ADVENTURE TRAVERSING THE KEYS

Lobster Season Preview

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above: Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas
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ABOUT THE COVER
Little Palm Island reopened after over two years of renovations. See the full story on page 8.

Photo courtesy of Noble House Hotels & Resorts

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FRONT COVER: Little Palm Island by Noble House Hotels & Resorts

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Little Palm Island was heavily damaged by Hurricane Irma in September 2017. The Noble House corporate team worked alongside employees, contractors, landscapers and trades to complete the massive 18-month rebuilding project of the Lower Keys resort. Now that these extensive design and restoration initiatives are complete, guests are now being welcomed back to Little Palm Island Resort & Spa.

Little Palm Island and Ocean Key Resort are owned by Pat, Diane, Scott and Jamie Colee. The Colee family's dedication to the resorts, their employees and the Florida Keys as a whole has been evident during the past 23 years. Bill Foster, Regional Director of Marketing for Noble House spearheaded the resort's extensive marketing and public relations efforts leading up to the opening. Kevin Geanides, the resort’s General Manager, managed the opening from an operations and guest satisfaction perspective.

The Category 4 storm, which leveled large parts of the Lower and Middle Keys, impacted parts of the resort to different degrees. Foster said, “The sight of hundreds of palms toppled over and the many docks and piers floating in pieces had a huge impact on us all. As devastating as it was to see the state of the island, our primary concern was with our staff. We knew we had to do all possible to get the resort up and running as soon as we could for them. Unfortunately, the damage was more extensive that we first thought, and the remote locale presented many challenges.”

Surprisingly, 14 of the 15 thatched roof bungalows remained structurally intact. Only one bungalow was lost and has been rebuilt to house two new Island Premier Suites — the crème de la crème on the island. All suites were restored to reflect the well-loved West Indies design, along with many comfortable upgrades for guests. The support buildings such as the spa, gift shop, great room, and all docks and piers, had to be rebuilt from the pilings up. Landscaping was also a huge project.

It's been a $34 million undertaking to put together the structures, aesthetics, and thoughtful amenities which Little Palm has been built around. The resort includes an indoor/outdoor spa delivering exotic charm, surrounded by the natural beauty of the tropical island. The two-story courtyard features hand-carved wood details, columns and an artisan fountain, seemingly plucked from a secret garden in Bali or Thailand, according to Foster. This is clearly an escape from the ordinary.

As part of the rebuild, the management team at Little Palm Island solicited and considered the opinions of past guests in the planning stages. “Our guests were adamant that the look and feel of the property should not change,” Foster said. “Even the rebuilt structures look like they’ve always been there.”

The iconic Dining Room is much larger than before and features a moody main dining area, several verandahs and porches, and of course the wildly popular beach dining tables.

BY RICHARD TAMBORRINO
An inside look at one of the two new Island Premier Suites — the crème de la crème on the island — shows the extent to which Noble House tended to luxury and detail.
The building is now 11 feet higher, amplifying the already stunning views. Upstairs boasts a guest common area, the Great Room. This is where the elusive sole television resides (behind linen curtains.) Generally used for the most special occasions such as the Academy Awards or the Super Bowl.

But in a sad twist of irony, the seemingly endless efforts that went into the reopening, ended a short two weeks later, after the coronavirus pandemic closed the resort down in late March. They finally fully reopened in early June.

And just when it seemed their fate and future would be tested, the bookings flooded in. The month of June this year will be the best June in their history, said Foster. He attributes it in large part because Little Palm Island is self-contained and is genuinely isolated. “People truly feel they have escaped to a place that’s far away, as the island has a remote island feel. Once you’re on the island you don’t feel like you’re in the United States anymore. There’s lush foliage, a thick canopy from the palms, a continuous breeze, and naturally, there’s the turquoise water,” Foster said.

Past guests at the resort have included late Hall of Fame coach Don Shula, basketball players Dwayne Wade and Alonzo Mourning, singers Blake Shelton and Billy Joel, golfer Tiger Woods, and actresses Cameron Diaz and Scarlett Johansson. Outside of the “who’s who” guest-list, many of their guests come from the New York area, Foster said.
Surprisingly, he added, “60% of our guests live in Florida. Many arrive by seaplane from the mainland”. Those that check in at the new land-based lobby, also known as “The Shore Station,” on Little Torch Key at Mile Marker 28.5, take a 15-minute boat ride to the island.

A large percentage of the island’s guests return year after year, and many more have always had Little Palm Island on their bucket list and feel that now is the right time, since more and more luxury travelers are coming to the island and foregoing international vacations. “Once guests visit us, we tend to see them again and again”, said Foster.

