

## Notes from Paradise: Hawks Cay Resort

February 28, 2014 12:01 pm by [Julianne Lowell](#)



**Where:** [Hawks Cay Resort](#), Duck Key, Florida Keys

**When:** December 2013

Picture crystal-clear turquoise waters, an endless stretch of sea surrounding a saltwater lagoon. Lying back on a beach lounger, you adjust your shades and take a deep breath. You feel that kind of relaxation that comes only from a vacation well spent—one where there is no clock running, no plans for the day, no agenda except to go where the wind takes you. The only interruption to this absolute serenity is the occasional rustling of a nearby shrub as its resident iguana turns his body to better soak up the sun. Now remind yourself that it is, in fact, December. And it's 80 degrees. No, this isn't the Caribbean; this is Hawks Cay Resort, in the Florida Keys.

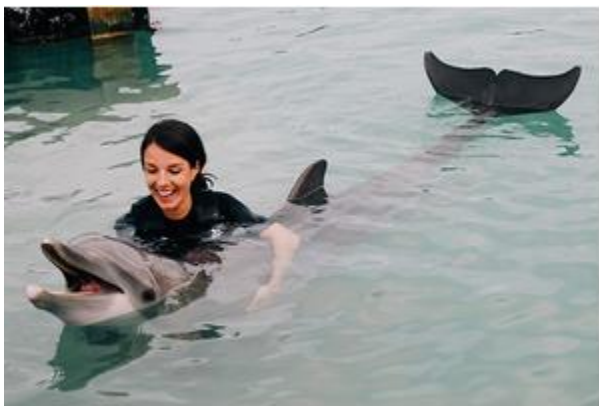
Hawks Cay is the next best thing to your own private island. The property sits halfway down the Keys island chain (mile marker: 61) and takes up 90 percent of one of the five islands that make up Duck Key. Sprawling and secluded, the 60-acre resort offers rentable villas as well as guest rooms and suites. With a terrific slate of [kid-friendly amenities](#), it's an ideal spot for families, but it's just as suited to couples looking for an utterly relaxing getaway—the kind where there is nothing to schedule, no need to get in the car, and absolutely no reason to do anything but take in all the natural beauty of the Keys.



## Dolphin Connection

Just around the corner from the saltwater lagoon is a protected ecosystem that was built to support and nurture Hawks Cay's resident pod of dolphins. The marine experts at the [Dolphin Connection](#) program, the only one of its kind in the United States, have been studying and raising generations of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins since 1990, and resort guests are free to watch the playful creatures darting, diving, and squeaking in their large ocean-fed lagoon at any time of the day.

To get a bit closer, guests can participate in the [Dolphin Discovery experience](#). Before getting wet, you'll spend some time on the outdoor deck that serves as a makeshift classroom, learning about the program and the dolphins. You'll hear the story of Lucky, one of their rescue dolphins who is now almost 40 years old. Lucky was found as a calf, tangled up in the nets of a shrimping boat off the coast of Texas. In captivity, he found a pair bond in fellow male Hastings, and they have lived together ever since, rarely leaving each other's side.



Like me, you might find yourself approaching the lagoon with a bit of trepidation. Wet suit on, expert trainer by my side, I gingerly walked down the ladder and entered the watery territory of the four male dolphins. I stood on a submerged platform but nevertheless felt as if I were in the open ocean, as tiny fish swam around me and aquatic plants tickled my ankles. But as the trainer let me give commands and toss the dolphins handfuls of herring from her waterproof fanny pack, their gentle dispositions and sweet faces, mouths fixed in permanent grins, won me over. In the end, the memory of my interactions with these smart, lovable dolphins—I even got a kiss from one of the affectionate guys—might just be my favorite souvenir.

## Cliff Drysdale Tennis and Alma

The sea air and warm breezes will make the prospect of outdoor exercise—even while on vacation—seem more like a game than a chore. On top of bike rentals, sports fields, and sand volleyball and basketball courts, Hawks Cay also offers an on-site tennis clinic, [Cliff Drysdale Tennis](#). Set up a lesson with Head Pro Michael Stedronsky, who will teach you the fundamentals, challenge you to be better, *and* act as your own personal cheerleader. The sun was hot and my tennis moves were pretty amateur, but Stedronsky managed to make the one-hour lesson extremely engaging and fun.

Afterward, you'll feel exhausted in the best kind of way. Reward yourself with a nourishing post-tennis meal at on-site restaurant [Alma](#), with its menu of fresh, Latin-influenced dishes. I highly recommend the ceviche of tender white fish, shrimp, scallops, and squid marinating in tart lime juice and mixed with chunks of buttery avocado.





## Hawks Cay Marina

Hawks Cay's amenities are abundant: Aside from five pools, a saltwater lagoon, a spa, and a putting green, the resort has [its own marina](#), featuring 85 boat slips and an ice-cream shop that serves treats at brightly colored tables right on the dock. Grab a cone—or a bottle of wine from Hawks Cay's Docksider Store—and sit for a while, looking out onto the blue-green Atlantic Ocean. Or pop into [Sundance Watersports](#) like I did; the outpost offers lessons in scuba-diving, snorkeling, paddleboarding, and kite-boarding as well as fishing charters and kayak rentals. The friendly guide handed me a map of the waters surrounding the resort property. "Take the kayak out for as long as you want," she said. "The property is ringed by a rock wall; hug that first, then head out into the open ocean and see what you can find."

“ On my way back in, I drifted past a snowy egret basking in the sun on a rocky outcropping. His long look seemed to ask, "What took you so long to come down to the Keys?"

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As I paddled out from the marina in my kayak, passing pelicans squawking from their dockside posts and a sign alerting boaters to the presence of manatees, I began to understand the rejuvenating magic of these islands. Gentle breezes propelled my kayak, making my paddle practically unnecessary. The water was so clear and calm that I could see straight to the bottom, where rainbow-colored fish darted past and stingrays glided along the sandy ocean floor. On my way back in, I drifted past a snowy egret basking in the sun on a rocky outcropping. His long look seemed to ask, "What took you so long to come down to the Keys?"

