

AOL | MY AOL | MAIL | MAKE AOL MY HOMEPAGE

Web Travel Images Video News Local More>>

AOL  travel

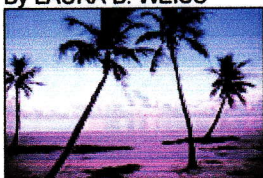
Search Here

SEARCH

MAIN | DEALS | FLIGHTS | HOTELS | CARS | CRUISES | VACATIONS | INSPIRATION | TRAVEL GUIDES BETA

Not Just for Bar Hoppers, Key West is Filled with Mystery, History

By LAURA B. WEISS



"You have to go to Nancy Ward's secret garden," insisted the reservation taker at Michael's, an atmospheric eatery in Old Town Key West where we had stopped to reserve a table for dinner that night.

After four years of exploring the back roads of this alluring tropical island -- which lies closer to Havana than Mia'i -- we had somehow missed Ward's oasis. Tiring of the bar scene on Duval Street, the island's main drag and party-central, we were in search of a some peace and quiet.

Fifteen minutes later, we parked our rented bikes at the garden entrance, barely visible off a narrow side street. Once inside, we ambled along winding paths through a lush acre thick with orchids, bromeliads, and 150 species of palms. Squawking cockatoos and parrots broke the silence. Ward, told us: "I opened the garden 40 years ago to save it from development. Now, developers threaten again," she says.

Key West -- the six-square mile island at the tip of the Florida Keys -- is known for letting the good times roll. Most visitors to the Conch Republic, (as the independent locals refer to the Keys), frequent the throbbing bar scene along Duval. Pulsing with pop bands and crammed with partiers, legendary bars like Sloppy Joes and the Hog's Breath Saloon entertain cruise ship passengers, locals and tourists nearly round the clock.

But Key West is more than the perfect margarita. With a history rich in the exploits of writers, presidents (Harry Truman wintered here), and pirates, Key West keeps time to its own Caribbean beat. Bounded by the turquoise waters of the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, beguiling pastel-colored Victorian Conch houses line the narrow streets of Old Town. On rented bike or on foot, we've toured Hemingway's home, examined a Conch mansion, strolled through the historic cemetery, and snorkeled around a beautiful coral reef.

And despite creeping gentrification, we've dodged chickens skittering across the road and dined in funky cafes where the fish is fresh-caught and the atmosphere laid-back and friendly.

Here are five ways to enjoy some of Key West's mystery and history:

Stroll or Bike Old Town

At the end of the 19th century, Key West, enriched by salvage from offshore shipwrecks, was the wealthiest town in Florida. Be sure to tour the ornate 1869 Curry Mansion (511 Caroline St.), now a bed and breakfast, (it's open to the public for tours). Once the home of William Curry, Florida's first millionaire, the Victorian mansion features Tiffany glass sliding doors, Severes porcelain and a 19th century grand piano. Ask Edith Amsterdam, the current owner, for a copy of Aunt Sally's Key Lime Pie recipe, which claims to be the first developed for this island specialty. At the corner of Angela and Margaret Streets lies the 15-acre Key West Cemetery, where Cuban cigar makers, Spanish war veterans (there's a monument to the 1898 Battle of the Maine), "Sloppy" Joe Russell and other locals lie buried in ornate above-ground tombs.

Get Arty

For an introduction to Key West's literary scene, stop by Voltaire Books at 330 Simonton; the cozy spot boasts an excellent collection of island histories. On Caroline, at Number 14, sits the Heritage House Museum and Robert Frost Cottage where the acclaimed poet wintered. Tour Hemingway's House and gardens at 907 Whitehead, where the great novelist penned *For Whom the Bell Tolls* among other masterpieces. Those with a taste for the Caribbean should visit the Haitian Art Company, 600 Francis St., which displays works by prominent Haitian artists.

Water, Water Everywhere

To experience the Keys' unique marine habitats, sign up for a guided kayak trip through dense mangrove islands and across shallow waters teeming with tropical birds and fish. There's also the new Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center, (35 East Quay Road), the official visitor's center of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary with a mock-up of Aquarius, the world's only underwater ocean laboratory, and exhibits about Keys ecology. Tired of the jostling crowds at Mallory Square, the traditional gathering spot for admiring street performers while viewing West's

gorgeous sunset? Book a trip on a dinner or wine-tasting sunset cruise instead. And while the island is not known for its beaches, Smathers Beach, on Roosevelt Blvd., is a pleasant two-mile long slice of sand with chairs and umbrellas for rent.

Dry Tortugas

Just 70 miles from Key West lies the remote Dry Tortugas ("tortugas" is Spanish for turtles). Begun in 1846 and never finished, Fort Jefferson, which commands the tiny island, was built by prisoners and slaves toiling under the sweltering sun. Feel the ghost of Dr. Samuel Mudd who was imprisoned in a three-level brick fortresses' dungeon for aiding John Wilkes Booth, President Lincoln's assassin. Enough history? Outfitters supply free snorkling equipment. Accessible by boat or sea-plane, the island, now a national park, is a destination for both day-trippers and campers.

Eat Your Fish

Not surprisingly, Key West's many restaurants emphasize fresh seafood. At Pisces, an inventive eatery at 1007 Simonton Street, gaze at the striking collection of Andy Warhol prints while dining on yellow tail snapper and other local specialties. Bo's Fish Wagon, (801 Caroline Street), offers up perfectly fried grouper sandwiches in a funky shack draped with beer bottles, beads and fish netting. You'll feel like you're in Old Havana at Jose's Cantina, a modest eatery at 800 White Street with an excellent Cuban mix sandwich. At Kermit's Key West Lime Shoppe (200 Elizabeth St.) the frozen pie on a stick is luscious and rich.

Across America



Take a visual journey across the country and discover America -- again!

- [Explore the U.S.](#)
- [Upload Your Travel Photos](#)
- [Share Travel Videos](#)

Latest Travel Articles

- [Cheap Airline Tickets: Common Misconceptions - AOL Travel](#)
- [The Best Months to Find Cheap Flights - AOL Travel](#)
- [Avoid air hassles: Be discreet and on your best behavior](#)
- [Travel Horror Stories With Happy Endings](#)
- [United Passengers Air Their Bitter Grievances](#)
- [Where Celebrities Spend Their Summer Vacations](#)
- [Creating Sacred Spaces by Visiting Sacred Places](#)
- [Get the Run Around and See the Great Cities of the World](#)
- [10 Best Beachside Hotels](#)
- [Super Cheap Destinations](#)

- [See All Articles](#)

Top 11 Travel Guides

1. [Las Vegas, Nev.](#)
2. [New York, New York](#)
3. [Los Angeles, Calif.](#)
4. [Orlando, Fla.](#)
5. [Chicago, Ill.](#)
6. [Honolulu, Hawaii](#)
7. [Boston, Mass.](#)
8. [Miami, Fla.](#)
9. [San Francisco, Calif.](#)
10. [Atlanta, Ga.](#)
11. [Denver, Colo.](#)

The World in Pictures