These guests pay top dollar — the nightly cost to stay on Little Palm Island ranges from $1,999 to $3,999 — to enjoy quiet time around the pool, beach or private firepits and copper tubs. Guests enjoy “Tropical Distancing” on the island, and are seated safely apart on the beach, at the pool, in the spa or in the dining room. Essential parts of this responsible vacation experience.

Several times a year, the island is completely reserved for a minimum stay of 3-nights, all for one group. Luxury weddings, anniversaries, family reunions, or corporate getaways have been reserved in the past, as well as celebrity escapes.

Watersport activities are popular and include paddleboards, kayaks and any type of fishing trip, including deep sea fishing excursions. The island has a new fleet of Boston Whalers that are available to guests, as well. Geanides says the resort supports numerous captains that are exclusive to Little Palm Island guests, adding “the sky’s the limit.”

But perhaps the biggest “win” in this arduous journey “has been putting employees and managers back at work, and getting our repeat guests back,” said Foster. Amazingly, Little Palm Island has been able to re-employ more than half of their past employees. The resort has come a long way in less than three years, but their well-known tag line remains as relevant as ever, inviting guests to Get Lost at their little piece of paradise. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Perhaps that says it all.

Little Palm Island is owned by Noble House Hotels and Resorts. For information, visit littlepalmisland.com or call 800-3GET-LOST.
Above: Craig and Cheryl McBay started out with a dream and have grown their brewery business into a quasi-oasis for craft-beer lovers in a short five years.

Along the white picket-fence-lined roads of the Morada Way Arts District in Islamorada, a steady buzz had been building for almost five years, until it was slightly derailed in March by the coronavirus. But perseverance and dedication come in many forms and what originally was a blank canvas is now a terrific success story.

When most think of the Morada Way Arts District, art galleries and quaint shops generally come to mind. But this artist’s pallet is made up of water, malt, yeast, wheat and fermentable flavors. The Florida Keys Brewing Co., 200 Morada Way, has turned brewing into an art, and making an impressive mark on the craft beer industry right here in the Keys.

“We are committed to making a beer in the Keys that is completely 100% local,” said proprietor Cheryl McBay, who handles front of the house while her husband and business partner Craig is head brewer in the back.

Florida Keys Brewing Company, or FKBC for short, flourished out of this husband and wife collaboration of imaginative home brewing and a vision to give locals and tourists alike a truly authentic Keys product. The two met late one night in 2007 at the Hog Heaven Sports Bar and Grill in Islamorada. Toronto native Craig was in town on a fishing trip and met Islamorada local Cheryl (whose father and grandfather were Keys lobster fishermen) before she embarked on a backpack trek through Europe. They started dating when she returned and decided to quit their jobs and take on beer brewing full time while raising 6-month old-twins.

The McBays started out with a dream and have grown to a quasi-oasis for craft-beer lovers, complete with mermaid tap handles and a mosaic of 2,000 bottle caps from beer bottles acquired around the world. The sole owners launched their dream into reality in 2015 when they renovated a Morada Way warehouse to accommodate their first brewery and tasting room. This original location is still where most of the beer is brewed, and the original tap room can be enjoyed on special occasions and every Art Walk (Third Thursday of each month).
Originally just a brewery with a cursory bar area, Florida Keys Brewing Company now sports a lavish, locally decorated motif. Local artists were tapped for the furniture, murals and bar tops inside the brewery. The tasting room has plenty of the unique blends they’ve become known for from sharing their beers with the community in the years preceding the brewery launch. Fan favorites include Kritter IPA, a big hoppy American IPA, Run Aground Brown, a very malty medium bodied brown ale, Honey Bottomed Blonde, an American blonde ale brewed with local honey and Key Largo Passionfruit Lager.

In 2018, a new taproom and brewery were opened just 300 feet down the road, at the beginning of Morada Way, on U.S. 1. The new location allowed FKBC to expand its brewing abilities and accommodate the swelling number of patrons. It also came with a beautifully lush Beer Garden, a Beer and Bed vacation rental upstairs, extra parking and two fermenters for additional brewing.

A significant milestone for the McBays occurred late last year when Florida Keys Brewing Company’s iconic Iguana Bait Kolsch was first
available for purchase at all Publix Supermarkets in the Florida Keys. This marks the first occasion that any grocery store from Key Largo to Key West will offer locally brewed and canned beer on their shelves for purchase.

