

Seven Mile Bridge—  
it's actually 6.79 miles  
long—is one of 42  
bridges that connect  
the Florida Keys

# A Low-Key Drive

Strung together by bridges and causeways like an unclasped necklace, the Florida Keys transport you back to a mellower way of life, filled with Key lime pie, scruffy beaches, and odd birds of all stripes. By Lindsay Van Gelder

Living in Miami Beach, Fla., undeniably has its charms, but sometimes I need a break from international supermodels and Armani-clad valets. Luckily for me, only 50 miles south there's a time machine to an older, quieter Florida, where the only glitz is the sun's reflection on the silvery scales of the tarpon.

Home to an odd mix of rednecks, hippies, and people committed to wearing fishing vests every day instead of ties or panty hose, the Florida Keys have a loose, unpretentious vibe. Too many tourists hurtle through them on the four- to five-hour drive between the discos of South Beach and the bars of Key West. But I prefer slower going.

The road itself, the Overseas Highway (U.S. 1), is one of the biggest draws—a mostly two-laner that stretches southwest 125 miles over dozens of islands until it reaches mile zero in Key West. The Atlantic is on your left, the Gulf of Mexico is on the right, and spectacular vistas of turquoise sea and emerald vegetation are all around.

As I cross Card Sound Road, the prettier of the two gateways from the mainland, my most pressing issue

is where to eat. The majority of restaurants in the Keys are of the Tiki Shack school of architecture—that is, when they don't look like auto body shops. But what matters is the local fish: fried, grilled, jerked, or variously dusted and encrusted. I opt for the **Pilot House Marina & Restaurant** in Key Largo, a classic waterfront joint with a glass-bottomed deck (13 Seagate Blvd., pilothousemarina.com, fish sandwiches from \$9). While I nosh on my blackened-grouper sandwich, I see a barracuda lurking like a Mafia don underneath my feet. The waitress tells me a mother and baby manatee were spotted a few days earlier.

Islamorada, a town occupying five islands about halfway to Key West, makes a perfect weekend base. The 25-room **Pines & Palms Resort**, a collection of whitewashed cottages on a private beach, gets the Keys atmosphere just right: laid-back, unfussy, and all about enjoying the outdoors (MM 80.4, pinesandpalms.com, rooms from \$99).

I love the access to wildlife in the Keys, from curious dolphins to small Key deer that will eat carrots out of your hand. The next morning I head for the **Florida Keys Wild Bird Center**, a sanctuary for injured wild



**WHEN TO GO**  
Anytime. Even in low season (August to October), temperatures are in the 80s and the water is bathtub-warm. You'll get the best combo of prices and weather from April to June.

**WHAT TO PACK**  
Even your most scuffed-up flip-flops won't be too casual.

**GETTING AROUND**  
Locals refer to highway mile markers (MM) rather than physical addresses when giving directions.

birds (MM 93.6, 305/852-4486, entry by donation). The open-air center is a mini Galápagos. Most of the birds are uncaged, and one pelican is so mellow that he lets me stroke his tail feathers like he's a lap cat. A yellow-crowned night heron perches near a sign explaining that he has returned annually to the same spot since his rehab there 13 years ago, the ornithological equivalent of a Cheers regular with his own bar stool.

Rather than wait for the birds' 3:30 p.m. feeding time, I drive 12 miles south to **Ma's Fish Camp** for my own lunch. I've been hearing buzz that the year-old Ma's is an upstart contender for the best-Key-lime-pie tiara, and I can see why (105 Palm Ave., Islamorada, 305/517-9611, slice of pie \$5). Ma's pie has a pale, silky, tart lime heart, a graham cracker crust, and a high hat of slightly burnt meringue. The chef, Barbara Cockerham, says that unlike some of her competitors, she doesn't tinker much with the classic recipe. "A Key lime pie is not supposed to be frozen," she says with a shudder. "Or topped with Cool Whip. Or green."

To work the pie off, I rent a kayak at **Robbie's Marina**, four miles farther south, and paddle about 30 minutes to Lignumvitae Key Botanical State Park, where I navigate past tangled tunnels of mangrove and gumbo-limbo trees—which locals call tourist trees because of their red, peeling bark (MM 77.5, robbies.com, kayak rental \$50 per day).

