

48 hours

Key West

Get your fill on a food-themed weekend in Key West, Florida, says **Tamara Hinson**



This year has been an exciting one for Key West and the wider Florida Keys, which have been celebrating their 200th anniversary as a permanent settlement. But there's every reason to consider going in the coming years too, thanks to an ongoing \$100 million expansion of Key West airport, due for completion in 2025, and new transport connections that are making the destination easier to reach than ever. Here's how to spend 48 hours making the most of this Floridian gem's food, attractions and activities. ➤



FROM FAR LEFT: Sloppy Joe's; typical Key West home; Key West aquarium; Southernmost Point Buoy; Conch Train at Southernmost hotel; Ernest Hemingway's bedroom and home; aerial view of Duval Street

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ASK THE
experts

Graeme Brett,
owner, Westoe Travel



"Key West is such a fun, friendly place, and it's relaxed and eccentric. I love the live music venues. For me, the best spot is Sunset Pier bar – head here to enjoy a drink while watching the sunset."

Andrew Bird, director,
Purely Travel



"Key West is famous for its palm tree-lined streets with gingerbread mansions, tin-roofed conch houses, luxury hotels and boutique properties. Visitors can fill their days visiting sidewalk cafes, sightseeing, diving and fishing. Suggest visitors take part in the sunset celebration each evening at Mallory Square, when street entertainers perform for an upbeat crowd to watch the sunset. At night a different vibe takes over with a party crowd soaking up the nightlife in the open-air bars, legendary pubs and world-class restaurants."

DAY ONE

09.00: Enjoy delicious French crêpes at Duval Street's Banana Cafe, a laidback bistro where chefs give French dishes a Caribbean twist. We recommend La Super, a crêpe with eggs, ham, Swiss cheese and béchamel sauce.

10.00: Opt for a post-breakfast stroll to Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park, a National Historic Monument, where you'll find the world's largest cache of US Civil War armament. Wander through its red-brick fort, built in the 1800s, before checking out the beach, a popular snorkelling spot.

12.00: Time to sample Key West's culinary delicacies, starting with Kermit's Key West Key Lime Shoppe's 17,000sq ft store at 335 Duval St. The space includes a demonstration kitchen and plenty of room for the constantly expanding product range, which includes key lime cookies, seasonings, soap and, if the rumours are to be believed, a key lime bath salt due to be launched by the end of this year.

For more weird and wonderful food, pop next door to the Beef Jerky Experience store, where delicacies include Bloody Mary Beef Jerky and Dill Pickle Popcorn.

13.00: If Kermit's Key West Key Lime Shoppe puts you in the mood for a key lime-themed lunch, head to nearby Kermit's Café at 200 Elizabeth Street. Specialities include the delicious Kermit salad, made with heart of palm and (obviously) key lime dressing. For dessert, try the key lime pie. In a rush? Have it served on a stick, lollipop-style.

13.30: The Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center, at Truman Waterfront Park, had a massive makeover in early 2023 and now has a range of exhibits focusing on the Keys' ecosystems. Many are interactive, including one that allows visitors to climb through artificial (but surprisingly realistic) mangrove branches.

15.30: An oldie but goldie, the Key West Conch Tour is a bright yellow train that chugs slowly around Key

West. Passengers gain an insight into its oldest neighbourhoods and learn about the various architecture styles, whether it's the so-called 'shotgun houses' or 'gingerbread trims' – ornate exterior latticework adorning many Key West homes.

17.00: Hire a bike and pedal over to the Southernmost Point Buoy on Whitehead Street. It's Key West's most popular selfie spot and marks the southernmost point of the US. The huge buoy, which turned 40 this year, is just 90 miles from Cuba.

18.00: Sunsets don't get more spectacular than the ones you'll see from a Key West sunset cruise. Operator Fury offers sailings to watch the sun go down; the cost includes drinks (don't miss the delicious margaritas) and appetisers. The meeting point is next to The Conch Republic Seafood Company at 631 Greene Street.

19.00: For dinner, it's got to be Cafe Marquesa, a Key West institution and fine-dining restaurant at the hotel of the same name. The decor

is spectacular – there's a beautiful hand-painted *trompe l'oeil* wall and mahogany-framed mirrors throughout. The food is seasonal and local. Try the crispy Apalachicola oysters with creole sauce.

20.00: Time for a nightcap. Sloppy Joe's Bar is so popular that there's even a Sloppy Joe's Bar webcam for fans keen to get their fix from afar. Its origins date back to 1933, when Ernest Hemingway's rum-running boat pilot opened a bar called the Blind Pig. Four years later, renamed Sloppy Joe's, it relocated to Duval Street (its current location). Today, this lively watering hole is filled with quirky artefacts, including skis owned by Hemingway.

DAY TWO

08.00: Start with a (Cuban) caffeine fix at Cuban Coffee Queen, which has three locations in Key West (Key Lime Square, Margaret Street and Clifton Square Market). Its cafe con leche is regarded as the best in Florida, and the Cuban bread with guava comes highly recommended.

10.00: No visit to Key West is complete without a wander around The Hemingway Home and Museum. The late writer's former home (now a National Historic Landmark) was one of the first in Key West to have electricity. Today, it's packed with memorabilia, including original furniture. Keep an eye out for the six-toed cats – there are dozens, and they're all descendants of the one Hemingway was given by a ship's captain. In need of inspiration? Consider signing up for the recently launched Writing Experience, which includes the chance to spend some time alone in Hemingway's studio, after hours.

12.00: It's lunch time. Stone crab is Key West's unofficial dish, and there's even an annual stone crab-eating contest every autumn. The best place to try it is at the aptly named Stoned Crab restaurant on N Roosevelt Boulevard. Tackle the huge seafood towers if you dare.

14.00: Admire the winged residents at the Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory, which celebrates its

20th anniversary this year, and is filled with thousands of butterflies – including 50 to 60 different species from around the world – and exotic birds. It's now possible to see the conservatory's two flamingos, Rhett and Scarlett, close-up, thanks to the new flamingo meet-and-greet sessions, which introduce the pair to small groups of up to six people in a dedicated area.

15.30: Time to explore beyond Key West. The revamped route network offered by FlixBus buses puts nearby locations within easy reach, among them Big Pine Key; less than a 40-minute ride from Key West, this is where you'll find the Pine Channel Nature Park, opened in 2022. The family-friendly destination has a huge boardwalk and a launch area for kayaks, alongside picnic and barbecue grilling areas. Don't miss the 100-year-old concrete mile marker, created by railroad visionary Henry Flagler as part of the Overseas Railroad, which marks part of the 100+ miles of track, bridges and viaducts operated from 1912 to 1935.

18.00: For dinner, head to First Flight Island Restaurant & Brewery. You'll find it in one of Key West's most historic buildings – the First Flight building is the birthplace of Pan American World Airways, which was founded in 1927. If you can, bag a spot in the plant-filled courtyard. The Caribbean pork with a spicy mojo glaze is fantastic.

20.00: Toast Key West at the Green Parrot, a saloon-style bar dating back to the 1800s. It started life as a grocery store before becoming a hangout for submarine sailors during the Second World War. The bar is now famous for its live music and specialises in (very strong) cocktails such as the Parrot Punch, made with spiced rum, orange juice and grenadine. **TW**

BOOK IT

Purely America offers seven nights' B&B at the Kimpton Fitch Lodge, including flights from London to Key West via Miami, from £1,599, departing on January 15, 2024. purelytravel.co.uk