This expansion led to an increase in space and production ability, allowing the small business to purchase their own canning line. This acquisition made the distribution of Iguana Bait, possible, while still holding fast to the ideal that all of FKBC’s beer remain locally brewed and canned.

Iguana Bait is a honey-hibiscus kölsch made with local Keys honey and hibiscus. It’s a light, refreshing beer with sweetness from the honey and a slight tart fruitiness from the hibiscus. Florida Keys Brewing Co. complimented their German-style kölsch with Hallertauer hops, honey and hibiscus. The beer garners its name Iguana Bait from the local iguanas’ voracious appetite for hibiscus flowers that decorate the island chain. It’s available as 12-ounce six-packs for $10.99 at all Publix Stores.

“Craft beer in the U.S. is world-leading in quality and variety,” said Craig, whose Canadian roots sparked his affinity for home brewing, which began years ago when he was gifted with a home brew kit. “Anything you can make at home is much better than most big brewery beers and the creativity in the range of ingredients is part of the experimentation and innovation.”

According to the Brewers Association, craft beer production increased 7%, up to $27.6 billion, and now account for more than 24% of the $114.2 billion U.S. beer market in terms of retail sales last year. These statistics use the craft brewer definition of small and independent brewer and show the McBay’s vision was spot on.

Microbiology and chemistry mastering are part of the in-depth range of study to be a successful brewer, says Craig. “The studying of compounds produced during fermentation and what micro contaminants can ruin your beer as well as developing a refined palate is just part of the expertise.”

Most beer flavors can be enjoyed in pints, samples, growlers or kegs. Growlers can be purchased and brought back for refills and brewery tours will be part of the lineup. “We will have everything available for anyone who wants to hang out and drink beer; on a rainy day it will be the place to be,” Cheryl said. “Our brewery tours will show them how it’s made, and we work with nearby restaurants so you can have your preferred food delivered.”

The McBays say their business will forever be a family business, and twins Rose and Ario seem to have furthered their inspiration. “They are growing up in the brewery,” Cheryl said. “We will never sell out to a big corporation. This will always be a family business owned and operated in the Keys.”

TOP: Many of the original color schemes and unique design applications at the Florida Keys Brewing Company taproom are still in place today and illuminate the brewery’s unique brand. CENTER: Florida Keys Brewing Company’s iconic Iguana Bait Kölsch, a honey-hibiscus kölsch made with local Keys honey and hibiscus, is now the only locally brewed beer sold at Publix in the Florida Keys. BOTTOM: On the rare occasions when the McBays aren’t tending to the brewery, they pack up the twins and travel retro in their vintage VW bus.
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The opening of the 2020 Lobster mini-season takes place on July 29-30 here in the Florida Keys and the eight-month regular lobster season commences on Aug. 6 and runs through March 31, 2021.

It’s safe to say that this year’s lobster season will be unlike any we have seen in recent years. Both local and visiting boaters have an insatiable demand to break out from the restrictions during the past four months and get out onto the water for the thrill of this annual hunt.

Hurricanes are sometimes thought of as that outside influencer that could impact lobster season. But, thankfully in the past 20 years, there have been no hurricanes that have even brushed the Keys near or during the opening of lobster season. So, it’s important to recognize that the coronavirus pandemic has altered the lobster fishery in the Florida Keys in ways that even hurricane activity has avoided.

There are approximately 9MP (million pounds) of harvested lobster annually in the State of Florida — 2MP by the recreational sector and 7MP by the commercial fleet. Of that state total in the 2019-20 season, amazingly, the average annual commercial harvest of spiny lobsters in the Keys is 85% of the statewide total and sometimes more.

The commercial spiny lobster fishery in Florida is the most valuable fishery in the state. Although prices fluctuate, the ex-vessel value — the price paid to fishermen — is worth about $50 million per year. Adding in the commercial harvest of stone crabs and finfish, Monroe County’s commercial fishery is valued at approximately $150 million annually. That makes the commercial fishing industry the second largest economic engine in the Keys, after tourism, and the second largest employer in the county at 4,500 fishing-related jobs.

More than 90% of our lobsters come from the Caribbean Basin and the waters off Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela and the south side of Cuba. This is referred to as “external recruitment” in the commercial fishing industry. It is genetically proven that lobster larvae from those areas are borne by ocean currents into the Florida Keys where the lobsters grow and mature to harvestable size. Our lobsters spawn and their larvae are transported via the Gulf Stream current to the Bahamas, Eastern Seaboard and some even to Bermuda. The varied distribution provides genetic diversity. The larvae typically do not successfully travel any further north since they hit unsustainable temperature thresholds.

