

# Parade

## A Favorite Fun-Lovin' Road Trip! Unlock Cool Surprises in This Warm Place

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Road trips are as much a beloved touchstone of American culture as is apple pie. But if you're wheeling down the pretty necklace of islands that string together the Florida Keys, Key lime pie is on the menu and good-natured boasting is the side dish at restaurant after restaurant that heralds its citrus dessert as best.

Driven straight, U.S. 1, called the Overseas Highway—from laid-back Key Largo to party-hearty Key West—zips end-to-end in just two-and-a-half hours. But depending on traffic, this colorful journey is worth slowing down to better savor. Spend a night or two here and there, tying a week of days into an indelible memory, in places as posh or as no-fuss as you like, working your way to the southernmost point in the continental United States, all the while sampling funky and flavorful sites, sounds, and sensations.



## 1. LOOSEN UP AT THE FIRST OF MANY HAPPY STOPS

Leaving Miami, jumpstart your vacay vibe at Alabama Jack's, in Homestead, on Card Sound Road, a toll-way through mangrove swamps. This honky-tonk, perched on two barges over the bayou, has been around more than 50 years—weathered to be sure, yet still desired. Celebs, like *Today's* Kathie Lee Gifford, sing its praises, but you're as likely to gobble up the legendary conch fritters and sweet potato fries while sitting next to bikers, families, CEOs, mechanics, smitten couples, and those looking for love. In other words, everybody grooves at AJ. It doesn't have a website (try calling 305-248-8741), and doesn't appear to need advertising to fill its open-air room. Starting at 2 p.m., musicians cover songs by Jimmy Buffett, The Beach Boys, and a coterie of country-celebrating songwriters; by 7 p.m. this joint closes, because the mosquitoes are hungry, too.



## 2. INDULGE YOUR COCOA LOCO LONGINGS

For a box of sweet treats, pull over next at [Key Largo Chocolates](#) (photo above), the only chocolatier in the Florida Keys. Owners Kristie and Bob Thomas craft delectable nibbles in whimsical shapes, such as starfish, turtles, crocodiles, and flip-flops. Best sellers include truffles in flavors as palate-invigorating as champagne, tiramisu, mango, cherry, coconut, tequila, banana daiquiri, creme de menthe, and, of course, Key lime.



### 3. RIDE A MOVING MOVIE HISTORY ICON

In Key Largo, fans of John Huston's iconic 1951 film *The African Queen* swoon over the very vessel on which Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn starred in the pulse-rapids drama. Ah, love! Registered now as a National Historic Site, *African Queen*—first built in 1912 in Africa for use by the East Africa British Railways Company to transport cargo, hunters, and missionaries across the Victoria Nile and Lake Albert—has been newly restored and now cruises the placid canals here. Captain Lance Holmquist and his wife Suzanne Holmquist signed a lease with The African Queen Trust to refurbish and run the famed boat. As I sat at its bow (remembering Bogey's character saying, "Nobody in Africa but yours truly can get a good head of steam on the old *African Queen*!"), I asked Lance Holmquist whether I could try my hand at the steam gear and whistle. Toot! Toot! Swoosh! Whoosh! At the end of the film, Hepburn's character exclaims that her experience on board was "so stimulating!" I just had a whole lot of fun.



#### 4. SETTLE INTO YOUR FIRST NIGHT WITH A SOOTHING SUNSET

A painterly end-of-day sky-scene is Mother Nature's almost daily ritual here. In Key Largo, eyeball a comfy chair and raise your glass in a toast. One of the best views (photo above) to philosophize the sun down is at [Kona Kai Resort Gallery](#), a small boutique inn owned by Joe and Veronica Harris, former New Yorkers who felt the Keys calling their names. The lodging's sandy beach, impressive works for sale by international artists, and botanic gardens round out this intimate escape.



#### 5. BE PAMPERED AT AN EXPANSIVE RESORT...

Live it up in luxury at [Cheeca Lodge](#) (photo above), an Islamorada oasis since 1946, where big game fishing and society ooh-la-la put it on the must-do map. With 27 acres of lush gardens and two pools, this resort attracts honeymooners and families, kayakers, and tennis pros. For spa-goers, Cheeca Spa incorporates Tiger Clam shells right from the sea into its Signature Hot Lava Shell Massage. At its Atlantic Edge restaurant, relish the locally caught seafood, such as hogfish and grouper; or catch your own fish on an excursion and bring it back for the chef to cook any way you please. An on-property cemetery pays respect to early Keys pioneers, called Conchs.



## 6. ...OR TWO

At secluded, swanky **Hawks Cay Resort** (photo above) in Duck Key—which harbors a beachfront and a marina—fishing, diving, snorkeling, kite-boarding, and stand-up paddling woo water-sport adventurers. Yet the best water-devoted moments for many guests are at its on-site **Dolphin Connection**, where you can swim with (and be kissed by) bottlenose beauties in an ocean-fed saltwater lagoon. Recharged yet? At the Calm Waters Spa, a skin-smoothing Key Lime Mojito Signature Scrub puts the famous fruit to new use; breathe deeply afterward in its eucalyptus steam room. For kids four to 17 years old, age-group divided activities and club haunts are well designed, with supervised nature hikes, treasure hunts, athletic **games**, and more. After dusk, you'll likely see romantics holding hands in a banquette at Alma, where executive chef Sandor Matyi melds bold Latin cuisine with refined European techniques.

For more info, go to: [The Florida Keys & Key West](#) and [Visit Florida](#).

*What has inspired you about the Florida Keys? Do you have a favorite hideaway here? Where have you most enjoyed traveling? We'd love to know!*

*Frequent globetrotter Laura Manske has visited most U.S. states, explored 70+ countries, and cruised 60+ ships. She loves to wander the world, unearthing travel joy, beauty, adventure, and humor through her camera lens and articles. Now, she's sharing pictures and memories of her favorite spots on Parade.com. [P](#)*