

Key West Travel Guide

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Things to do in Key West

Landmarks & Monuments

Key West's landmarks trace its odd history as a wrecking port, cigar town, and literary hideaway, all wrapped up in candy-colored Conch architecture.



Must See

Southernmost Point Buoy

15 minutes No Booking Needed



Map

The single most photographed object in Key West — a concrete buoy marking the **southernmost point in the continental United States**, just 90 miles from Cuba. Expect a line for photos any time after 9am.



Must See

Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum

1-1.5 hours No Booking Needed



Map

The Spanish Colonial house where Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms* and *To Have and Have Not*, now home to dozens of **polydactyl six-toed cats** descended from his original pet, Snow White.



Must See

Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park

2-3 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A Civil War-era fort turned state park with the **best beach in Key West** at its doorstep. Snorkel the rocky shoreline, then tour original cannon batteries under moss-draped trees.



Top Pick

Key West Lighthouse

45 minutes No Booking Needed



Map

Built in 1848 and still standing 88 feet tall across the street from the Hemingway House. Climb the 88 steps for a **360-degree view** over Old Town's tin roofs and the surrounding sea.





Top Pick Book Ahead

Dry Tortugas National Park & Fort Jefferson

Full day Book Ahead



Map

A massive 19th-century brick fortress rising from a remote island 70 miles west of Key West, reachable only by **ferry or seaplane**. Surrounded by some of the clearest snorkeling water in Florida.

Tips for Landmarks & Monuments

- Visit the Southernmost Point buoy early morning or after sunset to skip the crowds.
- Buy Dry Tortugas ferry tickets weeks in advance — it sells out in high season.
- Fort Zachary Taylor charges a small vehicle/pedestrian entry fee, cash or card.



Museums & Galleries

Small, quirky, and personal — Key West's museums lean into shipwrecks, eccentrics, and outsider art rather than grand institutions.



Top Pick

Mel Fisher Maritime Museum

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

Gold bars, emeralds, and silver coins recovered from the 1622 wreck of the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, one of the richest shipwreck salvages in history, displayed a few blocks from where it was found.



Notable

Key West Museum of Art & History (Custom House)

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

An 1891 red-brick Custom House packed with exhibits on wreckers, cigar rollers, and Cuban immigration that shaped the city, plus rotating contemporary art shows.



Notable

Key West Shipwreck Museum

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

A theatrical, actor-led walk through the city's 19th-century wrecking industry, when salvaging sunken ships made Key West the **richest city per capita** in the United States.

Tips for Museums & Galleries

- A combo ticket covers several Historic Society sites including the Lighthouse and Custom House.
- Most museums are compact — plan 45-60 minutes each, not a full afternoon.



Squares & Streets

Old Town Key West is built for wandering on foot or by bike — porch-lined lanes, a chaotic party street, and a working harbor at sunset.



Must See

Duval Street

2+ hours No Booking Needed



Map

The main artery of Key West, running **ocean to gulf** — bars, drag shows, T-shirt shops, and live music by night; galleries and cafés by day. Loud, campy, and unmissable.



Must See

Mallory Square

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

The harbor-front plaza where the entire town gathers every evening for the **Sunset Celebration** — street performers, artisan stalls, and a genuinely spectacular horizon over the Gulf.



Notable

Bahama Village

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

A historic Afro-Bahamian neighborhood west of Duval Street with narrow lanes, roosters wandering underfoot, and some of the city's most laid-back local eateries away from the tourist strip.

Tips for Squares & Streets

- Arrive at Mallory Square 45-60 minutes before official sunset for a spot at the rail.
- Rent a bike or scooter — Old Town is small but the heat makes long walks tiring.



Parks & Gardens

Tropical, dense, and a little wild — Key West's green spaces double as bird sanctuaries and butterfly houses.



Top Pick

Key West Butterfly and Nature Conservatory

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

A glass-enclosed tropical habitat with hundreds of free-flying butterflies, flamingos, and a waterfall, right in the middle of Old Town — a favorite with families.



Notable

West Martello Tower / Key West Garden Club

45 minutes No Booking Needed



Map

Ruins of a Civil War-era fort reclaimed by a lush tropical garden of orchids and native plants, with ocean views over Higgs Beach and far fewer crowds than the main sights.

Tips for Parks & Gardens

- The Butterfly Conservatory is fully air-conditioned and misted — a good midday heat break.



