

Testing the water

The Florida Keys are ideal for active water babies, finds Clare Walsh

The sunlight slips away as our tandem kayak slides gracefully from the salt flats through a gap in the dense foliage. It enters a mysterious dark tunnel of ancient twisted branches and silent shallow waters. Low-hanging trees help us steer, as we grab their long fingers to pull ourselves through.

We had entered the ethereal world of the mangroves, menacing and enchanting in equal measure. "Are there likely to be any alligators in here?" I asked.

"If there are, they'll only be in transit," came the reply from our guide Chris. How reassuring.

These secret surroundings felt more like something out of a Disney film than real life. And Disney is one of the first things that springs to mind when considering Florida as a holiday destination.

But I was in Florida Keys – a string of beautiful tropical islands about as far away from Mickey Mouse as you could get. Strewn with verdant green mangroves, legendary sunsets and shimmering seascapes, it's a place of wilderness, wide skies and pristine coastline.

Here, it is the archipelago's wild and natural beauty that



The archipelago's natural beauty is the playground, rather than neon lights and rollercoasters

is the playground, rather than neon lights and rollercoasters. And as I was about to discover, it also offers some of the best adventure territory on the globe.

WATERWORLD

Our kayaking adventure had taken us to Big Pine Key, a perfect spot for adventurers exploring the backwaters of the wilderness.

Run by captain Bill Keogh, a naturalist guide, educator and professional photographer, we were expertly introduced to a world of wildlife such as tiny endangered key deer, horseshoe crabs, orb spiders and sea cucumbers.

Book it: A three-hour tour with Big Pine Kayak Adventures costs \$50 per person.

keyskayaktours.com





Travel 2 has an eight-day Key West & Dry Tortugas sailing adventure from £1,879, departing May 13. The price includes flights, a night's pre-tour accommodation, six nights on a catamaran, most meals, sightseeing and snorkelling. travel2.com

Funway Holidays offers a week room-only at the three-star Courtyard Key Largo from £1,080, including flights, departing May 19. funwayagents.co.uk

Gold Medal offers a week at the Key Largo Bay Marriott Beach Resort from £849 between May 1 and June 12, including flights and transfers. The resort offers bike rentals, jetskiing, kayaking and volleyball. goldmedal.co.uk



LEFT: Key deer

RIGHT: Night boarding



It isn't just during the day that life in the Keys revolves around the water. At Key West, we discovered night boarding and kayaking, which uses LED-lit clear-bottomed kayaks and paddle boards to illuminate the sea bed.

Paddling out into the silent night was a serene and magical experience. The 90-minute eco-tour introduced us to colourful sponges, lobsters, crabs and tropical fish.

I gazed in awe at the flying fish darting through the night sky, until one flew through the air and slapped itself right in the middle of my kayak. After a series of acrobatics, it was rescued, though not before a few undignified shrieks on my part.

Book it: Night boarding and night



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kayaking rates at the Ibis Bay Resort start at \$55 per person.

ibisbayresort.com

KEY SPORTS

Home to the third-largest coral reef in the world, the aquatic theme

continued on Key Largo, the largest and northernmost of the Keys.

We headed to the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the first underwater park in the country, which was established to protect and preserve the US's only living coral reef.

After donning flippers and masks, we were taken by boat to Grecian Rocks, where we plunged into balmy waters and were treated to an impressive underwater show by barracudas, nurse sharks and technicolour tropical fish.

Book it: Prices for a two-and-a-half-hour snorkelling tour are \$30 for adults and \$25 for children. The reefs can also be viewed from glass-bottomed boats, plus scuba diving, canoeing,



3 OF THE BEST

NEW OPENINGS

Playa Largo Resort & Spa, Key Largo

The first new-build in 21 years in the Upper Keys, this Autograph Collection Hotels property has 144 rooms and suites, 10 bungalows and a beach house with plunge pool.

Little Basin Villas, Islamorada

The nine three-bedroom waterfront villas are suited to families and groups. Each unit has a kitchen, pool, tiki hut, grill, Wi-Fi and direct beach access.

Oceans Edge Key West Hotel & Marina, Stock Island

This luxury resort opened in January with 175 suites and rooms. The white clapboard and waterfront walkways lend a classic beachfront feel. It also has a marina and water sports centre.

fishing, swimming and walking trails are also on offer.

Clients who want to incorporate some dry-land activities into their trip won't be disappointed. In colourful Key West, the vibrant creative hub of the islands, we took a three-hour cycle tour around the main sites, including Mallory Square (famous for its nightly sunset street carnivals), Ernest Hemingway's house and the US's southernmost point, just 90 miles from Cuba.

The tour goes into how the residents of Key West set themselves apart from the Florida mainland. In 1982, the city council declared the independence of the city, naming it the 'Conch Republic', and while this was short-lived, flags and reminders of this strong identity remain.

There's no better way to finish off the tour than with key lime pie. A classic Keys recipe, we found it on every menu, and ate it almost every day. But after our mammoth cycle, this was certainly the best.

Book it: A tour around Key West with Key Lime Bike Tours costs \$42 plus tax – slice of pie included.

keylimebiketours.com

Key West is also easy to explore



In 1982, the council named Key West the 'Conch Republic', while this was short-lived, flags and reminders remain

on foot. We decided to embark on an alternative tour, unearthing the legends of the town's restless souls. Armed with ghost-busting equipment, we explored the old town's 'dead zone', where we heard disturbing stories of times gone by, even entering a 'portal' where the temperature appeared to mysteriously drop.

And while some of our group may have sniggered, they were quick to rub protective oil on their necks at the end of the tour, just in case a ghost had decided to 'attach' itself to them.

Book it: Sloan's Key West Ghost Hunt costs \$25 per person.

hauntedkeywest.com

HOOK, LINE AND SINKER

Our final stop took us back out into the ocean, this time off Islamorada to have a go at deep-sea fishing in the so-called 'Sport Fishing Capital of the World'.

Positioning my baseball cap backwards to get into character, I found my first challenge was attaching the slimy bait to the rod.

However, I soon knew my rod from my reel and was unexpectedly enjoying being out on the open sea, waiting for a catch.

While I didn't quite manage that (maybe the fish knew I was vegetarian and therefore a traitor), our group was soon reeling in snappers, groupers and sailfish, which were taken back to the marina and cooked up at the Hungry Tarpon restaurant for lunch.

Back on dry land, clients can



ABOVE:
Ernest Hemingway
Home & Museum

LEFT:
Key Lime Bike Tours



DO

Keep an open mind when selling active holidays – softer options are often available for less-mobile clients.

DON'T

Forget to check whether clients have adequate travel insurance. This is especially important on an active holiday.

➔ continue their fishy experience by feeding the huge tarpons that reside in the harbour. Home to more than 100 fish, it's not for the faint-hearted, as the huge prehistoric heads and teeth emerge above the surface eager to bite whatever it is dangling in the water – including a hand!

Book it: A half-day fishing excursion at Robbie's Marina costs \$40, plus \$5 to rent a rod. The Hungry Tarpon restaurant at the marina will cook your catch for \$15 and serve it with fries or salad.

GETTING THERE

We flew direct from Gatwick to Fort Lauderdale with budget carrier Norwegian Airlines. The flight time is about nine hours.

The tropical string of islands is easily accessible from Miami via the Overseas Highway, which runs from Key Largo to Key West. Spanning 113 miles and featuring 42 bridges, this 'magic carpet' enables visitors to cross the Keys in about four hours. **TW**



ABOVE: Sea fishing

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