

home of THE SUNSET

Norah Casey returns to Key West at the southernmost tip of America, the home of the Key Lime Pie, Hemmingway and the Margarita and where the locals are as obsessed with sunsets as the Irish are with rain.

Quite possibly my favourite place in the whole of the US is Key West. I think what I love about it is that it is almost the polar opposite to the rest of Florida. Firstly it's a town with a heart and soul and it has streets with low rise buildings. It's an unpretentious laid-back haven that enjoys a well-earned reputation for taking life easy. While in Ireland we seem to never tire of discussing the weather, and in particular the rain, in Key West sundown is the main topic of conversation. The first time I went there an old guy told me about this mysterious green flash that happened at the exact moment the sun went down on the horizon according to Key West folklore. He, like mostly everyone else – locals and visitors – has been chasing that green flash ever since. I looked it up and apparently it is a phenomena that can occur with just the right set of conditions. The flash is caused by the colours of the sun splitting and lasts no more than a second or two. The perfect ingredients for a green flash are a clear unobstructed view of the sunset (out on the ocean is perfect), a cloudless sky and a lot of wishful thinking. So about an hour or so before sundown, Mallory Square at the tip of the Keys and all along the seafront, a carnival atmosphere takes hold. Everyone congregates in wait for that moment when the sun goes down way out to sea – stalls peddle crafts and souvenirs, street performers take their

turn to entertain and everywhere there's music, sometimes dancing, artists paint portraits and cocktails are served from pop-ups. And then in the final moment, as the countdown to sundown begins, there is only one topic of conversation. Will the cloud clear in time to see that final moment? Is it a good sunset or was the previous night better? Is the sky as red and spectacular as it often is? Finally the sun dips below the horizon and the assembled onlookers accept with good humour that they must wait for another night for the green flash. The crowd disperses quickly to the restaurants and bars for a post mortem. The next day might be littered with little snippets of conversation about whether it was a good sunset or whether the forthcoming one that evening might be better. My camera is jammed with pictures of sunsets in Key West – even the mediocre ones are spectacular. Can there be anything more pleasant than spending time in a place where the quality of the sunset is the main talking point? Key West is sort of a cross between New Orleans (as it used to be) and London's Soho. The late-night bars on Duval Street blare out live music nightly, the gay bars further up the street feature some of the best drag shows I have ever been too. Key West attracts lots of colourful characters and it's really anything goes here.

Key West is at the end of a spectacular drive along US 1 (also known as Overseas Highway). There are two others way to

get there – by cruise ship (they dock daily) and by plane. We took a tiny four-seater plane down from Tampa once which was a challenge for my vertigo but my fellow passengers said it was great fun with fantastic views of the coastline. But you would really miss out if you didn't drive down the Keys – it is one of the most beautiful stretches of road with lots of reasons to stop off on the way. We were driving from Miami but the real magic starts once you leave the mainland of Florida behind and start the 113 mile spectacular road trip through the Keys, especially those impossibly narrow stretches when the highway cuts through the Atlantic on one side and the Gulf on the other. The Keys are a world away from the rest of Florida. That tropical island feeling begins almost immediately and a sense of travelling back in time to the kitsch seaside resorts of yesteryear intensifies as you drive towards Key Largo. Dotted along the roadside you'll spot wind chimes, sea shell huts, boho art galleries, beach shacks, local tiki bars. And time will start to move a little slower because on the Keys the vibe is relaxed and carefree.

There are so many temptations on the Keys – it once took me 10 hours to do that 113 mile stretch because we kept stopping – partly just because the scenery is so spectacular you keep reaching for the camera and pulling over to capture the moment. But there are also some amazing things to do and see along the way.

During my many trips to the Keys I have stayed in a Dolphin Sanctuary in Sugar Loaf Key – it was quite something to wake up to dolphins gliding through the waters outside your bedroom. We once stopped off at Islamorada during a ferocious lightning storm and ended up staying in some beach huts until it blew over – a great adventure. When my son was small we used to stay at a family friendly motel near Duck Key where he played in the shallow waters all day collecting shells and fish and building castles. When my dad was alive his sole ambition was to see the *African Queen* – the boat made famous by the 1959 movie of the same name which starred Humphry Bogart and Katherine Hepburn. He read that the boat was moored somewhere in Key Largo and it didn't take us long to find it – paint peeling and abandoned in a little wharf. I still have that photo of him standing proudly next to her with his hand on the prow – in wonderment that he was actually touching that very same boat that Bogart and Hepburn had taken that perilous journey in. It arrived in Key Largo in 1982 and I am not sure they knew what to do with it for a while. It was great to see it renovated and back to its former glory when I visited a few months ago – you can even take a trip on the African Queen now and Key Largo boasts an annual Humphrey film festival.

