



SHORT PASSAGES TO PARADISE

Exploring the natural wonders of the Florida Keys

BY J. WILLIAM HOWELL

The string of ancient coral and limestone barrier islands known as the Florida Keys meanders 220 miles south and then west from Key Biscayne to Loggerhead Key in the Dry Tortugas, far out in the Gulf of Mexico. Forming the northern boundary of the Florida Straits, the Keys separate the aquamarine waters of the Gulf of Mexico from the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

Unfortunately, from U.S. Route 1, the Florida Keys have all the aesthetic appeal of an abandoned 1950s strip mall. The quaint subtropical paradise that drew Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, and Robert Frost to the Keys is long gone.

But fortunately, just beyond the chaotic highway lies the splendid isolation and natural beauty of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS), 2,800 square miles of

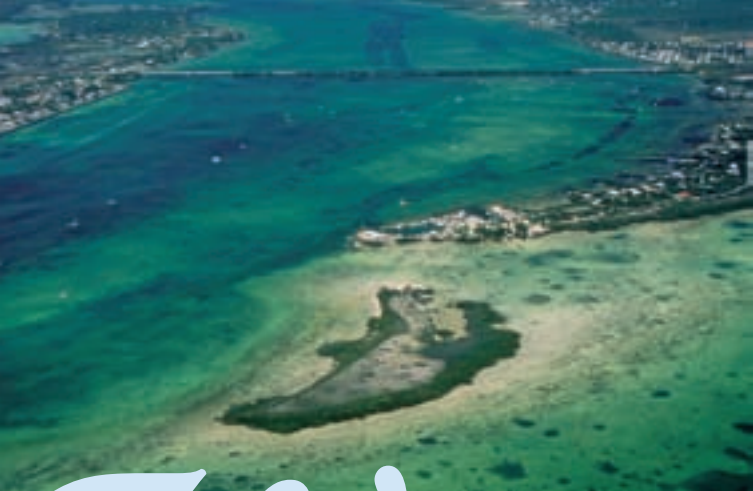
gin-clear waters, idyllic uninhabited islands and beaches, primal mangrove hummocks, shallow saltwater flats, coral reefs, and deep ocean trenches all teeming with life. North America's only coral barrier reef, the third

longest in the world, lies just five miles offshore. When combined with the adjoining 3,700 square miles of the Everglades and Biscayne national parks and the Big Cypress National Preserve, there's some 6,500 square miles of contiguous wilderness awaiting exploration, a spectacularly rich and diverse ecosystem 20 percent larger than the state of Connecticut.

Looking south from the Sanibel Causeway, Marathon in the middle Keys and Key West in the lower Keys are both only 136 miles south, a short passage across the Gulf of Mexico. Distances are even shorter from ports farther south. Those wanting someone else to do the driving can hop aboard the high-speed ferry service to Key West offered year-round from Ft. Myers or seasonally out of Marco Island.



Left: The Marquesas, a group of uninhabited islands, surround an idyllic lagoon twenty miles west of Key West in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.



Left: Newfound Harbor Anchorage offers a sheltered anchorage on the ocean side of the lower Keys; below: Key West Bight, a well-protected harbor housing several marinas in Key West, is also the terminus for the high-speed ferries running from Ft. Myers and Marco Island.



GETTING THERE

Without extensive local knowledge, one shouldn't navigate the shoal-filled waters of the Florida Keys at night. While most channels and hazards are well marked for daylight, even lighted navigation aids are difficult to see at night against the clutter of onshore lights.

When planning for a daytime landfall, departure time is a function of boat speed. Boats cruising at fifteen miles per hour or faster can easily make the 136-mile passage from Sanibel in ten hours or less. Those cruising at under fifteen miles per hour require more planning. For example, aboard my sailboat *Wavedancer*, I avoid a tiring overnight passage of seventeen hours at eight miles per hour by running down the coast to Marco Island (forty miles), anchoring in the shelter of Coconut Island in Capri Pass, and retiring early after a relaxed dinner. At 3 a.m. I slip out into the Gulf of Mexico for the one-hundred-mile, thirteen-hour run to the Keys. An added bonus is the beauty of the sun edging above the surface of Florida Bay to the east as the moon slips beneath the Gulf of Mexico to the west.

The passage to Marathon can also be broken into short coastal hops as shown in the table below. All anchorages listed have minimum seven- to eight-foot depths. All but Little

ANCHORAGE INFORMATION

| FROM/TO | MILES | MILES TO MARATHON |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Sanibel Causeway to Capri Pass | 40 | 136 |
| Capri Pass to Indian Key | 36 | 100 |
| Indian Key to Little Shark River | 38 | 78 |
| Little Shark River to Flamingo | 22 | 43 |
| Flamingo to Marathon | 36 | |

Shark River have marinas farther inland. The mileage (statute miles) indicates the distance between sea buoys marking the entrance to each anchorage, as well as the direct distance to Marathon from the first named location.