Beaches & Coastal Areas

Key West's beaches are small and rocky rather than powder-sand, but the water is warm and calm nearly year-round.



Top Pick

Smathers Beach

2-3 hours No Booking Needed



Map

The longest beach in Key West, with a wide stretch of sand, watersports rentals (parasailing, jet skis, paddleboards), and plenty of room to spread out.



Notable

Higgs Beach

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A calmer, more local beach with a fishing pier, picnic pavilions, and the sobering **African Cemetery at Higgs Beach** memorial nearby, marking the graves of rescued Africans from 1860 slave ships.

Tips for Beaches & Coastal Areas

- Bring water shoes — most Key West beaches have a rocky, not sandy, seabed.
- Fort Zachary Taylor's beach (listed under Landmarks) is generally rated the best for swimming and snorkeling.



Tours & Activities

Water is the whole point of Key West — snorkeling, sailing, and fishing dominate the activity list, alongside its famous sunset cruises.



Must See Book Ahead

Sunset Sail on the Historic Schooners

2 hours Book Ahead

Multiple tall ships (like the *Western Union* and *America 2.0*) depart from the harbor nightly for a two-hour sunset cruise with drinks included — the classic Key West evening.



Must See Book Ahead

Snorkeling Trip to the Florida Reef

3-4 hours Book Ahead

Catamaran trips out to the only living coral barrier reef in the continental US, part of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary — gear, instruction, and usually a rum punch included.



Notable

Conch Tour Train

1.5 hours Book Ahead

A 90-minute narrated tram loop past all of Old Town's major sights — a good first-hour orientation before deciding what to revisit on foot.



Notable

Backcountry Flats Fishing Charter

4-8 hours Book Ahead

Guided light-tackle fishing trips into the shallow flats around Key West for tarpon, bonefish, and permit — a bucket-list trip for anglers, no experience required.

Tips for Tours & Activities

- Book sunset sails a day ahead in winter high season (Dec-Apr) — they routinely sell out.
- Reef snorkeling trips run rain or shine; check the operator's cancellation policy for rough seas.



Day Trips & Excursions

The Overseas Highway connects Key West to the rest of the Florida Keys, making several worthwhile day trips possible by car or tour.



Top Pick

Seven Mile Bridge & Bahia Honda State Park

Half day No Booking Needed



Map

Drive the iconic Seven Mile Bridge north to Bahia Honda, widely considered the **best beach in the Keys**, with turquoise water and views of the old railroad bridge.



Notable

Islamorada

Half day No Booking Needed



Map

The self-proclaimed "Sportfishing Capital of the World," about 75 minutes north, with the History of Diving Museum and excellent seafood shacks along US-1.

Tips for Day Trips & Excursions

- The drive itself along US-1 is the attraction — allow extra time to stop at overlooks.
- Combine Bahia Honda with a Seven Mile Bridge photo stop for one efficient half-day loop.



Nightlife & Entertainment

Key West after dark trades quiet streets for open-air bars, live music spilling onto sidewalks, and a laid-back party spirit that never quite clocks out. From historic saloons to rooftop lounges with harbor views, the island's nightlife scene is as much about atmosphere and characters as it is about drinks.



Must See
Sloppy Joe's Bar
1-3 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A Key West institution since the 1930s, this legendary bar was once a favorite haunt of **Ernest Hemingway** and remains one of the liveliest spots on the island. Expect *live bands* playing rock, country, and island tunes almost every night, a boisterous crowd of locals and visitors, and walls covered in memorabilia from decades of history. The frozen drinks and conch fritters keep people fueled well past midnight. Arrive early on weekends to snag a table near the stage, as the bar fills up fast once the music starts. It is loud, unpretentious, and quintessentially Key West, a must for anyone wanting to feel the pulse of the islands famous bar-hopping culture.



Top Pick
Irish Kevin's
1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

Right in the heart of the entertainment strip, this rowdy pub is known for **solo acoustic performers** who keep the crowd singing along late into the night. Expect a packed dance floor most evenings, cold beer, and a party atmosphere that spills out onto the sidewalk. The energy here is high-volume and high-fun, making it a favorite stop for bachelor and bachelorette groups touring the strip. There is no cover charge, so visitors can pop in for one song or stay for hours. Bartenders pour generously and the crowd tends to be friendly and easygoing. It is a reliable choice for anyone looking for a classic, unfiltered slice of the islands nightlife without a reservation or dress code.