This stretch of road is a feast for the senses – above the water there are wild birds, mangrove islands, and tropical hardwood groves while below the water the sea is teeming with marine life. Among the best things I have done along the Keys include kayaking through the mangroves in the beautiful John Pennnekamp Coral Reef State Park, a stop off to see the owls, hawks and kestrels in the healing hands of the staff at the Rehabilitation Centre for Wild Birds at Tavernier. If you have little ones and even if you don't, a visit to the Turtle Hospital at Marathon is really sweet or take a break at the US's only living coral



barrier reef at Pigeon Key. The cute little national Key Deer refuge in the pinelands of Big Pine Key is a great stop off. While you're there grab an hour to snorkel – Big Pine has an underwater music festival every year to raise funds to preserve the coral reef. It is truly a wonderful sight to behold.

Let me detour for a minute to tell you about something else the Keys are famous for. The first book I remember that really captivated me as a child was Ernest Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. In the 1930s he bought a house in Key West (which is still standing) and wrote some of his best literary works there – *A Farewell to Arms* and *To Have and Have Not*. But by far my all-time favourite is the story of Santiago – an old Cuban fisherman who was 84 days without

catching any fish when he set out for the Straits of Florida to try to change his luck. *The Old Man and the Sea* features the epic battle that ensued between him and the great fish he has ensnared – a prized marlin. The Keys are home to some of the best sports fishing and saltwater fly fishing – Islamorada is probably the best spot for a charter.

Dolphin spotting will definitely delay your journey south to Key West with various vantage points along the highway. I suppose what the Keys can really lay claim to is some of the best dive spots in the world including wreck and reef dives. Don't worry if you aren't a certified PADI diver or haven't done any scuba diving there are plenty of places that will offer you an introductory programme.

THE LIFE AQUATIC

Many years ago my late husband and I stopped off for a coffee at Key Largo and ended up scuba diving to the one and only original underwater hotel in the world – Jules' Undersea Lodge. He had scuba dived before but it was a first for me so I enrolled in an introductory programme which was enough to allow me to take the trip 21 feet below the surface to visit this amazing place. We didn't stay over but this time round I went to visit to get an update and for \$800 you and a friend can stay overnight and avail of a pizza delivery for supper (there are two bedrooms and a common room/kitchen). At the moment you can catch the Classroom under the Sea from Jules' Lodge which is the first online biology class live from the ocean floor. The Lodge was actually built as a research laboratory to explore the underwater habitat and that's what makes it so different. When you dive you emerge into a moon pool and the rooms are filled with compressed air. So once you rid yourself of your diving gear in the wet room you can curl up by one of the 42 foot round windows that feature in each room. There you can see angel fish and parrot fish and barracudas and lots of anemones, sponges and oysters. Jules' hosts weddings and special events at the Undersea Lodge and they will even send a "mer-chef" to cook a gourmet meal for you. (See Jul.com).





PERFECT PLACE TO STAY & DINE

Key West grew in stature as a busy seaport at the southernmost tip of America and right where the land meets the ocean you'll find a hotel that is perfectly situated for all that Key West has to offer. Our room at the Westin looked out over the Marina and a beautiful azure sea dotted with yachts and catamarans at full sail. At sundown the celebrations at Mallory Square are right next door – you don't even have to leave your balcony to enjoy the scene and a private sundowner on occasion. Because of the location we were able to walk everywhere so the car remained parked for the week. On very hot days we collapsed at the outdoor pool and enjoyed lunch in the pool bar or up on deck overlooking the ocean. The Westin was bright and airy and the décor contemporary, the service was wonderful from check in to check out. Sometimes you book a hotel and hardly see it we, however, hung around the hotel for a lot of the time because it had everything you could want – the views were incredible (unbeatable in Key West), the food was great – the casual and the fine dining and wherever we were in Key West we could pop back to the hotel to cool off and take a break.

