

## **The Florida Keys: More Than a West Caribbean Cruise Port**

*By Jasmine Taylor (Unpublished excerpt)*

The ocean looked like something from a REM-fueled dreamscape. It was the brilliant turquoise undulations we witnessed from the Seven Mile Bridge that first sold my husband and me on the magnificence of the Florida Keys. It was 2023, and the entire summer had passed us by. There were no rooftop parties to enjoy, swanky spa days, or lazy days soaking up the surf and sand from January to August. Just work, home, sleep, repeat. By the time we had reached September, we were burnt out and overdue for some true rest and relaxation.

Initially, my husband pooh-poohed my suggested travel destination, remarking, “Florida Keys as in Key West? That’s just a tourist trap cruise port. Why would we want to go there?”

The Florida Keys form an impressive 202-mile chain of islands situated on remnants of coral reef. This means that, unlike most Caribbean archipelagos, the islands don’t offer sprawling miles of pristine beaches with perfect, powdery sand. For the typical travel enthusiast who loves spending time on the beach, the reality could leave much to be desired.

Admittedly, the only time I had ever visited the Florida Keys was via cruise ship to Key West. I was so familiar with the “downtown” area’s souvenir shops and bars that I stopped getting off the ship whenever the boat docked there, a choice I now realize was an unfortunate mistake. I realized how wrong I was about Key West halfway into our first trip to the Keys. The adventure was marked by natural beauty, unique local points of interest, and a sense of peace you can only find while slowing down to enjoy the world around you.

### **The Drive**

Hands down, one of the most fantastic experiences one can have when visiting the Keys is driving there. Our preferred method is flying into the airport at Fort Lauderdale or Miami, renting a car, grabbing a quick lunch or a few snacks from a random fast-food restaurant or gas station, and then making our way down the breathtakingly scenic Overseas Highway. After you drive through the Southern Everglades, the sun slowly beckons you from Florida’s mainland, inviting you to soothe your eyes on the Florida Bay’s rippling blue currents. We’ve made the trek three times since 2023, and we will never take its beauty and tranquility for granted.

Other than taking in the sights, we realized that the drive through the Keys is one of our favorite times to enjoy our music collection from yesteryear. We engaged in a few rounds of car karaoke, shouting Fall Out Boy and Missy Elliott music lyrics so loudly and gleefully that the sea birds could sense our catharsis.

### **The Stay**

Our first stay in the Keys was primarily about affordability and having the amenities that would keep us comfortable and happy for the duration of our trip. Lime Tree Bay Resort was a

fantastic first foray into the quaint, beachy feel of the Keys. The value was undeniable: we had a beautiful view of the Gulf of Mexico, a spacious room with a full kitchen, bathroom, television, and an on-site restaurant. We could tell Lime Tree Bay also prides itself on helping guests unwind and reconnect with each other through a wide variety of activities offered on the property, like free yoga, free kayaks, bike rentals, tennis courts, and more.

The sunsets there were romantic and unforgettable. The atmosphere on the property feels like a soft murmur in comparison to the unharmonious and overstimulating cacophony of cars zooming by, plane engines overhead, and jackhammers rattling on the mainland.

### **The Location**

Lime Tree Bay is nowhere near Key West; in fact, it's well over an hour's drive away. We knew this when booking our trip, but we wanted a budget-friendly option that would allow us to experience more of the Keys. The modest bay resort is located in Layton, Florida, which is nestled between the towns of Islamorada and Marathon. The vibe of Layton is quiet and private, perfect for sleep, reading, or unplugging. It's a great spot to just...be. There are no pretentious restaurants, shopping malls, or nightclubs. If you want more of a busy pace, you'll have to "work for it." For us, that meant planning a day trip to Key West for great eats, exploration, and a little excitement.

### **Key West Day Trip**

I could only compare driving through the Lower Keys to taking a cross-country road trip. Just like you can get a sense for the people and their culture in each state, we could truly feel and see the differences when we transitioned onto a new island. From the surprising white beaches dotting Bahia Honda Key to the mangroves stretching across Big Pine Key, the views were stunning and well worth the commute.

We're early risers and don't mind waking up to beat traffic, so we had no issues until we were fifteen minutes from Key West. This is where the hustle meets the bustle in the Keys, so be prepared for heavier traffic, greater wait times, and more pedestrians.

After scrambling for parking, we kicked our day off with a relaxing couple's massage at Spa Terre. We left feeling calm and rejuvenated, setting the pace for what would be an exceptional day.

We squeezed in a boozy brunch at Four Marlins, the oceanfront restaurant at The Reach hotel. Legend has it that the establishment's name was inspired by Ernest Hemingway's love of sport fishing, captured in a photo with his wife and children in which they are each posing with their bounty from the sea. The menu offered fare just as fresh as its modern maritime decor. Upon our arrival, the restaurant was sunny and inviting but nearly empty.

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