

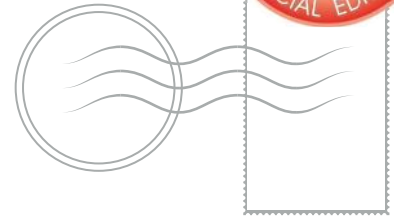
DESTINATIONS

THE US | FLORIDA KEYS



POSTCARD

Florida Keys



Sustainable tourism is key to the survival of this water-based wilderness, finds **Rhonda Carrier**

It's 8.15am, and while other mornings would be spent taking a pre-breakfast dip beneath a sky full of pelicans in Whale Harbor, off the retro-styled Postcard Inn, today I'm being educated about global coral-reef destruction at Key Largo's Coral Restoration Foundation.

But its Exploration Center is not all about talks, slides and interactive exhibits – fascinating and chastening as they are. Visitors can get hands-on training to work in coral nurseries and learn to plant coral.

Before long we're speeding over shimmering Atlantic waters courtesy of the CRF's partner, Rainbow Reef Dive Center, to see its offshore coral nurseries. Donning snorkel masks and a layer of reef-friendly sunscreen (provided free on boats), we take in the heartwarming sight of transplanted coral fragments growing on 'trees' tethered to the ocean floor. About 15 sharks threading their way through the corals are an added delight.

Staff at the CRF are just some of newly designated Stewards of the Keys dedicating themselves to saving this imperilled part of the world. Climate change is all too real here. The Keys are threatened not only as a diving destination – their very existence is on the line.

There are plenty of other ways to minimise your environmental footprint and play a role in the Keys' survival during a stay. One of the loveliest – a mixture of relaxation and adventure – is a back-country trip through the mangroves with Big Pine Kayak Adventures, run by local naturalist guide Captain Bill Keogh, another Steward of the Keys. Manatees, bonnethead sharks, spider crabs and Key deer are just some of the local wildlife he points out as we row.

Then there's a Dolphin Watch tour with Honest Eco Sustainable Nature Tours aboard its new Squid – Key West's first electric-powered charter boat – and the Mallory Glow Tour with Key West Hydrobikes. We found the latter – pedal-bikes mounted on buoyant pontoons – a weird but fun way to take in Key West Harbor at sunset. **TW**



BOOK IT

American Affair offers a 10-day Florida Keys Highlights Fly Drive from £1,988 per person based on two adults sharing, departing May 1, 2022. The price includes flights from Heathrow, accommodation and 10 days' car hire with full insurance. americanaffair.com



TOP: Exploring the mangroves with Big Pine Kayak Adventures
ABOVE: The CRF's offshore coral nurseries

PICTURES: Kevin Gaines/Coral Restoration Foundation; Beth Higham