Top Pick
Green Parrot Bar
1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A weathered, unpretentious neighborhood dive dating back over a century, the **Green Parrot** is beloved by locals as the anti-tourist-trap bar just off the main strip. Its open-air windows, ceiling fans, and eclectic decor set the scene for *blues, funk, and reggae* acts that play several nights a week. There is no glitz here, just cold drinks, a friendly crowd, and genuinely good live music without the crush of the busier strip bars. Regulars trade stories at the bar while a mixed-age crowd sways along to the band. It captures an older, grittier version of Key West that still exists a few blocks off Duval Street, appealing to travelers who want nightlife with more character and less spectacle.





Notable

Latitudes Beach Club Sunset Bar

2-3 hours Book Ahead



Map

Accessible only by a short ferry ride to Sunset Key, this **waterfront lounge** offers a quieter, more upscale alternative to the raucous downtown scene. Guests sip craft cocktails on the sand as the sun dips below the horizon, with soft island music playing in the background. The setting is intimate and romantic, popular with couples celebrating anniversaries or simply looking to escape the crowds. Food service ranges from light bites to full dinner, so an evening here can easily stretch into a leisurely night out. The ferry transfer adds a small sense of adventure and exclusivity. It is an ideal pick for travelers who want a memorable evening view paired with a calmer, more polished nightlife experience.



Notable

Garden of Eden Rooftop Bar

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

Perched atop a building along the entertainment strip, this open-air **rooftop bar** has a laid-back, clothing-optional reputation that has made it a quirky local legend. Beyond the novelty, it offers sweeping views over the streets below, a relaxed tropical vibe, and a solid drink menu perfect for unwinding after a day of sightseeing. Live DJs or acoustic sets sometimes play in the evenings, adding to the breezy, anything-goes atmosphere. It draws an eclectic mix of free spirits and curious first-timers. The rooftop setting makes it a great spot to watch the energy of the street below while enjoying a cocktail above the noise, offering a different angle on the city's after-dark scene.

Tips for Nightlife & Entertainment

- Most bars along the main strip have no cover charge, so bar-hopping on foot is easy and affordable
- Live music typically starts around 8-9pm and many venues stay open until 2am or later
- Wear comfortable shoes since the best nightlife crawl covers several blocks of uneven sidewalks
- Book the Sunset Key ferry transfer in advance if visiting Latitudes, as the last boat back leaves at a set time
- Weekends get crowded fast, so arrive early for a seat near the stage at popular live-music bars



With Kids

Beyond the historic landmarks, Key West has a playful side built for its youngest visitors. Splash pads, a touch-tank aquarium, glass-bottom boat rides, and a jungle-like secret garden give families plenty of ways to fill an afternoon without a museum-fatigue meltdown.



Must See

Key West Aquarium

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

Tucked beside Mallory Square, this **historic open-air aquarium** has been introducing kids to marine life since the 1930s, long before Florida built its bigger theme-park tanks. Guides run *hands-on touch-tank sessions* where children can carefully handle horseshoe crabs, sea stars, and small nurse sharks, and the shark-feeding demonstration is a reliable crowd-pleaser for younger visitors who want to see something with teeth up close. Exhibits cover local Keys species like tarpon, sea turtles, and stingrays in tanks sized for eye-level viewing rather than towering displays, which keeps toddlers engaged without the overwhelm of a larger facility. The whole visit runs about an hour, making it easy to slot in between beach time or a walk down Duval Street. Indoor and shaded outdoor sections offer a break from the midday sun, and the gift shop leans into ocean-themed souvenirs kids actually want.



Top Pick

Truman Waterfront Park

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

This sprawling **waterfront green space** on the site of the old naval station gives kids room to actually run, something in short supply on Key West's narrow historic streets. A splash pad cools things down on hot afternoons, a modern playground covers climbing and swinging, and a skate park and basketball courts keep older children occupied while parents relax on the open lawn. The park also hosts an amphitheater where free community events and concerts pop up throughout the year, so it is worth checking the schedule before a visit in case there is live entertainment to catch. Wide waterfront paths are ideal for scooters or a family bike ride, with views out toward the harbor and passing cruise ships. Unlike the paid attractions clustered around Duval Street, this is free to enter and shaded by mature trees, making it a natural stop to burn off energy before or after a day of sightseeing.



