tradition of artists, writers, and people who needed to be somewhere the mainland could not easily reach them.

What remains today is one of the most distinctive small cities in America. The Old Town historic district — 3,000 Victorian-era homes in a grid of narrow streets shaded by banyans and royal poinciana — is a genuine architectural treasure largely free of the franchise development that has consumed most of Florida. The water on both sides of the island is clear, warm, and sits on the only living coral reef in the continental US. The food has improved dramatically in the past decade without losing the Cuban and Keys traditions that define the island's culinary identity.

Key West is an excellent destination for solo travel. The island is small enough to cover on foot or by bicycle. The bar and music culture on Duval Street is one of the most genuinely social in any American city — strangers talk to each other without the usual metropolitan reserve. The water activities (snorkeling, kayaking, sunset sailing) are individually paced and naturally social. The nightly Sunset Celebration at Mallory Square is the most welcoming public ritual in Florida. Arrive without a rigid plan.

DAY ONE

Day One

Old Town · Hemingway Home · Duval Street · Fort Zachary Taylor · Sunset Celebration

Day One covers the historic core of Old Town on foot, ending with the island's defining daily ritual at the waterfront.

MORNING · 8:00 AM - 1:00 PM

8:00 AM

Early Morning Walk — Old Town Streets

The streets of Old Town before 9am are the best version of Key West: quiet, lit by the early sun filtering through the banyan trees, and occupied only by locals walking to work and roosters (the island's feral chicken population numbers in the thousands). Walk Whitehead, Fleming, and Simonton Streets south from Duval — the Victorian conch houses, white picket fences, and tropical planting are as good as anything in the country. The architecture is largely intact because Key West was too economically depressed to demolish anything for most of the 20th century.

9:00 AM

Breakfast: Sandy's Cafe

1026 White Street, Key West: the most authentic Cuban breakfast counter on the island — a walk-up window attached to the M&M; Laundry on White Street, open since the 1950s. Cuban coffee (cafe con leche or the devastating colada), Cuban toast with butter, and the best breakfast sandwich in the Keys. Under \$8. Cash preferred.

10:00 AM

Hemingway Home & Museum

907 Whitehead Street: Ernest Hemingway bought this 1851 Spanish Colonial home in 1931 and lived here until 1939, writing *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* on the property. The house, pool, and writing studio above the carriage house are all accessible on guided tours. The six-toed cats — direct descendants of Hemingway's original polydactyl cats — are the authentic attraction; 50+ live on the grounds. \$16 admission; tours run every 30 minutes.

Insider Tip The writing studio above the carriage house — reached by a suspended walkway from the second-floor balcony — is where Hemingway did most of his serious work. The studio is preserved largely as he left it. The pool (first in Key West, built for \$20,000 in 1938 — a sum that caused a legendary argument) still contains salt water pumped from the ocean two blocks away.

11:30 AM

Southernmost Point Buoy

Corner of South Street and Whitehead Street: the 1983 concrete buoy marking the southernmost point in the continental United States, 90 miles from Cuba. Tourist trap and genuine landmark simultaneously. The queue for the photograph is 30 minutes by 10am on weekends — go at 8am or after 4pm. Free.

AFTERNOON · 12:00 PM - 6:00 PM

12:00 PM

Lunch: Blue Heaven

729 Thomas Street, Bahama Village: the quintessential Key West lunch experience — an outdoor courtyard restaurant under century-old mango trees with roosters wandering between tables. Shrimp tacos, blackened fish, and the house rum punch. A cats and chickens social ecosystem that Hemingway himself frequented when the building was a boxing ring and brothel. Arrive before noon on weekends to avoid a wait. \$15-25.

2:00 PM

Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park

End of Southard Street: the best beach in Key West on the Atlantic side of the island — a small protected cove with clear shallow water, a sand-and-rock bottom, and a well-preserved Civil War fortress completed in 1866. Snorkeling off the rocks on the west side of the fort reveals the beginning of the reef system. \$6 per person admission. Bring snorkel gear (rental at the park); bring a cooler as there is no food vendor on-site.

Insider Tip The fort itself — a three-story brick structure built during the Civil War that allowed the Union to maintain control of Key West throughout the war despite Florida's secession — contains the largest collection of Civil War cannons in the US. The guided tour (included) takes 45 minutes and is genuinely interesting. The view from the top parapet across the Straits of Florida toward Cuba is the best elevated view on the island.

