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The Keys to happiness

Everyone knows **Florida** is eccentric, but if you want a true taste of her quirks, travel along one of the most surreal(ly beautiful) roads in America: The Overseas Highway (also known as Route 1). The distance between Homestead and Key West, the southernmost point in the continental USA, is 181 km — and several shades of weirdness.

Too many people cross the Overseas Highway and head directly for Key West, and that's a shame — every Key is a tiny bastion of silliness.

The vagabonds, fishermen, alcoholics, artists and rednecks who inhabit these islands have made them the pirate enclaves of the Eastern Seaboard. So give the other Keys their due in one of the maddest, tropically bright road trips America's highways have to offer.

You'd be forgiven for reaching Key Largo and wondering, "Are these the islands?" The outer periphery of mangrove forests that form **Florida's** coastline overlaps into

LONELY PLANET

Adam Karlin

the Keys, making it not immediately clear you're off the mainland.

The big activity on Key Largo is under the water, not above it. John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park (pennekamp.com; mile marker 102.5 oceanside) was the first underwater park in the U.S., and still one of the best. Glass-bottom-boat tours (adult/child \$22/\$15) head out on catamarans that glide over clouds of technicolour tropical fish and an enormous coral-reef system.

There's a glut of animal Samaritans in the Keys; one of the finest examples of their good works is Key Largo's **Florida** Keys Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center (305-852-4486; fkwbc.org; mile marker 93.6), packed with fine-feathered friends who have been injured by BB guns, cars and other dangers

Farther south is Islamorada, where the ocean breaks into view and the highway achieves tropical Zen: The teal coolness of **Florida** Bay on one side, the rich blue of the Gulf of Mexico on the other, and, if you're lucky, the wind in your hair and the sun on your face (on the other hand, if traffic is bad, expect to sit behind RVs in island-time gridlock).

What's there to do here? Feed the fish. The enormous, prehistoric-looking tarpon, to be exact, at Robbie's Marina (305-664-9814; robbies.com; mile marker 77.5 bayside), which doubles as a flea market, booking agency and general bizarre bazaar.

The Middle Keys — especially Marathon, the second-biggest town in the islands — form a natural and pleasant Overseas pit stop. One of the best parks in an island chain full of them is Crane Point Museum, a series of nature trails and exhibits.

Otherwise, the best thing to do here is eat, drink and make merry at the Hurricane.

It's not that the Jagerbombs are particularly stronger here than anywhere else (OK, they probably are). It's the classic Keys cross section that comes here to party — weirdos and fun-seekers who just can't fit in on the mainland — that makes this spot special.

To top off the islands' oddities, Big Pine Key houses the dog-sized, unbearably cute, car-accident-prone Key deer. These little Bambis prance around a refuge that takes up the northern half of the Key, and are easy to spot with patience.

Homestead and the Overseas Highway are about an hour south of Miami. Fuel before you hit the Overseas, as gas is expensive in the islands. Or try biking on the still-being-developed **Florida** Keys Overland Heritage Trail (dep.state.fl.us/gwt/state/key-strail). Addresses are marked by mile markers, which run from 113 to 0 (Key West), and bayside (right-hand, going south) and oceanside (left-hand).





LEE FOSTER/LONELY PLANET

Windsurfing is just one activity to be enjoyed in Islamorada,