Theoretically, fishermen could harvest every single legal lobster in Florida each year and the result would have no bearing on what would be available to catch the following season. This principal of external recruitment is scientifically documented and genetically proven.

This principle is much different from finfish management methods so that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) does not impose an Annual Catch Limit for all lobster harvested both recreationally and commercially. Restrictive action is only necessary if the seasonal harvest yields below 5MP, indicating something is seriously wrong with the fishery.

There are varying opinions on the value of the two-day lobster mini-season. Visitors love it and tourism benefits, but the allure of the event often results in diving and ecological impacts. Obviously, there are enough lobsters to go around and everyone should feel comfortable about harvesting a renewable resource, but safety and responsibility are equally important.

The mini-season separates recreational harvesters from the commercial sector and is an enormous safety step since the 350-400 commercial lobster fishermen in the Keys do not deploy lobster traps while there are an estimated 35,000-40,000 recreational divers in the water.
The elusive spiny lobster and the opening of mini and regular seasons are great draws to the Florida Keys.
The FWC assigns additional law enforcement officers to Monroe County for the mini-season so they can focus their efforts on safety during the recreational harvest. Officers prepare themselves for dealing with the potential fallout caused by many recreational participants who rarely boat, dive or snorkel other than during mini-season.

A major concern of residents, Sanctuary officials, and others is the amount of environmental damage that takes place to corals and benthic habitat during the two days of harvest and the three to five days prior to that as lobster harvesters scope out their three to five preferred spots, often referred to as “honey pots”. Locals are quick to point out the negative impact upon our coral reefs by reckless and irresponsible behavior on the reefs, but no formal studies have been undertaken to analyze the amount of damage that occurs during mini-season. Considering the stress that the reefs are facing from degrading water quality, pollution and climate change, it’s clear whatever impact can be avoided from mini-season would positively contribute to reef quality.

From an economic standpoint, during these trying times, dealing with the impacts of the coronavirus, the economic stimuli our county derives from mini-season is probably worthwhile. It keeps dive operators profitable and the dollars spent reverberate throughout our island communities.

However, that economic optimism must be tempered with the fact that Monroe County is geographically adjacent to Miami-Dade County, reporting the highest COVID-19 infection rate in Florida.

Here’s to a safe boating and lobster-fishing season this year!

Captain Bill Kelly is the Executive Director of the Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen’s Association.
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“What are we going to see today, Cap?” is the question that most of my clients ask first thing in the morning before we leave the A&B Marina dock in Key West. My standard answer is ALWAYS...“I’m not sure, but I can’t wait to find out!”

Every summer day, the South Atlantic churns and swirls while the wind pushes from the southeast sending floating artifacts from all over the planet to our fishing grounds. Depending on what material the floaters are made of dictates what creatures are using it as a safe harbor or feeding station. Plastic bags, balloons, bait containers, water bottles and basic landfill type trash are never helpful to our search — only an eyesore and an opportunity to slide close and remove them.

Picking up trash in the ocean, especially balloons, consistently deposits credits in one’s “fish Karma account.” Balloons are devastating to our sea turtles because of their jellyfish impersonations. Once a sea turtle eats a balloon, he is likely on his way to a much tougher existence. Plastic buckets, trap floats with line, cargo nets and abandoned longline gear are some of the attractive artificial habitats that lure crustaceans, bait fish and our favorite pelagic fish toward them.

Dolphin (mahi mahi), wahoo, tuna and billfish are nomadic Bluewater hunters that use these floaters as feeding stations sometimes for weeks at a time. One particular coil of line we found offshore of Cudjoe Key was littered with dolphin from 10-20 pounds, enough of them to take care of our dinner needs not to mention the numerous others we caught and released. Three weeks later the same floater was found by our crew 30 miles west of Key West with the same sized school of dolphin still using it as a feeding station. We knew it was the same floater because of the red and white lure that someone had snagged on the rope and lost.

“What is the craziest thing you’ve ever found Cap?” is another question asked, usually after a successful swipe at a floater. I usually start by telling the elephant story ... yep an elephant. Capt. David Schugar out of Marathon told me a story of the remnants of an elephant he had found on his way to Cay Sal Bank. The sight of a floating elephant is something you never forget. The ocean has a way of recycling everything, so identification was only made by its curly tail. The rest was not so recognizable since the sharks were doing what sharks do.

