

Getting There is Half the Fun

The many roads to Key West



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Cape Air's Cessna *Fantasy Flyer* will put you in a vacation mood before you even board for Key West.

If there's truth in the phrase, "Life is a journey, not a destination," then nowhere might that truth be more evident than on the road to Key West. The continental United States' southernmost city is not easy to reach, but as lovers of Key West know, it is well worth the journey. The history, charm, funkiness, and

By Elizabeth Heath

even seediness of Key West can't be duplicated; you just have to get there to experience it.

From Southwest Florida, there are a number of ways to get to Key West and the route you choose—by air, land, or sea—depends largely on the amount of time you have, personal phobias, and your own sense of what's fun and what's a drag.

The Fast Track

Simply put, if you're in a hurry to get to Key West, fly. Cape Air offers direct flights from Naples or Ft. Myers to Key West in six-seater Cessna 402s. If flying from Naples, you might be lucky enough to ride in *Fantasy Flyer*, one of Cape Air's fleet of custom-painted Cessnas. Dedicated to the spirit of Key West, it depicts a shark on the nose cone and such

Key West icons as the Conch Republic flag, a pirate complete with eye patch, Captain Tony, parrots, and a school of fish.

The forty-five-minute flight (fifty minutes from Ft. Myers) flies low over the Everglades and the 10,000 Islands, then across Florida Bay before landing at Key West's small airport. With every seat a window seat, it's a beautiful ride.

On full flights, the pilot might ask for a volunteer to ride in the copilot's seat. Unless you're squeamish about flying in a small plane, do it. The view from the front and the experience of riding shotgun are a thrill—and one you can boast about over rum runners at the Hog's Breath Saloon.

Once in Key West, you can pick up your rental car or hop on your hotel's courtesy van—most of the bigger properties on Key West offer such a service. If you're staying in the Old Town, there's no need for a car since the streets of historic Key West are easily traversed by foot or bicycle (and the latter can be rented just about anywhere).

Cape Air offers several daily flights to and from Key West and special price incentives for those who fly in and out of Key West on the same day.

From either Naples or Marco Island, charter flights to the Keys are available as well. This is a great option if you want to be in control of when you get there and when you leave. Some of the charters' prices are competitive with Cape Air; others are best reserved for those to whom money is no object.

The Water Route

In recent years a spate of ferry companies have sprung up in the region, offering daily round-trip service from Ft. Myers, Ft. Myers Beach, or Marco Island. Each leaves early in the morning from home port and makes the one-way trip in four to five hours.

In Ft. Myers, Fast Cats Ferry Service leaves from the base of Hendry Street on the Caloosahatchee. Boasting all first-class and VIP accommodations, the yacht-styled ferry features airline-type seating in an enclosed cabin as well as an open deck. The first-class section has a full bar where beer, wine, and frozen drinks can be purchased along with snack items. VIP service features a luxury seating lounge and a



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Key West Shuttle, Fast Cats Ferry Service, and X-press to Key West deliver South-west Florida passengers right to Key West central.

menu of premium wines, espresso and cappuccinos, as well as appetizers, entrées, and desserts.

At Ft. Myers Beach, the Key West Shuttle and X-Press to Key West vie for passengers. Both depart around the same time and take about four and a half hours to reach their destination.

Benefits of the ferry services are many, but foremost among them is that they are less expensive than flying (though they take longer) and, of course,

you don't have to make that long drive to the Keys.

The drawbacks? If the water's too choppy, the boat doesn't go. At 7:30 a.m. of the appointed day of your vacation to Key West, this can really throw a monkey wrench into your plans.

Ditto for the return trip. Although the ferries are all scheduled to leave Key West around 5 each evening, if the weather's not agreeable, the boats will not make the trip.



The VIP deck on Fast Cats Ferry Service features comfortable seating and a menu of premium drinks and meals.

Life in the Slow Lane

If you've got time to kill or are saving your money for when you *get* to the Keys, the drive across the Everglades and down U.S. 1 to the literal end of the road in Key West is a unique experience with a fast-dwindling slice of Old Florida. The slow moving traffic on Route 1, a two-lane road through much of the Keys, offers plenty of opportunity to pull the car over and check out the local color. From crumbling tourist traps to scenic state parks, authentic fish houses to tacky T-shirt stands, the road to Key West has many rewards for the patient and the curious.

At Key Largo, go for a snorkel at John Pennekamp State Park, the country's largest underwater nature preserve, or swim with dolphins at the aptly named Dolphin World. Pick a designated driver and stop for a piña colada at Holiday Isle, an amusement park for drinkers in Islamorada.

However you get to Key West, chances are the trip will be memorable, and for all the right reasons. After all, you're either flying over, sailing past, or driving through one of the most scenic, wild parts of the world, and your destination....Like no place else on earth. 🦋



Elizabeth Heath is a freelance writer and avid traveler.

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