

## Unlocking the Magic of the Florida Keys: Key West (Part 3 of 3)

by Maureen Austin, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Our final and southernmost stop on this tour of the Florida Keys is the most well known section of this majestic series of islands. Key West has had many famous residents and a reputation for laid back lifestyles unlike any other resort town in the world.

The focus in Key West tends to be either in-town on famous Duval Street and vicinity, or off shore - sailing, diving, and fishing. Beaches are few and far between, so let's take a moment to put that topic behind us.

Get a little history with your beach by taking in the sights and sands at Fort Zachary Taylor, encompassing 87 acres on the island's southwest corner.

If the locals go there, you know it's good. Most Key West residents take seaside refuge at South Beach located at the far end of famous Duval Street.

Speaking of Duval Street, let's talk all there is to offer on this main thoroughfare. Shops, restaurants, clubs are crammed into this festive and busy area. You'll find an array of specialty shops located in the area, where you can pick up everything from Key Lime cookies to Key Lime bath products.

Key West, as most folks know, has a rich literary history. Writers have been drawn to the laid back atmosphere for years, even as far back as the early 1930's. Ernest Hemingway's home has been lovingly preserved here and you can also take in Sloppy Joe's, one of his favorite hang outs. One of Key West's other famous residents, Jimmy Buffet, introduced the world to the Margaritaville way of life - soak that in by visiting the original Margaritaville, located at 500 Duval St.

Mallory Square is near the northern end of Duvall Street - a trip to Key West just wouldn't be complete without a photo op there. This place is well known for its spectacular viewing stage for that famous Key West sunset you'll be talking about long after the vacation is over. You'll find an eclectic mix of street performers as well.

Kids of all ages will enjoy the Key West Aquarium, which is the oldest attraction here. Free guided tours are an excellent way to take in all the museum has to offer. Treasure hunters will appreciate a visit to the Mel

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Fisher Maritime Museum located on Greene Street.

If you prefer someone else to do the guiding as you tour the city, then you are indeed in luck. The Conch Tour Train is a tram that wends its way through the town's streets, or choose the Old Town Trolley, known for humorous hosts that provide a rich history as you make your way around. Air tours are also available at Key West Airport.

Divers and water explorers will want to head to Key West Marine Park. Swim-only zones in the waters here provide a serene and safe way to explore the majesty under the surface.

Fishing is big here and there are numerous opportunities to catch the big one by choosing from the many outstanding charter boat tours.

70 miles from Key West are a small string of islands known as the Dry Tortugas. If you love nature, you'll find this side trip well worth the time it takes to get there. Fort Jefferson was built to protect the Gulf of Mexico; however it served as a prison in the Civil War. Now open to visitors, Fort Jefferson is a national monument run by the National Park Service. Camping is an option to extend your visit here.

The widest range of accommodations in the Keys is found in Key West, from the traditional conch style cottages to multi-million dollar resorts by national chains, as well as condominiums and family-run motor inns.

Most major cruise lines include a stop at Key West on Western Caribbean itineraries. Disney Cruise Line is no exception. If you are sailing with Mickey, you'll surely want to take advantage of the numerous shore excursions available to you as you visit Key West. From kayaking, touring the waters on a glass bottom boat or snorkeling trips, water play abounds. If you'd rather stick to shore consider one of the many landlubber excursions - a walking tour or Pirate Soul and Shipwreck Historemum tour.

However you get here, whenever you get here, be sure to relax and take in the island way of life. Key West is like no other city in the world and it will surely provide you with memories to last long after you depart.

*If you're looking for the the first two installments of this series, check out the May 3, 2006 and June 29, 2006 issues of PassPorter News.*

*About The Author: Maureen Austin is co-owner of Ears to You Travel and a proud Florida native. Born in South Florida and having lived all over the state, she enjoys writing about the Sunshine State's many attractions and*

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natural beauty.

Article last updated: 7/13/2006

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