Notable

Glass Bottom Boat Tour

2 hours Book Ahead



Map

For families with children too young or too nervous for snorkeling, a **glass-bottom boat cruise** out to the coral reef is the easiest way to see Florida's underwater world without anyone getting wet. Large viewing panels built into the hull let kids press their faces against the glass and watch parrotfish, sergeant majors, and coral formations glide by while a naturalist narrates what is visible below. Trips typically run a couple of hours round-trip from the marina near Mallory Square, with shaded seating and an upper deck for catching the breeze. It is a gentler alternative to the reef snorkeling trips also popular in Key West, and works well for toddlers, grandparents, or anyone prone to seasickness who still wants reef views. Many operators time the return so passengers catch part of the sunset over the water. Snacks and drinks are usually available on board, and the boats are stable enough that motion sickness is rarely an issue.





Optional

Bayview Park

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

A neighborhood favorite away from the tourist crowds, **Bayview Park** pairs a shaded playground with a splash pad that runs during the warmer months, giving younger kids a low-key place to cool off between sightseeing stops. The park sits under a canopy of large trees, including century-old specimens that provide welcome relief from the Florida sun, and there are picnic tables and open lawn for a packed lunch. A public pool adjoins the park for swimming lessons or lap time, and the adjacent dog park and tennis courts mean there is usually something happening for every member of the family. It is far less polished than the attractions closer to Duval Street, but that is part of the appeal: local families use it as their everyday park, so kids get a chance to play alongside Key West residents rather than only other tourists. Parking is easy and free, a rarity in the historic district.



Minor

Nancy Forrester's Secret Garden

45 minutes No Booking Needed



Map

Hidden behind an unmarked gate just off Simonton Street, this **lush tropical garden** feels like stepping into a jungle in miniature, with towering palms, orchids, and free-roaming parrots that make it feel more like an adventure than a formal botanical stop. Kids tend to love the sense of discovery, following narrow paths between dense plantings while colorful macaws call out overhead, and there is no rush to move quickly through since the whole space can be explored at a toddler's pace. It is quieter and less crowded than the bigger name attractions nearby, which makes it a good option for a mid-afternoon breather when children need a change of pace from beaches and museums. The garden is compact enough to see in under an hour but full of small details, insects, lizards, hidden sculptures, that reward slow exploration. Comfortable shoes are recommended since paths can be uneven and shaded rather than paved.

Tips for With Kids

- Visit the aquarium or garden during midday heat and save the splash pad or park for late afternoon when it cools off.
- Book glass-bottom boat tours a day ahead in high season, as family-friendly departures fill quickly.
- Bring water shoes for splash pad visits and reef-tour walkways, which can get hot or slippery.
- Pack sun protection and refillable water bottles, as shade is limited between stops in the historic district.



Events Calendar

Key West runs on a rhythm of festivals, block parties, and sunset gatherings that unfold across the island all year long. From songwriting showcases in spring to the riotous costumes of autumn and a midnight conch shell drop on New Year's Eve, these recurring happenings are as much a part of the destination as the beaches. Dates below reflect the expected 2026 schedule, though visitors should confirm exact days closer to their trip.



Must See

Key West Songwriters Festival

5 days (multi-venue) No Booking Needed



Map

Held each spring, the **Key West Songwriters Festival** returns May 6 to 10, 2026, filling Duval Street bars and intimate venues with the writers behind some of country and pop music's biggest hits. Unlike a typical concert, this festival is built around *in-the-round* performances where three or four songwriters trade songs and stories on the same small stage, often previewing unreleased material. Venues like Irish Kevin's, The Bull, and the Hard Rock Cafe host free daytime sets, while evening showcases at bigger rooms sometimes carry a cover charge. It is a favorite for music lovers who want an up-close, unplugged experience rather than a stadium show. Expect the island to feel especially lively, with locals and repeat visitors treating it as an unofficial kickoff to the warmer season. Comfortable shoes help since most people bar-hop between multiple sets in a single evening.



Must See

Fantasy Fest

10 days (island-wide) No Booking Needed



Map

Key West's biggest annual event, **Fantasy Fest**, takes over the island from October 23 to November 1, 2026, ten days of costume parties, themed parades, and elaborate body-painted street processions. What began decades ago as a way to boost off-season tourism has grown into a Mardi-Gras-style spectacle, with a different costume theme announced each year and a headline parade down Duval Street that draws enormous crowds. Daytime hours bring family-friendly pet costume contests and a children's parade, while nights turn distinctly adult, especially along the famous Duval Street strip. Accommodation across the island sells out months in advance, and prices rise accordingly. Visitors who prefer a quieter trip may want to avoid this window entirely, while costume enthusiasts consider it a bucket-list event. Either way, it is the clearest example of Key West's anything-goes personality on full display.