An unidentifiable life raft was found by our crew 40 miles west of Key West with enough dolphin and wahoo under it to top the box on the first day of a two-day Dry Tortugas trip. One of the dolphin was 48 pounds and the largest wahoo was 40 pounds.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The variety and types of ocean debris that’s found on the water can be small or large. This wave-powered military surfboard was one of the most unusual items Capt. Scott ever encountered.
Then there was the tree off the Marquesas. Having found the tree at the end of our trip was a bonus, but it was the very last fish that I’ll never forget. A mechanical issue had forced me down into the engine room to investigate while we drifted next to the floating tree. Local musician, Howard Livingston, had chartered the Premium Time for his yearly fishing trip with his grandsons. While digging deep into a hydraulic leak, I looked up out of the engine room and saw a launching dolphin more than 20 pounds connected to the line of his gleaming grandson, Michael. Landing a larger dolphin from a drifting and disabled boat is not easy, but the fish made it into the box.

The latest, greatest find was a wave-powered military surfboard that was null and void of life but had a strange way of veering into my trolling spread. Below the board there was an entire energy plant that converted wave action to energy for the propulsion system. It wasn’t floating, it was moving along at 1 ½ knots! Later we received a call from Forbes.com in London wanting to do a story about the board after seeing the video.

Countries including the USA have taken great strides to curtail the flow by instituting stiff fines on cruise ship companies and requiring trash companies to cover their loads. There is remarkably less trash offshore of Key West today than there was in the late 1980s but more can be done. We’ll continue to take out what we can on our trips, but we will leave the objects that have become home to the many small creatures depending on it for food and shelter.

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Mobility throughout the Keys has been limited since March, but spots we love are gradually opening. So, if you’re a resident and have been dealing with cabin fever for the last four months or you’re a visitor interested in making the most of your Keys visit, check out some of these terrific day trip locales here in the magnificent Florida Keys.

By Richard Tamborrino

**FORT ZACHARY TAYLOR**

Fort Taylor is a perfect example Florida’s rich history. The park, which now covers a total of 54 acres, is a National Historic Landmark that played a significant role in Florida’s early development. Construction of the fort began in 1845, shortly after Florida became a state. In 1850, the fortress was named after U.S. President Zachary Taylor, who died in office earlier that year. Throughout the 1850s, construction on Fort Taylor was slow. Yellow fever, shortages of material and men, remoteness, and hurricanes had slowed down progress.

Prior to the start of the Civil War, Capt. John Brannan occupied the fortress, placing it in Union hands. The main role of Fort Taylor during the Civil War was to serve as headquarters for the U.S. Navy’s East Gulf Coast blockade squadron. This squadron deterred numerous supply ships from reaching and leaving Confederate ports in the Gulf of Mexico. While Fort Taylor never saw any hostile action, many historians have argued that because of Fort Taylor and its mission, the War of Rebellion was not allowed to continue any longer than it did.

**ABOVE:** An aerial view of John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the first undersea park in the U.S., is a draw for visitors and locals alike who enjoy the coral reefs and the associated marine life.

**LEFT:** Fort Zachary Taylor in Key West, a National Historic Landmark, is one of many breathtaking sites to view a sunset in the Keys.
The 10-inch Rodman and Columbiad cannons at the fort had a range of three miles, an impressive deterrent to the Confederate navy, preventing them from attempting to take the fortress or the island of Key West. Proving to be a severe loss for the South, Fort Taylor remained in Union hands throughout the Civil War. By the time the three-story fort was finally finished in 1866 (21 years after it was begun), there were many impressive features included. Items such as sanitary facilities flushed by the tide and a desalination plant, which produced drinking water from the sea, were available as early as 1861. A total of 140 guns and a large supply of ammunition were on hand to secure the fort.

Fort Taylor was again used during the Spanish-American War. In 1889, to modernize the fortress, the top levels were cut down to install newer weapons. With the coming of the 20th century, more sophisticated weapons and eventually radar and other devices took the place of guns. By 1947, the Army turned Fort Taylor over to the Navy to maintain.

Beginning in 1968, through the tireless efforts of volunteers, excavations for old armaments in the gun rooms uncovered a number of guns and ammunition from Civil War times. This represents only a fraction of the buried arsenal, which is the largest collection of Civil War cannons in the U.S. In recognition of this, Fort Taylor was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. Two years later, the fortress was designated a National Historic Landmark.

While at the fort, take a stroll along the nature walk around the park and view the native wildlife, trees, shrubs and wildflowers, or bike along the shore past the historic fort and beside the Key West Shipping Channel. Many walking trails are wheelchair accessible. Tours of the historic fort are offered at 11 a.m. daily.