COASTING IN THE KEYS

Once in the Keys, two sheltered waterways provide unfettered access to the full length of the Keys and the broad reaches of the FKNMS. Ocean-side there's Hawke Channel, a five-mile-wide waterway bound by the Keys and the offshore barrier reef extending all the way from Key Biscayne to the Dry

Tortugas. The barrier reef shelters the well-marked deep waterway from the strong currents and rough waves of the Florida Straits.

Bay-side, the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) cuts across the shallows of Florida Bay from Miami to Key West. Though poorly maintained and subject to shoaling in the lower Keys, its four-and-a-half-foot controlling depth is adequate for the majority of recreational vessels. Many crossover channels connect the bay-side and ocean-side waterways limited only by depth and the vertical clearance of bridges connecting the islands. Safe anchorages, marinas, hotels, and restaurants dot both sides of the Keys.

Weather typically determines waterway choice. The ICW is usually calm when prevailing southeasterlies kick up, and Hawke Channel is the place to be when Nor'easters roll through.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Where to begin exploring? I recommend simply trying your favorite activity, and by the end of the day your wish list will be long enough to consume several visits. For example, my first stopover in the Keys was to pick up crew for a Gulf of Mexico crossing to Texas. The beauty and isolation of the Key West National Wildlife Refuge and the Dry Tortugas National Park seduced me into returning for a few weeks on my way to the Bahamas. Now, after five cruises in the Keys, each lasting several months, my wish list still hasn't been completed.

Conventional wisdom is that the upper Keys are "diving world" and the lower Keys are "fishing world." And I'll admit: Given only one day to dive, I'd pick John Pennekamp Coral



Reef State Park in the upper Keys. Likewise, for fishing I'd pick shallow-water sight fishing for tarpon in the Marquesas in the lower Keys. But in the end, all of the choices are like sampling several delicious key lime pies: All are excellent; it's simply a matter of taste. As a result, diving and fishing operations thrive throughout the Keys. In addition, most marinas offer daily excursions into the FKNMS aboard vessels ranging from kayaks to glass-bottom boats. Sailboat and powerboat rentals are also available.

Out on the water, sitting quietly on the shallow-water flats, you'll observe the food chain play out nature's cycle of evolution and natural selection. The illusion of calm is periodically shattered as predators streak toward prey and hundreds of frenzied fish leap into the air or tail walk in an attempt to absent themselves from the razor-sharp teeth slicing through the water just beneath the surface. It's over in seconds, tendrils of blood and birds sweeping in for scraps the only evidence it wasn't an illusion.

Playful manta rays, with wingspans of up to six feet, dash toward you before wheeling 180 degrees to sprint away at full speed, sometimes launching out of the water for a few seconds of air time, wings beating furiously before landing with a slap. It's not only man who wishes to fly.

Barracuda are the felines of the sea. Intensely curious, they'll approach within a few feet of man, large dark eyes monitoring every movement. They're typically harmless to humans unless shiny objects are mistaken for food. Barracuda are sprinters with a hunting style similar to predatory cats on the African veldt. While stalking their prey, they adjust the coloring of their long, slender, aerodynamic bodies from dark

Above: Key West is the end of the road but not the end of the Florida Keys, which extend another eighty miles into the Gulf of Mexico; left: Loggerhead Key in the Dry Tortugas ranks as the westernmost island in the Keys.

mottled gray to silver, blending with the algae-covered rocks, multicolored vegetation, coral, and white bottom sand. Then they streak at speeds of up to thirty miles per hour to impale the tail of their prey on the fishhook-like individual teeth of their front lips.

Sharks usually keep their distance from humans, absent blood or alarm vibrations in the water. But on the shallow-water flats, they'll sometimes bump the bottoms of small boats. Are they curious, or just scratching their backs? Sharks

WANT TO GO?

Check out the following sources for more information about the Florida Keys and some of the sites mentioned in this article.

Monroe County Tourist Development Council: 800-352-5397, www.fla-keys.com

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary: 305-743-2437, www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov/welcome.html

Dry Tortugas National Park: 305-242-7700, www.nps.gov/dрто

Key West National Wildlife Refuge: 305-872-2239, www.fws.gov/southeast/KeyWest

John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park: 305-451-1202, www.pennekamppark.com

Key West Express ferry service: 888-539-2628, www.keywestferry.com



Left: Marathon's Boot Key Harbor provides the most sheltered anchorage in the Keys and is also adjacent to several marinas and boatyards; below: Key West sits 136 miles south of the Sanibel Causeway.

rank high in the food chain and love barracuda fillet. But while they can sprint farther, they're slower than barracuda—the key to barracuda survival.