Must See

New Year's Eve Sunset Celebration and Conch Drops

1 evening No Booking Needed



Map

On December 31, 2026, Key West closes out the year with three simultaneous countdowns that only this island could pull off: a giant conch shell lowered at Sunset Pier, a red high-heel shoe drop featuring a drag performer outside Bourbon Street Pub, and a pirate wench descending from the mast of a tall ship at the Historic Seaport. Crowds move between Mallory Square and the waterfront bars throughout the evening, with live music, fireworks over the harbor, and street performers adding to the carnival atmosphere. It is a distinctly local twist on a globally familiar night, blending the theatrical flair of Duval Street with the maritime setting that defines the island. Arriving early to claim a spot near the water is worthwhile, as the Historic Seaport and Mallory Square both fill up well before midnight. Warm clothing is rarely needed given Key West's mild winter nights.





Top Pick

Key West Pride

5 days (multi-venue) No Booking Needed



Map

Every June, the island turns into one of Florida's most colorful celebrations as **Key West Pride** takes over downtown from June 4 to 8, 2026. The week combines a beach party at Fort Zachary Taylor, drag brunches, a sunset tea dance, and a rainbow-lit street festival along Duval Street, capped by a Saturday parade that draws thousands of spectators. Key West has long been a haven for LGBTQ+ travelers, and Pride week is when that history is celebrated most visibly, with rainbow flags hanging from nearly every guesthouse and bar. Many of the events are free and family-friendly during the day, shifting to an adults-only party atmosphere after dark. Hotel rooms book up quickly for this week, so early reservations are *strongly* recommended. It is a joyful, high-energy way to experience the island's famously inclusive spirit.



Top Pick

Hemingway Days

5 days (multi-venue) No Booking Needed



Map

Timed around Ernest Hemingway's July birthday, **Hemingway Days** runs July 15 to 19, 2026, and is best known for its raucous Papa Hemingway Look-Alike Contest at Sloppy Joe's Bar, where dozens of bearded men in fishing vests compete for the title. Beyond the contest, the week includes a short story writing competition, a marlin fishing tournament, and readings that celebrate Hemingway's decade living on the island. The event captures Key West's playful, literary side and its enduring fascination with its most famous former resident. Streets around the historic Old Town fill with visitors snapping photos alongside look-alikes, and several bars extend their happy hours to match the festive mood. It is equal parts literary tribute and beach-town party, which sums up Key West rather well. Arrive early for the look-alike contest since seating at Sloppy Joe's disappears fast.

Tips for Events Calendar

- Book accommodation months ahead for Fantasy Fest and New Year's Eve, as prices surge and rooms sell out island-wide.
- Many festival events are free to attend on the street, but headline parties and reserved seating often require advance tickets.
- Duval Street becomes pedestrian-heavy or fully closed during major events, so plan extra walking time and expect limited parking.
- Check official festival websites close to your travel dates, since exact days can shift slightly from year to year.



Hidden Gems

Beyond the crowded piers and famous facades, Key West hides a quieter side: overgrown gardens, oddball museums, and cemetery lanes where the island's eccentric history lives on. These spots reward travelers willing to wander a few blocks off Duval Street.



Must See

Nancy Forrester's Secret Garden

45 minutes No Booking Needed



Map

Hidden behind an unmarked gate near Simonton Street, this **dense botanical hideaway** feels nothing like the manicured gardens elsewhere on the island. Founded decades ago by a naturalist and artist, it is planted almost entirely with native and rare tropical species, sheltering resident macaws and free-roaming cats among the ferns and towering bamboo. There are no gift shops or crowds here, just a shaded, humid tangle of paths that make Duval Street feel a world away. Entry is by small donation, and visitors often have the place nearly to themselves. It is best appreciated slowly, camera in hand, as an antidote to the island's louder attractions and a genuine local secret many residents still do not know exists.



Top Pick

Key West Cemetery

1-1.5 hours No Booking Needed



Map

Tucked on Solares Hill, this **19th-century burial ground** is one of the island's most atmospheric and least-visited attractions. Above-ground vaults and wind-worn headstones reflect Key West's Bahamian, Cuban, and naval heritage, but the real draw is the *dry local humor* carved into the marble. Look for the infamous epitaph reading I Told You I Was Sick, alongside monuments to sponge divers, sailors, and yellow fever victims. Free self-guided maps are available at the Sexton office near the Margaret Street entrance, or join a low-key walking tour led by longtime residents. Shaded by gumbo-limbo and frangipani trees, it is a peaceful, strange, and strangely moving detour that most cruise-ship visitors never discover.