**KEYS HISTORY & DISCOVERY CENTER**

A 16th century bronze cannon, an 18th century anchor and a model of historic Indian Key circa 1840 are just a few of the great finds which can be found at Keys History & Discovery Center, on the property of the Islander Resort in Islamorada. It is a world-class museum that preserves and shares the incredible history of our Upper Keys community and explores the unique ecology of the region.

Permanent exhibits cover subjects such as Henry Flagler’s Over-Sea Railway, Legends of the Line, First People, as well as Coral Reef Exploration, featuring three large aquariums. The museum’s second floor features a state-of-the-art theater showing documentaries on topics like the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane and pirates, as well as traveling exhibits, and the Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., at Mile Marker 82.1, Islamorada. More information can be found at keysdiscovery.com or by calling 305-922-2237.
HISTORY OF DIVING MUSEUM
The History of Diving Museum has a time line of exhibit galleries focused on the international story of "man’s quest to explore under the sea", from early breath-hold diving to adventures into the abyss. The Museum is dedicated to collecting, preserving, displaying, and interpreting artifacts, antiques, books, documents, photographs, and oral history relative to the History of Diving. The display’s cover over 4,000 years of early male and female pioneers and their attempts to explore, understand, and venture under the sea, as well as the special role that the Florida Keys played in this story.

The majority of the Museum’s artifacts have been provided through the generous support of its founders, Drs. Joe and Sally Bauer, who over a span of forty years, acquired one of the world’s largest collections of diving helmets, hand-operated air pumps, armored suits, lights and other accessory gear, plus memorabilia, prints, photographs, books, film and video related to diving. Their passion took them to virtually every corner of the globe and the Museum’s collection now represents the contributions of more than 30 countries to diving history.

The Bakers are founding members of the international Historical Diving Society of both the United Kingdom and the United States. Through research of original documents in libraries throughout the world, they have published articles on diving history and discovered new links in the early progress of diving, which had previously been unrecognized. They have extensively studied "open bottom" or shallow water diving helmets that were the most significant contribution of South Florida and the Keys to the worldwide history of diving, helmets that fostered the beginnings of modern marine biology, treasure salvage, underwater photography and sport diving.

The History of Diving Museum was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational institution in 2000 and opened to the public in September 2005. HDM is currently celebrating its anniversary with a featured exhibit, In Depth: 15 Years of the Diving Museum. Dive in to take a break from the sun, enjoy a fun scavenger hunt and pick up a fun activity booklet to take home. The Museum also hosts a FREE Immerse Yourself! presentation at 7pm on the third Wednesday of every month, featuring authors, historians, and environmental speakers from all over the world. You can find out more on their website: DivingMuseum.org.

KEY WEST AQUARIUM
The Key West Aquarium is the island’s first attraction and construction began during the Great Depression in 1933 as part of the Works Progress Administration Program. This provided many jobs to local Key Westers or “Conchs” as they are called today during this tough financial time when jobs were limited, and people were in need of income to support their families. The concrete that was used to form the aquarium structure and holding tanks was mixed with sea water from the ocean since fresh water was hard to come by in those days.

Taking two years to complete, the Aquarium opened to the public on February 18, 1935. The Key West Aquarium was the first aquarium to use an “open air concept”. This allowed for natural sunlight to illuminate the concrete marine displays.

One of the purposes for the Key West Aquarium was to be a clearing market for other aquariums around the country. Only seven months after opening, Labor Day of 1935, a hurricane struck the middle keys and destroyed the Overseas Railroad and...
any hope for the Key West Attraction’s success along with it. At the time the Overseas Extension to the Florida East Coast Railroad was the only way to reach Key West besides by boat. On May 8, 1943 the U. S. Government leased the Aquarium to the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard to use as an indoor rifle range. All the displays were torn down or filled in to make a level surface area for military firearms. It wasn’t until June of 1946 that the Aquarium was returned to the city of Key West and restored to its former glory. In the 1960s the roof was added to the once opened air aquarium to cut down on algae in the exhibits.

Today the Key West Aquarium features a large collection of fish, sharks, invertebrates, reptiles and birds that are all native to the local waters of the Florida Keys. The Atlantic Shores exhibit is a living replica of the Florida Keys near shore mangrove environment complete with turtles, tarpon, tropical and game fish. The Key West Aquarium also features non-native species such as pythons and iguanas to educate locals and visitors of the impact that invasive species have on or delicate south Florida ecosystems.