Coral formations and the marine life inhabiting them provide some of the most dramatic and beautiful scenery in the Keys. Much of the action is just beneath the surface, great for snorkeling or observing from glass-bottom boats. Within the canyon-like channels of the reefs, the flashing colors of thousands of tropical fish are magnified by the subdued glow of sunlight filtering down from the surface.



THE REMOTE WESTERN WILDERNESS

Key West may be at the end of the road, but it is not the end of the Florida Keys. To the west from Mallory Square, the low-lying islands and glistening aquamarine water across Key West Harbor mark the beginning of the final eighty miles of the Keys. This pristine, primitive, and isolated wilderness jutting into the Gulf of Mexico silently beckons with promises of exploration and discovery.

One crown jewel of this wilderness is the Marquesas, only twenty miles west of Key West and my all-time favorite anchorage. Twelve small mangrove-covered islands, many with narrow ribbons of sugar-sand beaches, surround a quiet lagoon two miles in diameter. Geologists believe the lagoon

was created by a meteor strike hundreds of thousands of years ago. The crystal clear waters of the lagoon, inlets, shallow-water flats, shipwrecks, and coral reefs are home to diverse marine life. While reputed to be a breeding ground for hammerhead sharks, I've never seen any. But I have seen ancient horseshoe crabs and several species of sea turtles laying their eggs on its beaches.

The other crown jewel is Dry Tortugas National Park, a cluster of seven islands, coral reefs, saltwater flats, shipwrecks, and sand seventy miles west of Mallory Square. Discovered by Ponce de Leon in 1513, the islands and their abundant supply of sea turtles (or *tortugas*) provided his ships with fresh meat. But the absence of fresh water resulted in the

PLANNING AHEAD

The information in this article should not be used for navigational purposes. Prudent mariners should rely on multiple sources of information and aids to navigation for their cruising area. Safe boating requires the use of the latest nautical charts, cruising guides, local knowledge, and other aids to navigation. Most local and online marine stores provide a comprehensive selection of navigational products. West Marine (www.westmarine.com), Boater's World (www.boatersworld.com),

and Bluewater Books & Charts (www.bluewaterweb.com) are good sources of information.

With the cost of a single NOAA chart at \$18.95 or more, chart books and/or electronic charts are the economical way to go. Aboard my sailboat, I use Maptech Digital ChartKits and Marine Navigator software on a personal computer. Most navigation equipment manufacturers offer similar charting systems.

Maptech is the primary supplier of hard-

copy chart books, offering a comprehensive Region 8 ChartKit for west Florida and the Keys as well as three waterproof chart books covering the upper, middle, and lower Keys. Also included: a companion CD-ROM containing electronic charts and trip-planning software. Cruising guides covering the Keys include Maptech's *Embassy Florida Guide 2005*; *Cruising Guide for the Florida Keys*, 11th Edition (2001); the *Southern Waterway Guide*, published annually; and *Cruising the Florida Keys* (2002).



Above and right: The nineteenth-century Fort Jefferson serves as the centerpiece of the Dry Tortugas, a group of seven islands located about seventy miles west of Key West.

name Dry Tortugas. While off the beaten path, great fishing, snorkeling, and diving along with five hundred years of history and spectacular natural beauty lure cruisers and tourists to the Dry Tortugas. Ferry and seaplane services run daily from Key West.

WHAT'S REQUIRED?

Given the distance between ports and the total lack of services in the wilderness areas and open waters of Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, a passage to the Keys requires a sense of adventure, a fully equipped, seaworthy vessel, and self-reliance along with good planning, seamanship, navigation equipment and skills, and weather. Lives depend on it.

The golden rule is, "Hope for the best and plan for the worst." Leave a written cruising plan with someone you trust so he or she can use it to notify the Coast Guard if you're overdue. Take an onboard Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) to signal an emergency and provide your location via satellite.

Weather is by far the most critical variable and totally outside our control. The only times I've been hammered by bad weather in fifteen thousand miles of cruising was when I imposed my schedule on

The author during a visit to Dry Tortugas National Park



Mother Nature. Marine weather forecasting is usually accurate two to four days out. Thus the wise mariner carefully selects a time frame and accepts the gift of good weather with cynicism, watches Mother Nature with unceasing vigilance, and runs like hell for safe harbor the instant she acts up. Always carry extra fuel and provisions and have a safe harbor in mind so you can wait out bad weather. 🌴

When J. William Howell isn't cruising aboard his sailboat Wavedancer, he divides his time between the Texas Gulf Coast and Annapolis, Maryland. A frequent nautical visitor to Florida, he's explored much of the United States' Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts and crossed the Gulf of Mexico from Key West to Texas and back.