Top Pick

Fort East Martello Museum

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

Overshadowed by its more famous sibling near the beaches, this **Civil War-era brick fortress** near the airport draws far fewer visitors despite its strange charm. Inside the vaulted casemates, exhibits cover shipwrecks, Cuban refugee rafts, and local folk art, but the star attraction is *Robert the Doll*, a supposedly haunted 1906 toy said to curse anyone who photographs him without permission. Climb the spiral watchtower for a breezy view over the salt ponds and airport runway, quite different from the postcard sunsets downtown. Because it sits outside the main tourist loop, the fort stays uncrowded even in high season, making it an easy, offbeat stop for history buffs and curious skeptics alike.





Notable

Key West Tropical Forest and Botanical Garden

1-1.5 hours No Booking Needed



Map

Florida's southernmost botanical garden sits on a quiet freshwater wetland far from the harbor bustle, preserving native hardwood hammock that once covered much of the island. Volunteer-run and rarely crowded, its shaded boardwalks pass butterfly-friendly plantings, a native tree collection, and a small memorial garden honoring islanders. Unlike the manicured tropical stops downtown, this **28-acre reserve** feels genuinely wild, with gumbo-limbo, mahogany, and orchids growing as they would have centuries ago. Birdwatchers come early for migratory songbirds, while others simply enjoy the rare quiet. A small nominal admission supports ongoing habitat restoration, and the modest visitor center offers context on the island's vanishing native ecosystem that few tourists ever learn about.



Notable

Reynolds Street Pier

30-60 minutes No Booking Needed



Map

While tour buses funnel everyone toward Mallory Square, locals quietly gather at this **unassuming pier** near the Truman Annex for the same sunset without the crowds, street performers, or souvenir carts. It doubles as a favorite spot for shore fishing and casual swimming off a small ladder into the harbor, with benches facing west toward the open water and passing sailboats. There are no vendors or ticket booths, just a stretch of open concrete where residents walk dogs, toss fishing lines, and watch the same colors spread across the sky that draw thousands elsewhere. Bring a drink, arrive an hour before dusk, and claim a spot on the seawall for one of the island's best-kept evening rituals.

Tips for Hidden Gems

- Visit Nancy Forrester's Secret Garden and the Botanical Garden in the cooler morning hours to beat both heat and humidity.
- Bring cash for small donation-based sites like the Secret Garden, which do not always take cards.
- Arrive at Reynolds Street Pier about an hour before sunset to secure a seawall spot.
- Photographing Robert the Doll without silently asking permission is considered bad luck by staff and locals alike.



Christmas Market

Key West does not host a European-style Christmas market, but the island still leans hard into a tropical version of the season every December. Expect palm trees strung with lights, a decorated Norfolk pine instead of a fir, and a laid-back mix of boat parades, waterfront festivities, and Duval Street cheer rather than wooden market stalls.



Must See

Key West Holiday Boat Parade

2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

Every early December, the Historic Seaport at Key West Bight fills with locals and visitors for the island's answer to a Christmas market crowd: a harbor lined with food and drink vendors watching decorated boats cruise past strung with lights, tinsel, and inflatable Santas lashed to the rigging. It is a distinctly Key West mash-up of nautical tradition and holiday kitsch, with sailboats, shrimp boats, and charter catamarans all competing for the best-lit-vessel title. **Arrive early** to grab a spot along the Bight boardwalk or a table at one of the seaport bars, since the route fills in fast. Expect live music, seasonal cocktails, and a genuinely festive, unpretentious atmosphere. *Free to watch* from the public waterfront, though restaurants and bars along the route get busy and may add a cover or minimum.



Top Pick

Truman Waterfront Park Holiday Lighting

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

Key West's largest public park becomes the closest thing the island has to a holiday market during December, with a lit community Christmas tree, seasonal food trucks, and periodic weekend events pulling in families from all over the Keys. The open lawns and amphitheater host live music and craft or food vendors on select evenings throughout the month, giving visitors a casual, outdoor gathering spot rather than a formal market. **Check the park's event calendar** before visiting, since vendor nights and concerts rotate rather than running daily. The waterfront setting means sunset views over the harbor while string lights come on, and there is plenty of open space for kids to run around. *Free entry* to the park itself; individual food and drink vendors charge separately.