4:00 PM

Happy Hour: Louie's Backyard

700 Waddell Avenue: the best bar setting in Key West — a Victorian house with a wood deck cantilevered over the Atlantic. Happy hour 4-6pm. Conch fritters, rum drinks, and one of the cleanest water views in the Keys. The AfterDeck bar on the lower level is open until 1am. Come for happy hour; stay for the sunset.

EVENING · 6:00 PM - LATE

6:30 PM

Mallory Square — Sunset Celebration

The northwest corner of the island at the foot of Duval Street: Key West's nightly street festival marking the sunset — jugglers, psychics, trained-cat acts, escape artists, and 200 to 2,000 people applauding the sun entering the Gulf of Mexico. The celebration begins 90 minutes before sunset and continues 30 minutes after. Free. The best spot is the north edge of the square looking west-northwest; the waterfront restaurants and bars immediately adjacent are overpriced — eat before you arrive.

8:00 PM

Dinner: Seven Fish

632 Olivia Street: the best small restaurant in Key West — a narrow, 10-table room with wood-plank walls, a short menu of impeccably prepared fresh fish and pasta, and no pretension whatsoever. The grouper, the Key West pink shrimp, and the house pasta are all consistent. Cash only; reserve by phone at (305) 296-2777. Dinner for one: \$40-55. One of the best value meals in the Florida Keys.

DAY TWO

Day Two

Key West Cemetery · Reef Snorkel · Dry Tortugas Option · Old Town · Duval

Day Two is built around the water — the reef system that makes Key West unique in the continental US — with time in the afternoon for the island's quieter cultural attractions.

MORNING · 7:30 AM - 1:00 PM

7:30 AM

Key West Cemetery

Margaret Street between Angela and Frances: one of the most distinctive cemeteries in the United States — 19 acres in the geographic centre of Old Town, with 100,000 burials in above-ground vaults (the island's coral bedrock is too shallow to dig). The epitaphs are famously irreverent ("I told you I was sick"). The grounds include the oldest Jewish cemetery in Florida and a section dedicated to USS Maine sailors. Open daily 7am-7pm; free. Walk without a map.

Insider Tip The cemetery is the best quiet morning in Key West. The above-ground vaults are stacked four and five high in some sections, the bougainvillea grows through the ironwork, and the roosters walk between the plots undisturbed. The section along Angela Street has the most photographed epitaphs. Bring coffee.

9:30 AM

Reef Snorkel Tour

Garrison Bight Marina, N Roosevelt Blvd: Key West sits on the Florida Reef — the only living coral reef in the continental United States, third largest in the world. Morning snorkel tours depart from multiple operators at Garrison Bight and the Historic Seaport. The reef is 5-6 miles offshore in 10-25 feet of clear water. \$45-65 for a 3-hour trip including gear. Fury Water Adventures and Sebago Water Sports are the most reliable operators. Book online the day before.

Insider Tip The Dry Tortugas — a cluster of seven uninhabited islands 70 miles west of Key West, accessible only by ferry or seaplane — is one of the most extraordinary places in the United States. Fort Jefferson, a 19th-century masonry fort built on a coral island, surrounds a turquoise lagoon of reef and tropical fish. The Yankee Freedom III ferry departs at 8am, returns at 5:30pm, costs \$200, and requires advance booking. Worth every dollar if you have the full day.

AFTERNOON · 1:00 PM - 6:00 PM

1:00 PM

Lunch: El Siboney

900 Catherine Street, Midtown: the best Cuban food in the Florida Keys — a no-frills neighbourhood restaurant that has been feeding Key West workers since 1984 without alteration. Roast pork (lechón asado), ropa vieja, black beans and rice, sweet plantains. Everything under \$15. Cash only. The wait on weekends is worth it.

2:30 PM

Harry S. Truman Little White House

111 Front Street, Truman Annex: the working vacation home where Harry Truman spent 175 days of his presidency (11 separate visits from 1946 to 1952). The building is a former naval officers' quarters dating to 1890, perfectly preserved with original 1940s interior — the poker table where Truman played with advisors, the communications

room, the screened porch where he sat in the evenings. Guided tours only; \$22; 45 minutes. One of the best-preserved presidential sites in the country.

4:00 PM

Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory

1316 Duval Street: a 5,000 sq ft glass-enclosed tropical habitat with 50+ butterfly species in permanent free flight, alongside exotic birds and tropical flowering plants. Unexpectedly meditative. \$15 admission; allow 45 minutes. The exit shop has the best selection of nature photography books in Key West.