There's still time for a walk before dinner, and I see a free parking spot at **Anne's Beach**, a scruffy-but-secluded stretch of sand at MM 73. Like most beaches on a road where you can often see the whole island in your peripheral vision, Anne's is tiny. And this being the Keys, it's not without a few eccentrics. At one point during my stroll, I look up to see an old guy in a thong, sunbathing standing up.

As the day draws to a close, I drive back north (the setting sun behind me—beware late afternoon driving in the other direction), bound for my favorite restaurant, whose name, **Marker 88**, guarantees you'll always find it (marker88.info, cocktails from \$8). I settle into a glider swing and sip a blood-orange margarita while the color-coordinated sunset slides down the Gulf.

## Keys Kitsch

You'll find no shortage of tacky souvenir shacks—think manatee-shaped mailboxes—but I'm drawn to the more authentic mementos.

Look, but don't touch! The Keys are home to the only living reef in the continental U.S.; it's illegal to take coral from the beach.

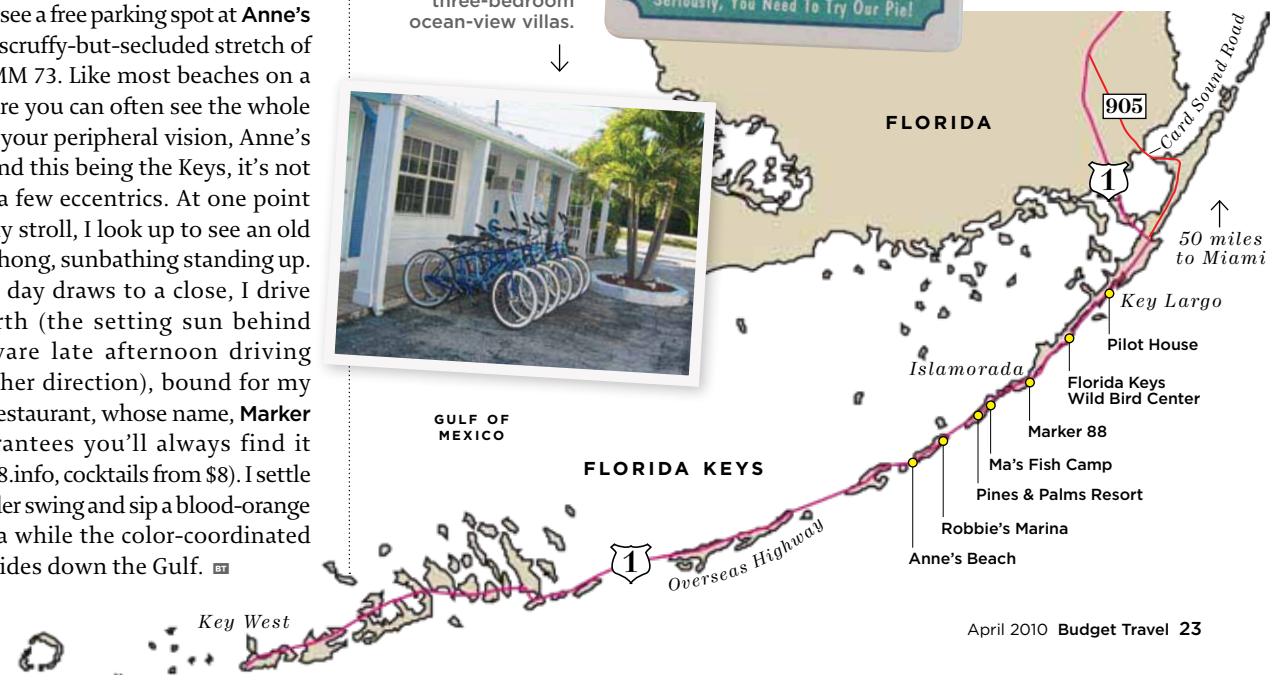


My takeaway from Robbie's Marina, where I fed the resident tarpon population—the sumo wrestlers of the fish world.



Key lime pie shacks like this are everywhere, but no one talks about the fact that the main ingredient comes mostly from Mexico.

I want to go back to Pines & Palms with my kids and grandkids and stay in one of the three-bedroom ocean-view villas.



FROM TOP: M. TIMOTHY O'KEEFE/ALAMY; COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER

COURTESY LINDSY VAN GELDER (5); VISOR AND COASTER: VERONICA IBANEZ