

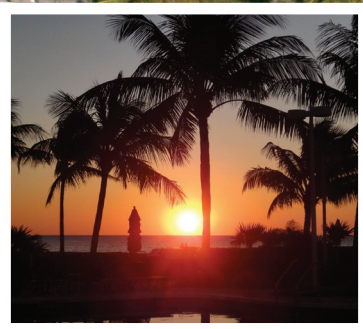
SEVEN DAYS IN Margaritaville

By Annette Gallagher Weisman

As I cross over Seven Mile Bridge that connects the Middle and Lower Florida Keys, the sky is a dazzling blue, and the surrounding water shimmers in varying shades of turquoise. It's the kind of idyllic scene that warrants driving a sports car while wearing an enormous, floppy hat and Hollywood-style sunglasses. I'm in a modest rental *en route* to Key West. But the 150-mile drive from Miami is pleasant, the windows are down, and life is good.

During Key West's heyday in the early 20th century, it was one of the most desirable and prosperous places to live in the U.S. But its fortunes declined, workers left, and during the Depression people no longer flocked to "Paradise."

Now tourism is on the upswing and new residents seek the balmy weather and laid-back lifestyle. Just the name brings to mind a collage of images: Key Lime Pie and Cuban cigars (Cuba is just 90 miles away); writers such as Ernest "Papa" Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and Hunter S. Thompson; and President Truman, too, who was often ensconced in his "Little White House."



Smathers Beach photo by Andy Newman/Florida Keys News Bureau, courtesy www.fl-keys.com
Conch Tour Train and Key lime pie photos by Bob Krist/Florida Keys News Bureau, courtesy www.fl-keys.com
Sunset and Key West home photos by Annette Gallagher Weisman

Smathers Beach

Part Bahamian, part Cuban, the island has many influences, including that of former resident Jimmy Buffet, who's performed at the Margaritaville Café on Duval Street to the delight of his "parrothead" fans, who are always ready to par-tay!

Festivals dot the calendar year round, including Hemingway Days in July. Fantasy Fest in October is a major 10-day affair, including the two-day Bahamian Goombay Days. These festivals are barely over when homes, businesses and even cars are bedecked for the November and December holidays.

"Island time" reigns, and many residents, also known as Conchs, enjoy the art of lolling. Or sunset gazing. Nowhere is this better than at Mallory Square and Pier in Old Town, where people gather each evening to applaud the sun's performance.

But there's a lot more to do on both land and sea than kick back, from birding to biplane rides to bike riding and scuba diving.

My husband and I took an eco tour via kayak to see local wildlife with a group called Fury, and a blissful champagne sunset sail on a 60-foot yacht with Floridays Yacht Charters.

When exhausted, it's beach time. I recommend the wide, sandy Smathers Beach in New Town. The best beach for swimming is at Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park; it also has hiking and biking trails. The fort was built by the Army in 1845, and Yankee forces were based there during the Civil War.

Other historical sites and museums abound: Key West Shipwreck Treasures Museum, Harry S. Truman Little White House and the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum. Other places worth seeing include the Key West Butterfly and Nature Conservatory, Audubon House and Tropical Gardens, and Key West Aquarium.

Take the Conch Train or Old Town Trolley to get your bearings or just for fun. The trolley has 13 stops, so you can get on and off at various places. Walking, though, is one of the pleasures of Key West. Biking too. With just over seven square miles, you can get around pretty much everywhere without a car. Away from the bustle, side streets reveal examples of its fine architecture

such as Victorian homes and "Bay" houses painted in bright Bahamian colors.

It doesn't take long to notice the roosters. Why did the chicken cross the road? Because in Key West it can! Roosters, hens and chickens tiptoe about or just stand idly in the middle of the street like India's revered cows. Key Westers love their fowl. There's even a Chickenfest! Chickens will appear unexpectedly in front gardens or perched on rooftops, as I observed while having lunch at Blue Heaven, one of my favorite restaurants.

Hemingway is said to have adjudicated boxing matches here at Blue Heaven. I just judge the Shrimp Melt and Key Lime Pie, which I deem scrumptious.

For seafood addicts like me, there are numerous places along the water to choose from. I like Half Shell Raw Bar, a super-casual place with wooden benches for seating. Many other seafood restaurants line the docks – take a stroll while watching fishing boats and yachts gently tugging at their moorings, then choose the one you like best.

Two of my favorite places for evening dining are Pisces and Rooftop Café. Pisces is small, with intimate lighting, and is a bit more formal than most on the island. Andy Warhol originals adorn the walls,

including portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Mick Jagger. Rooftop Café, with indoor/outdoor seating and a full bar, has a more multi-occasional feel. Executive Chef Brendan Orr's cuisine, such as his Really Big Shrimp and Grits, begs repeat visits.

After a week of activity, including Thanksgiving dinner with family and friends, it feels good on the last day to relax by the pool, margarita in hand. Two biplanes, one bright red and one yellow, buzz and swirl a few hundred feet overhead and then zoom back over the ocean like a couple of carefree escapees. I feel like I've escaped too, from the cold, slush, sleet and frosty weather back home. I'm not sure about "wasting away in Margaritaville," but a few more weeks of this would be Paradise.

For more information visit www.fl-keys.com. ❁



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