

TRAVEL

There's more than fish to the Florida Keys

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

Most people go to Florida's Upper Keys to fish.

And, if you like to ocean fish for sail, dolphin (the fish not the mammal), yellow tail and grouper, you probably already know the Keys. And, if you like to fish the ocean bottom for bone fish that frequent the Bay, you might not be hooked to read on.

But, take heart: all you non-fisherpeople. Our family has been going to the Upper Keys, specifically Islamorada, at least annually for 20 years, and our T-shirts say: WE DON'T FISH.

This ostensibly tacky, wrapped-in-Christmas-tree-lights year-round, jeans-go-anywhere part of the world also belies dancing blue waters and delicious dining, accessible bike paths and a small but growing art colony, as well as Florida's most dependable weather.

You can't get lost. There's just one main road - U.S. 1 - a basically two-lane highway that runs from Florida City all the way to Key West. We count on it taking an hour and 15 minutes from Miami Airport - provided traffic is moderate and none of the bridges go up - to where we stay at Mile Marker 88 Oceanview. Everything's denoted by those MM's and whether it's on the bay or ocean side.

Down the road a piece is Islamorada - known as the sport fishing capital of the world. But it is also home to Cheeca Lodge, a world-class resort made famous by George Bush, which has just completed remodeling its 203 rooms and suites. Cheeca features a man-made beach, Par-3 golf course, tennis courts, a program for youngsters, some of the finest dining in the Keys and has an ecological bent. It has an extensive recycling program and asks guests - who pay from \$240-610 for rooms in season - to please conserve on towels and sheets.

Perhaps it's that ever-present sense of delicate ecological balance that is part of the Keys allure. It's a confined area - this series of small islands sown together by a single road - with a limited set of resources. But it took Hurricane Andrew, which in 1992 narrowly missed the Keys, that has brought development nearly to a halt.

It's pretty simple: If growth continued and another emergency occurred where people had to evacuate the Keys, the one road simply wouldn't be sufficient to get everyone out.

Laid back perfectly describes the Keys. A big day would be to amble over to the Wild Bird Sanctuary and watch them mend. Although we are minutes from Theater of the Sea, we've only gone once in all these years - on a rainy day - but you can swim with the dolphins (mammals not fish) and see them perform.

The John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park in Key Largo - the first underwater state park

in the continental United States - is a Mecca for divers and snorkelers. But overwater types can also paddle its lagoons, lie on its rather mediocre beach, or meander along the boardwalks which take you through the tangle of mangroves.

But my very favorite part of the Keys isn't even water-related. It sounds silly, but it's this two-lane road aptly called the Old Road because at one time it was U.S. 1. Desolate in some sections, condominium-dotted in others, it's a sanctuary for the runner, walker or biker.

Although you tend to lose track of time in the Keys, you'll have to look at your watch once in a while or at least the placement of the sun in the sky if you want to do these two things:

Even for non-fisherpeople, it's fun to wander over to the Holiday Isle marina about 3:30 p.m. to watch the chartered fishing boats come in. And crowds, sipping Holiday Isle's signature drink - a red rum runner, gather round to see the number and size of fish each boat brings in.

And you'll want to take in a sunset at the Looeet marked by a larger than life statue of this siren of Germanic legend whose singing lures sailors to shipwreck. Now this legendary Keys bar and restaurant lures people with live music to gather each evening in tribute to the sun's exit over the bay.

You should definitely plan to dine exclusively on fresh fish, Florida lobster and stonecrabs no matter whether you visit for a week or a month. I promise you won't get bored. And don't be put off by the honky-tonk look of Keys restaurants - or you'll surely go hungry.

Fresh fish is offered in a variety of ways almost everywhere. Florida lobster is not as luxurious as Maine lobster, but it's tasty and right out of the ocean. As for stone crabs, you can eat them hot or cold with a choice of sauces - and since they don't travel well and have a short season, make hay while the stonecrab shines.

For dessert, it has to be Key lime pie on which I consider myself rather an expert. But I must say a December article in the New York Times added some background. This is the dessert of which Craig Claiborne once wrote: "If I were asked to name the greatest of all regional American desserts, my answer might very well be Key lime pie."

But, I learned, few Key limes actually are grown in the Florida Keys. Those that I've seen on trees dappling residents' yards are most likely for their own use. Those grown in America mostly come from Homestead and other communities just north of the Keys. But the Key limes you find in our area markets are even more likely to be from Mexico and Guatemala.

No matter. Key lime pie is on all menus. But you'll find a huge variance in taste, consistency,

what's on the bottom and what's on the top. In my mind, the best has a buttery graham cracker bottom and a tart, creamy filling, with nothing - no moringue, no whipped cream - to temper the full flavor. Still, the Key lime baked Alaska at Marker 88 (yes you guessed it, it's at MM 88 Bayside), my favorite Keys restaurant, is also a nice treat.

Except for Key West, the Keys aren't known for its beaches - or so even I thought until our last trip there in November. And that's still the case in the Upper Keys. But if you travel south past Marathon, just beyond the Seven Mile Bridge, you'll discover or Bahai Honda State Park - designated "Best Beach in America" in 1994.

But don't go there expecting combed, wide, sandy beaches. Instead, it's narrow, rough, seaweed-strewn, weather beaten, laid back - a beach in perfect symmetry with the Keys themselves.



Big fish: Waiting for a charter boats to return at Holiday Isle are, left to right, Jon Ginsberg, Jennifer Berne, Marchia Mumbrae and Bruce Mumbrae, all of West Bloomfield.



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At play: Allyson Ginsberg plays at the man-made lake and beach at Cheeca Lodge.

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