Notable

Hemingway Home Christmas Tree

1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

Each December the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum decorates its towering Norfolk Island pine into one of the island's most photographed Christmas trees, wrapped in lights beside the writer's 1851 Spanish Colonial house. Visitors touring the museum's famous six-toed cats and Hemingway's writing studio get a bonus dose of holiday atmosphere in the tropical garden setting, a striking contrast to typical snowy Christmas-tree scenes. **Regular museum admission applies** and includes the guided house tour along with the seasonal decor, so it works well as a combined sightseeing and holiday-photo stop. *Go in late afternoon* for softer light on the tree and garden. The tree typically stays lit throughout December into early January, well past most mainland displays have come down.





Optional

Duval Street Holiday Stroll

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

Duval Street's shops, guesthouses, and bars lean into palm-tree Christmas lights, wreaths on gingerbread-trim porches, and seasonal cocktail menus throughout December, turning an evening stroll into an easy substitute for a market crawl. Rather than stalls selling mulled wine, expect open-air bars serving rum-spiked eggnog and seasonal drink specials, plus shop windows dressed up for the season. **Walk the street after sunset** when the lights and string bulbs on balconies and storefronts really stand out. It pairs naturally with dinner reservations along the strip or a stop at Mallory Square, a few blocks away, for the nightly sunset celebration with local performers and craft vendors. *No cost* to walk and browse; individual bars and shops set their own prices.

Tips for Christmas Market

- Key West has no traditional Christmas market; travelers wanting a classic market experience should plan a side trip to Miami (about 3.5 hours by car), where Bayfront Park's seasonal ice rink and holiday market run through December
- December is peak tourist season in Key West, so book accommodations and boat parade viewing spots well in advance
- Evenings can still be warm, so skip heavy coats and dress for tropical holiday weather
- Confirm exact 2026 dates for the Holiday Boat Parade and Truman Waterfront events closer to December, as schedules are set only a few months out

Practical Information

Peak season runs **December through April**, with warm, dry weather and the biggest crowds/prices (especially around New Year's and Fantasy Fest in late October). Summer (June-September) is hot, humid, and hurricane-season risky, but hotel rates drop sharply and the water is at its calmest for snorkeling.

Key West International Airport (EYW) has direct flights from several US hubs, though fares run high — many visitors fly into Miami or Fort Lauderdale and drive the **3.5-4 hour Overseas Highway (US-1)** instead, one of the great American road trips.

Once in town, Old Town is entirely walkable or bikeable — a car is a liability given limited/expensive parking. Bike and scooter rentals are everywhere; the free Duval Loop trolley and the paid Conch Tour Train cover the rest.

➔ Airport Transfer

Key West International Airport (EYW) to city center:

- **Taxi:** About 10 minutes to Old Town, flat rate around \$15-20
- **Airport Shuttle:** Shared shuttle van to hotels in 15-20 minutes, around \$12-16 per person
- **Private Transfer:** Pre-booked car service directly to your hotel in 10-15 minutes, around \$40-50
- **Rental Car:** All major agencies on site, useful since Key West attractions are spread along the island

Duval Street is packed with T-shirt shops and souvenir stands, but look for local Key lime products, hot sauce, and hand-rolled cigars from small Cuban-tradition cigar shops. Whitehead Street and the side lanes off Duval have better independent galleries and jewelry stores. Prices are fixed — bargaining isn't customary.

Fantasy Fest (late October) — Key West's answer to Mardi Gras, ten days of costumes, parades, and parties. **Key West Songwriters Festival** (May) draws Nashville talent to intimate bar venues. **Hemingway Days** (July) features a lookalike contest and marlin tournament honoring the author. The Fourth of July and New Year's Eve (with a drag queen dropped from a boat at Bourbon Street Pub) are also major draws.



Day 1: Old Town Highlights

Hemingway House, Key West Lighthouse, lunch on Duval Street, afternoon at the Butterfly Conservatory, sunset at Mallory Square.

Day 2: Beach & Fort

Morning snorkeling or beach time at Fort Zachary Taylor, afternoon at Smathers Beach, evening sunset sail.

Day 3: Water Day

Full-day reef snorkeling or fishing charter, dinner at the Historic Seaport.

Day 4: Dry Tortugas

Full-day ferry trip to Fort Jefferson and the outer reef — book well ahead.