EVENING · 6:00 PM - LATE

6:30 PM

Duval Street Evening Walk

The 1.3-mile length of Duval Street from the Atlantic to the Gulf: the most concentrated bar mile in Florida. The blocks south of Angela Street are quieter and have the better independent bars; the blocks north toward Mallory Square have the live music venues. Sloppy Joe's (201 Duval) is the obligatory Hemingway stop. The Bull and Whistle, the Green Parrot (601 Whitehead), and the Smallest Bar in the USA (124 Duval) are all worth a single drink.

8:00 PM

Dinner: Cafe Marquesa

600 Fleming Street: the most refined dining in Key West — eight candlelit tables in an 1884 building on a quiet block of Fleming Street. Florida seafood prepared with classical French technique; an excellent wine list; attentive service without pretension. Dinner for one: \$65-85. Reserve at least two days in advance. The bar seats two and is worth asking for as a solo diner.

WHERE TO EAT

Key West's Table

RESTAURANT	NEIGHBOURHOOD	PRICE
Sandy's Cafe	White Street	\$
Blue Heaven	Bahama Village	\$\$
Seven Fish	Old Town	\$\$\$
El Siboney	Midtown	\$
Cafe Marquesa	Old Town	\$\$\$\$
Louie's Backyard AfterDeck	South Beach	\$\$
Kermit's Key Lime Shoppe	Old Town	\$
PT's Late Night	Old Town	\$

GETTING AROUND

Navigating Key West

MODE	COST	NOTES
Bicycle	\$15-20/day	The best way to navigate Key West. The island is 4 miles long and entirely flat. Rental shops throughout Old Town and on N Roosevelt Blvd. Most hotels have bikes available.
Walking	Free	Old Town is entirely walkable from any accommodation. The walk from the Southernmost Point to Mallory Square is 1.5 miles along Whitehead Street.
Conch Tour Train	\$35	90-minute narrated tour of Old Town and surrounding neighbourhoods. Good orientation on arrival. Departs Mallory Square; runs daily.
Uber / Lyft	Varies	Available but wait times can be long. Most trips within Old Town are under \$8. Useful for the marina and mid-island destinations.
Scooter	\$40-60/day	Widely available for rent. Helmet legally required. Useful for Fort Zachary Taylor and mid-island destinations beyond comfortable walking distance.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Before You Go

TOPIC	DETAILS
Getting There	Key West International Airport (EYW) has limited direct service from major hubs. Most visitors fly into Miami (MIA) or Fort Lauderdale (FLL) and drive the Overseas Highway (US-1, 160 miles, 3-4 hours). The drive through the Keys is an experience in itself; stop at Bahia Honda State Park at Mile Marker 37.
Best Time	November through April: ideal weather (75-82F, low humidity, dry). May-October is hot and humid with afternoon thunderstorms; late September-October is hurricane season. Fantasy Fest (October) and New Year's Eve bring major crowds and doubled hotel rates.
Solo Dining	Key West has excellent solo dining culture. The bar counters at Seven Fish and Cafe Marquesa are ideal for single diners. Blue Heaven's communal courtyard tables are naturally social. The food stalls at the Waterfront Market (Clinton Square) seat solo diners without awkwardness.

TOPIC	DETAILS
Water Activities	Book snorkel tours online the day before departure. The Dry Tortugas ferry (Yankee Freedom III, yankeefleet.com) should be booked 2-4 weeks in advance in season. Sunset sailing cruises (Fury Water Adventures, Classic Harbor Line) fill up 3-5 days ahead on weekends.
Useful Apps	Uber, Google Maps (download offline before arrival), yankeefleet.com (Dry Tortugas booking), furycat.com (snorkel tours), OpenTable (restaurant reservations). The Key West Citizen newspaper (keysnews.com) has the best event listings.

Key West awaits.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE: FINAL CHECKLIST

Reserve Seven Fish by phone: (305) 296-2777
Reserve Cafe Marquesa: cafemarquesa.com
Book Dry Tortugas ferry (if going): yankeefleet.com — book 2-4 weeks out
Book snorkel tour online the day before: furycat.com or sebago.com
Sunset Celebration at Mallory Square: arrive 90 min before sunset
Fort Zachary Taylor: bring snorkel gear and a cooler
Kermit's key lime pie: non-negotiable stop at 200 Elizabeth St
Sandy's Cafe: Cuban coffee and breakfast — walk-up window, cash preferred
Download Google Maps offline before arriving

Your interactive map is one scan away.

All locations from this guide, colour-coded by day, open on your phone.

goingsolo.life/maps/key-west