One memorable evening we left to go exploring – started at the Sunset Deck in the hotel with a panoramic backdrop of the ocean as the sun slipped below the horizon, lost track of time (as you do in Key West) and ate a beautiful meal (Key West Shrimp and Black Angus Beef) in the Westin's Sunset Pier Restaurant just below the balcony to our room. We hadn't ventured too far but it was perfect and we didn't have far to walk to get home!

The Westin Key West Resort & Marina; 245 Front Street, Key West, telephone 305 294 4000, www.westinkeywestresort.com.

The best meal in terms of food and location of our entire time away was in Latitudes Restaurant situated on Sunset Key a private island off the coast accessible by regular seven minute ferry transfers from the Westin

Marina. We arrived in time for sunset and our table was right on the beach with spectacular views of the Gulf of Mexico. We worried that the clouds that had started to sweep in from the open sea would mask the moment but Mother Nature didn't disappoint. It was without question the most spectacular of many spectacular sunsets of our trip. It's quite something to share a meal with good friends in the final moments of daylight beneath a sky bathed in shades of reds blending to orange. It was a magical night and a feast of the senses the dining experience was as stunning as the sundown. We talked afterwards about why this particular dinner won top marks all round from the adults and the teenagers and I think it was a combination of factors. Of course the perfect backdrop, the warmth of the welcome when we walked up from the pier at Sunset Key, the impeccable service – friendly, knowledgeable and not intrusive. The tropical feel of the island was matched by the food with imaginative twists to locally sourced ingredients. After some chilled cocktails and a brief glance at the menu we were drawn by the light and refreshing appetisers – perfect for the dying moments of a hot day. There were five of us and as usual we enjoyed sharing and tasting various dishes between us. Among the more memorable starters we had was a wonderful chilled seafood salad (\$16) with slivers of octopus, calamari marinated in citrus with shrimp, olives and shaved fennel served with a lemon olive oil – it was bursting with flavour. We also had tuna sushi (Tuna Crudo \$18) with oriental influences – crispy lotus root, white soy vinaigrette and yuzu (a fragrant yellow citrus fruit from China served with sea beans (also known as samphire or sea asparagus). The combination of flavours and the fresh tuna and seafood were just right for pre-sundown appetisers and we loved all the unusual flavours.

We ate the main part of the meal after the sun went down where we were well and truly ready to feast. Latitudes had a fantastic sommelier – I mention that

because we so rarely met a wine waiter during our travels in the US. So it was great to meet someone with a passion for wine and a knowledge to match. We talked through the various options from the wine list with him and chose the 2011 Kendall Jackson Cabernet Sauvignon for the meat eaters and a lovely crisp Villa Maria "Private Bin" Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough New Zealand.

The men at the table opted for steaks – it had been sometime since they had eaten red meat as we were in seafood heaven in the Keys. So they chose fillet steaks and dry aged prime New York striploin (both \$42) served very simply with garlic butter, fresh vegetables and some nice accompaniments like the chorizo stuffed peppers. Cumin and coriander dusted yellowtail snapper (\$34) balanced by a tangy lime salsa was my own choice – very little left by the time it went round the table for the obligatory tasting! Other favourites were the seared sea scallops (\$36) with a sea urchin emulsion and saffron butter braised potatoes and wonderfully fresh Florida lobster tail (\$42) poached in butter. Once we recovered sufficiently we enjoyed a "Flight of Cakes" – tiramisu, carrot cake, baked strawberry cheese cake, Black Forest gâteau, beignets, chocolate fondant and peanut butter banana pudding. I think we all have a second tummy for desert because I don't know how we did the platter justice...but we did! This was a memorable meal – the kind we will be talking about for many years to come. The setting guaranteed it would be a special night but there was so much more besides that made Latitudes our top spot. Without doubt the service was great but the food was exciting with some surprise touches and looking back I think we talked as much about the food and the joy of tasting so many different flavours as we did about the sunset. If you ever get to Key West reserve a spot on the beach at Latitudes (and you may have to do it a few weeks in advance). *Latitudes Key West, Sunset Key, westinsunsetkeycottages.com.*