Day 5: Keys Road Trip

Drive north over the Seven Mile Bridge to Bahia Honda State Park, stopping at roadside seafood shacks along the way.

The **Southernmost Point buoy** at sunrise, before the line forms. **Mallory Square** at sunset for the classic silhouette shot. The colorful **Bahama Village** lanes and gingerbread-trim Conch houses on Elizabeth and William Streets for architecture shots. The top of the **Key West Lighthouse** for a rooftop panorama.

United States standard: **120V, 60Hz**, Type A/B plugs (two flat pins, sometimes with a round grounding pin). Visitors from Europe, the UK, or Australia need a plug adapter and, for high-wattage devices, a voltage converter.

Try **Key lime pie** at its source — the frozen chocolate-dipped slice-on-a-stick is a local trademark. **Conch fritters** and conch salad (ceviche-style) reference the city's old nickname. Fresh-caught **yellowfin tuna, mahi-mahi, and stone crab claws** (in season, Oct-May) dominate seafood menus. Cuban sandwiches and café con leche reflect the strong Cuban influence throughout the Keys.

Tourist Passes

Key West Historic Sites Combo Pass

Bundles entry to the **Custom House Museum, Lighthouse & Keeper's Quarters, and Oldest House Museum** at a discount over separate tickets.



www.kwahs.org

Go City Key West Pass

A prepaid multi-attraction pass covering tours, cruises, and museums, useful for visitors planning to hit several paid activities in a short stay.



gocity.com

Where to Stay in Key West

- **Near the historic core:** Staying within walking distance of the main strip and harbor suits **first-time visitors** who want easy access to bars, restaurants, and sunset views without needing a car.



- **Near the main nightlife strip:** Guesthouses and inns close to the late-night bar scene are ideal for **nightlife seekers**, though rooms here can be noisy after dark — light sleepers should look elsewhere.
- **Quieter residential streets a short bike ride from downtown:** These areas offer better value and calmer surroundings, making them a good fit for **budget travelers** and **families** who still want quick access to the center by bike or short drive.
- **Marina-adjacent and waterfront lodging:** Properties near the marinas and harbor front work well for **business travelers** and anyone attending conferences or boat charters, with easier parking and a more relaxed pace than the busy center.

Whichever area you pick, most of Key West is compact enough to explore on foot or by bike, so proximity to downtown matters less than the type of experience — lively and central, or quiet and low-key — you are after.

Is Key West Worth Visiting?

Yes — few places pack this much personality into four square miles, where the southernmost tip of the continental US meets a nightly sunset ritual that still stops traffic.

- **Unmistakable atmosphere:** sun-bleached streets, conch shells, and the lingering presence of Hemingway make Old Town feel unlike anywhere else in Florida.
- **The sunset tradition:** Mallory Square's evening celebration turns a simple sunset into a shared island event, complete with buskers and food carts.
- **Easy island pace:** most of the historic core is walkable or bikeable, so visitors can drift between galleries, bars, and waterfront views without much planning.

It suits travelers chasing laid-back charm and a bit of literary lore more than those seeking untouched wilderness or budget quiet — but as a one- or two-day stop at the end of the Overseas Highway, it earns its reputation.

Key West Travel Budget

Key West is one of the pricier stops in Florida, with hotel rates driven up by limited land and high demand year-round. Daily costs below cover a solo traveler; couples can expect accommodation to be shared but food and extras to roughly double.

- **Budget (\$120-180/day):** Hostel dorm or budget motel off Duval Street (\$60-90), Cuban sandwiches and food truck meals (\$25-35), bicycle rental for local transport (\$12-18), free beaches and self-guided walking tours (\$0-20).
- **Mid-range (\$250-400/day):** Boutique guesthouse or 3-star hotel near Old Town (\$150-220), casual seafood restaurants (\$60-80), scooter rental or occasional taxi/rideshare (\$25-35), paid attractions like the Hemingway House or a sunset sail (\$40-60).
- **Luxury (\$550-1000+/day):** Waterfront resort or historic inn suite (\$350-600), fine dining with fresh-caught seafood and cocktails (\$120-180), private car service or golf cart rental (\$40-60), private charters, snorkeling excursions, or spa treatments (\$100-200+).

Tip: Prices spike sharply during Fantasy Fest (late October) and winter holidays, so booking accommodation 2-3 months ahead can save 20-30 percent, even at the budget tier.