Guides offer guests tours and lectures every 20 minutes throughout the day on a variety of topics including sharks, history, and the feedings Atlantic Shores exhibit.

The Key West Aquarium is open daily, 365 days per year, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and located in the heart of Mallory Square at #1 Whitehead Street. keywestaquarium.com or 305-296-2051.

**AQUARIUM ENCOUNTERS**

Aquarium Encounters is an interactive outdoor aquarium, where visitors can walk through and see a variety of wildlife, from the fascinating and biologically diverse Florida Keys and nearby Caribbean. All of the exhibits are outdoors and covered by large Tiki huts. Guests are protected from the sun and rain, offering a unique and natural experience at our facility. Aquarium Encounters is situated in Marathon at Mile Marker 53.1 on the Bayside. A perfect spot to enjoy the beautiful views of Florida Bay and Vaca Cut!

Aquarium Encounters has taken numerous precautions to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Masks are required by all guests and staff at all times. There are multiple handwashing sinks and hand sanitizer dispensers throughout the property. A free audio tour is now available and easily accessible on a smartphone so guests can take a tour without worrying about crowding. The staff is working hard to keep frequently touched areas sanitized and are encouraging social distancing. The aquarium is spread across a 2-acre property with plenty of open space for families to interact and learn about all the amazing local marine life, while keeping recommended social distance. Aquarium Encounters will continue to follow the guidelines set by the CDC and Monroe County for the safety of all guests and staff.

With general admission visitors gain access to four different touch tanks, public feedings of animals and hourly guided tours by marine biologists. Endless interactive and feeding opportunities bring you face to face with everything from sharks and stingrays to alligators and tortoises! Encounters range from thrilling in-water experiences where guests can hand-feed sharks in the Predator Reef Tank, to interacting with baby stingrays in the Nursery Tank from dry land. Experience the magic of the ocean firsthand! Open 365 days, 9-5 p.m.
YANKEE FREEDOM III, DRY TORTUGAS NATIONAL PARK FERRY

Located just 70 miles from Key West lie seven remote islands called the Dry Tortugas. It is here one will find Fort Jefferson, a Civil War era fort. With more than 16 million bricks, Fort Jefferson is the largest brick masonry building in the Americas on the Dry Tortugas and one of the most remote national parks in the US.

One of the best ways to get to Fort Jefferson and the Dry Tortugas is aboard the Yankee Freedom III, a state-of-the-art high-speed ferry. Unforgettable adventures await on this most memorable adventure. On route to Dry Tortugas National Park Yankee Freedom’s onboard naturalist will provide an orientation about the area and the national park’s surroundings. Passengers may opt to travel inside the upper or lower air-conditioned cabins or outside on one of the observation decks. Bars on both decks stock a large variety of beverages and the galley is open all day for extra snacks, souvenirs and essentials.

Once at Dry Tortugas National Park, disembark at Fort Jefferson and have the option of joining a 45-minute guided tour. Both breakfast and lunch are included.

Visitors can take advantage of the swimming, snorkeling, beach walking, exploring, birding, and the flora and fauna of this pristine island. Guests re-board in mid-afternoon and arrive back in Key West at approximately 5:15 p.m. For more information visit drytortugas.com.
**DOLPHINS PLUS MARINE MAMMAL RESPONDER (DPMMR)**

Looking for a great way to have a fun family getaway, while supporting a good cause? Book your family fun in the sun at Dolphins Plus Marine Mammal Responder (DPMMR) in Key Largo. This not-for-profit organization offers educational swim experiences with their resident Atlantic bottlenose dolphins seven days a week! The best part? Proceeds from these swims not only support the care of the resident animals, but also support their mission as the ONLY rescue organization for sick and injured whales and dolphins in the Florida Keys. The DPMMR rescue team covers 10,000 square miles of marine habitat and relies on funds from the swims and volunteers to keep their mission going.

Located on the Oceanside at Mile Marker 99.5 in Key Largo, DPMMR hosts a variety of educational programs and swims to make memories last a lifetime for every member of the family. The most popular program, the Interactive Swim, is a deep-water program, where guests age 7 and up can enter the water with the DPMMR marine mammal family and experience a variety of behaviors such as belly rubs, hugs, footpushes, dorsal tows, or belly rides. The Splash and Wade Program is fun for younger family members and allows guests as young as 3 years of age to stand on a mechanical platform lowered into the water (waist deep) and interact with the dolphins while firmly standing on solid ground.