When you eventually arrive at Key West you will be well and truly on Island time and ready for all that it has to offer. So what is there to do – well the short answer is lots of nothing if you can help it. Try not to get sucked into

the touristy bits around Duval Street and get out and explore the real Key West. We hired bikes at the Island Bike Rental store on Greene Street for \$17 a day and did the whole circumference of the Island along the ocean front. It's flat so not at all arduous. We also spent lots of time out on the ocean – fishing, snorkelling, paragliding or just enjoying the sunsets. We lost hours meandering around the town dipping in and out of galleries, watching the old men role Cuban cigars in the many tiny huts squeezed between the shops on Duval. I have some friends who moved to Key West and the most unlikely craic was had at what they promised was a local favourite – Drag Queen Bingo which happens at 5pm every Sunday at 801 Bourbon (801bourbon.com; 801 Duval Street). Q Mitch, a witty and bitchy drag queen, is the host and for \$5 you can play six games of bingo and you will laugh through most of it – the best three hours of entertainment money could buy.

AN ISLAND SPA

■ We went back to the island the following day to try out the spa. When we arrived for dinner we wandered through the wonderful rooms at Latitudes and found the spa tucked at the back. We were all feeling a bit muscle sore from all the swimming, cycling and walking so we booked in for some body treatments. I talked to Tracy McClellan the manager at the spa before we went and she advised on what treatment would work for our various aches, pains and sore spots. The signature treatment at The Spa at Sunset Key is the customised therapeutic massage – you can of course choose to have a classic Swedish or aromatherapy massage but like most people I have areas that need more work than others – years of writing and computer work mean that I always need more focus on my neck and shoulders. The tailor-made massage also allowed for various pressures and types of massage – 50 minutes of bliss. We also got to see more of the secluded 27 acre island where you can rent cottages for a tranquil hideaway. The spa experience was as much about the beautiful location – I chose the outside patio for the massage amid the wild orchids and the ocean breeze – no piped wave sounds here this was the real thing. westinsunsetkeycottages.com/spa; tel: 305 292 5370 for bookings.



NIGHTTIME

At night time the bars are hopping on Duval Street – you won't last an evening without dropping into Irish Kevins – even though there doesn't appear to be a fellow country man or woman in sight. Every night it blasts out live music – a U2 cover band had a regular nightly slot while we were there but they also turned their hand to the *Galway Girl* and *The Auld Triangle* – which surprisingly everyone in the vast bar seemed to know. Sloppy Joes is another haunt on the strip which you will inevitably find yourself in at some point. We had a memorable night drinking Jack Daniel shots with Cathy in Coyote Ugly and you can't escape Johnny Cash or Elvis blaring out nightly from The Bull and Whistle Bar on the corner of Duval and Caroline Street. It's one of the few remaining old open air bars in Key West and the murals on the wall tell their own story about the history of the town. However, venture three stories up above The Bull and you enter the Garden of Eden – a clothing optional bar! It might not for you but I can assure you that lots of people there were fully clothed and only some hardened locals turned up nude – usually either topless or bottomless. Although you will be encouraged to undress it is usually with good humour. The drinks aren't great, music is ok but still – it's worth a visit just to say you've been. The Hard Rock Café was a favourite with the teens late at night – especially for the nachos and the old memorabilia.



EATOUT

We discovered some great places to eat and chief among them was this little spot at 314 Duval called The Grand Café – owned by an Irish woman no less. This is a beautiful Victorian mansion with a wraparound porch and garden and I am so glad we found it on our first night because we went back again during our stay and on both occasions the service was exemplary and the food was wonderfully executed. It didn't take long for me to connect with Maria Weaver (nee Keane) the owner who comes from Killarney. Her parents still live there and when we she goes home to see them with her 14-year-old son occasionally but I don't think that Ireland will ever tempt her away from Key West. We sampled lots of the menu at The Grand but we all had our favourites. Mine was the carpaccio of beef tenderloin

with capers red onion and white truffle oil for \$14.99. The fellow diners told me that the red Thai chicken curry had a healthy kick to it; we all tried the Jumbo Lump crab cake with orange reduction and Key lime mustard (\$14.99) – delicious. The carnivore enjoyed a 10oz New York strip, we also tried grilled bluefin tuna salad which was spiced up with sesame ginger vinaigrette (\$15.99). I am not a dessert person but the teenagers really enjoyed the white chocolate bread and butter pudding, twice. If you make it to Key West put it on one of your dinner lists – you won't be disappointed and say hello to Maria. grandcafekeywest.com