Safety is important for DPMMR guests, staff, and dolphins, so management has developed new COVID-19 virus practices to mitigate the possibility of infection. These safety measures, effective June 1, include:
- Guest Services calls each guest prior to their reservation to remind them that they must wear a mask while on land at the facility (can be removed before entering the water).
- All guests’ check-in times will be staggered to prevent too many people from congregating in the gift shop/reservations area.
- Each guest’s temperature will be taken before entering the facility with a laser thermometer. No one with a temperature of 99.5 F or higher will be allowed to enter the facility.
- Each guest will be asked to use hand sanitizer before entering the facility.
- Guests will wait in a designated waiting area, 6 feet apart from other guests.
- All families will be spaced at least 6 feet apart in the educational briefing.
- All guests will be asked to use hand sanitizer just prior to entering the water with the dolphins.

Call to make your reservation at 305-453-4321 or book online at dpmmr.org. Check out the Big Splash Challenge at dpmmr.org/splash. If you are interested in supporting our mission!
THEATER OF THE SEA
Theater of the Sea lagoons and lush, tropical gardens are home to dolphins, sea lions, sea turtles, fish, sharks, stingrays, alligators, and birds. Its mission is to provide a wonderful home for our animals while sharing them with visitors in up close and personal shows and interaction programs. Loving and caring since 1946, Theater of the Sea is family-owned and located in Islamorada.

Swim with dolphins in the Florida Keys! During Theater of the Sea’s Swim with the Dolphin program, touch and interact with a dolphin while swimming and snorkeling around the lagoon and while doing behaviors such as dorsal tows, hugs, and foot pushes.

Established in 1946 by the P.F. McKenney family, Theater of the Sea is one of the oldest marine mammal facilities in the world. The McKenney family still owns and operates the park today.

Originally a rock quarry excavated for Henry Flagler’s railroad in the early 1900’s, the lagoons and lush, tropical gardens at the facility are home to Atlantic bottlenose dolphins, California sea lions, sea turtles, tropical and game fish, sharks, stingrays, crocodiles, alligators, marine invertebrates, and birds. Twelve million gallons of ocean water are pumped in daily to supply water to the three-acre natural salt-water lagoons.

While some of their animals were collected and others were born here, many are non-releaseable as a result of imprinting and/or injuries sustained in the wild. The health and well-being of the animals takes precedence over all other interests and their care and maintenance is supported by patronage alone.

General admission to the park includes dolphin, sea lion, and parrot shows, as well as a fish and reptile tour, access to the lagoon side beach, and a 5-minute bottomless boat ride around the dolphin lagoon. Shows are up close and personal and guest participation is encouraged. One of the shows is always taking place; guests join the one that is in progress when they arrive and should plan to spend two to three hours in the park.

JOHN PENNEKAMP CORAL REEF STATE PARK
The first underwater park in the U.S., John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park encompasses approximately 70 nautical square miles. While the mangrove swamps and tropical hammocks in the park’s upland areas offer visitors a unique experience, it is the coral reefs and their associated marine life that bring most visitors to the park. Many enjoy the view of the reef from a glass-bottom boat tour, but visitors can get a closer look by scuba diving or snorkeling.

The park named for the late John D. Pennekamp, a Miami newspaper editor, whose efforts contributed to the establishments of Everglades National Park and the preservation of what would become John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park.

The park contains a wide variety of tropical vegetation, shore birds and marine life. While the mangrove swamps and tropical hammocks offer visitors a unique and interesting experience, it is the coral formations and associated marine life that most park visitors come to enjoy. The coral reef at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park are among the most beautiful and diverse of all living communities.

Canoeing and kayaking through the park’s waters are popular activities; fishing is permitted in designated areas. Visitors can enjoy walking on short trails, picnicking, or swimming at the beach. The Visitor Center has a 30,000-gallon saltwater aquarium where visitors can learn about the Coral Reef Ecosystem. Full-facility and Youth/Group campsites are available.

Established in 1963, John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park was the first underwater park in the United States. John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, and the adjacent Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, cover approximately 178 nautical square miles of coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangrove swamps. The park extends 3 miles into the Atlantic Ocean and is approximately 25 miles in length. These areas were established to protect and preserve a portion of the only living coral reef in the continental United States. The park was added to the National Register of Historic Places on April 14, 1972.

Throughout the year, there are many environmental programs offered to park visitors on a wide range of natural and cultural history subjects. Guided nature walks along the Mangrove and Wild Tamarind trails are offered seasonally or upon request by individuals and organized groups. Current program schedules are available at the Visitors Center.
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