

# BIKING *the* Florida Keys



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FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU

Old Seven Mile Bridge

*Two old college friends take a bicycling trip down one of America's most iconic stretches of highway.*

BY DEBORAH R. HUSO

**I'M NOT SURE WHEN** my friend Susannah and I first began our road trip tradition. Friends since college and both of us suffering severe cases of wanderlust, we've made a habit of heading off together on at least one road trip (if not two or three) every year. This last year, however, the road trip happened via two wheels, not four, when I got a wild hair to bike the Florida Keys from Key Largo to where Route 1 ends in Key West.

Luckily, Susannah is game for anything. She would have to be to agree to this 90-mile journey.

These days, bicycling Route 1 is made easier by a designated cycling path (for much of the way) that parallels the historic highway completed in 1938 to link the coral bedrock of these series of islands south of Miami. Strung together by 40-some bridges, Route 1 offers easy riding by this mountain girl's standards, and I'm primed to go 20 or so miles a day, taking in the often-overlooked local haunts and nostalgic tourist destinations along the way—oh, and to scout out the best key lime pie to be had south of Florida Bay.



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Old Road Gallery



PHOTO BY CRAIG AMBROSIO

Pelican Cove Resort

### DAY 1: TAVERNIER TO WINDLEY KEY

Our journey begins at a bike rental shop in Tavernier (Mile Marker 91), where we change into bike shorts, don helmets and sunglasses, and load our bikes and ourselves down with packs of gear for a four-day journey to Key West. Following the guidance of Key Largo Bike shop owner Patrick Fitzgerald, we follow the path of "Old Route 1" as much as possible and, early in our journey, find ourselves at the Old Road Gallery (MM 88). Owned by husband and wife artist team Dwayne and Cindy King, the gallery sells locally crafted pottery and sculpture, but the real treat here is the adjacent sculpture garden in the mangroves where pebbled paths lead us to Adirondack chairs in the shade and giant glass-blown balls nesting in the trees.

We abandon our bikes for a bit and venture into the sculpture garden, which eventually opens onto what are known here in the Keys as a "Hurricane House." A solid Arts and Crafts structure completed in 1934, this building, along with many others like it, survived the

hurricane of 1935 that took out Henry Flagler's railroad from Miami to Key West. Today, it has been transformed into the home for an artist-in-residence at the adjacent gallery and features unusual epoxy floors in swirls of sunset orange.

Once we're back out on the main drag of Route 1 in Islamorada, we find ourselves distracted again by another stop at the Rain Barrel Artisans Village (MM 86), where a giant metal lobster known as Betsy presides over a series of funky art galleries and gift shops. You can also get key lime pie here as well as pizza served in cones.

After an obligatory selfie in front of Betsy, we head south again onto Windley Key, where our first day's ride ends after less than 10 miles at the Gulf-side Pelican Cove Resort (MM 84). Sporting a manmade white sand beach littered with hammocks and lounge chairs and a beachfront pool with a swinging bed, Pelican Cove is both indulgent and laidback. For dinner, we take a shuttle to Oltremare Ristorante at nearby Amara Cay Resort (MM 80), where we dine on

the restaurant's signature three-cheese, three-meat meatballs along with fettucine, hard Italian bread, and craft cocktails from a seriously eclectic lounge and bar featuring swinging chairs and Keys-inspired artwork.

### DAY 2: WINDLEY KEY TO DUCK KEY

The next day, we hit the road mid-morning and enjoy the dedicated bike trail for the seven-mile journey to our next stop for an early lunch at shack-style Robbie's Marina (MM 77). Here, we dine on deliciously greasy fish sandwiches while watching pelicans land on the dock and tied-up yachts. Robbie's also offers tarpon feeding (and sometimes biting) from the dock, kayak rentals and T-shirt/flip-flop stores scattered about a yard riddled with firepits and Adirondack chairs.

We elect to take a break from biking in favor of a kayak trip out to Indian Key with local historian Brad Bertelli. It takes about 30 minutes to cross the choppy waters of the Atlantic out to this now-abandoned historic island settled in the 1820s by wreckers who rescued



PHOTO BY DEBORAH R. HUSO

The journey included a kayaking side trip to Indian Key.

cargo from shipwrecks in exchange for a share in the haul. The most notorious among them and a resident of Indian Key was New York native John Jacob Housman, who was believed to have caused some of the shipwrecks from which he profited. Housman was largely responsible for the growth of a community on this island. Today, all the houses are gone, but the foundations and cisterns beneath them remain. The community was destroyed following a massacre by Native Americans in 1840. Housman was buried on the island, but his skeleton was reputedly stolen in the 1960s.

As the longer shadows of late afternoon fall, we hop back on our bikes for a 16-mile trek to our second night's lodging at Hawks Cay Resort (MM 61) on Duck Key. Our decadent suite features an expansive patio overlooking an array of pools, hot tubs, a tiki bar and the Atlantic Ocean. That evening, we dine at the resort's Alma Bar, where casual fare is anything but as we enjoy a three-cheese and charcuterie platter, flatbread pizza, and—my personal fave of the evening—a key lime pie martini served in a glass rimmed with graham cracker crumbs.

### DAY 3: DUCK KEY TO SUGAR LOAF KEY

Our third day ends up being our longest haul: a 45-mile stretch over what I consider some of the most beautiful lengths of roadway and bridges in the Keys.

After riding through the bustling city of Marathon for several miles after breakfast, we come to the famous Seven Mile Bridge (MM 47). While the bridge makes for a challenging ride due to crosswinds, it offers some of the best views of the trip as it parallels the remnants of old Route 1 and the leftover bridges of Flagler's doomed railroad.

As I pedal, I find myself lost in contemplation of the views. The Keys are made of limestone, and offshore reefs prevent the ocean waves from forming beaches here. Thus, the natural shoreline drops off into the water, water that is among the most colorful in the continental U.S. The water of Florida Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean here ranges from a deep sea green to a rich royal blue to phosphorescent sea-foam green.

After getting some miles under our wheels, we stop in for brunch at the Stuffed Pig (MM 35), the perfect

greasy spoon for a pair of ladies who are burning 400 or so calories an hour. Greeted with a "you girls sure look like you could use some mimosas" from the waitress on duty, we indulge, indeed, while also shoveling in shrimp and grits.

As we transition into the Lower Keys, the traffic bound to and from Key West grows heavier, and the riding a bit more stressful. We find ourselves relieved to bring our saddle-sore bodies limping into the lobby of the quirky Sugar Loaf Lodge (MM 17) on Sugar Loaf Key, where the crusty yet friendly desk clerk calls me "sweetheart" and provides a five-minute rant on the dangerous road riding in the Lower Keys, a sentiment echoed by another lodge guest from Maryland who has biked Route 1 through the Keys eight times.

We settle into our retro room for the night and then head to the lodge's on-site tiki bar to experience some of the true laidback lifestyle of the Lower Keys.

### DAY 4: SUGAR LOAF KEY TO KEY WEST

Our last day, we make a somewhat desperate haul for the last 17 miles of our journey, as the fine weather we've



Southernmost Point in Key West is a popular spot for a photo.

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enjoyed the first three days has left us. Donning rain slickers and sunglasses to keep the water from blistering our eyes, we spend the morning and early afternoon pedaling through rainstorms and high winds. And if there were any Key deer to see on Big Pine Key, we miss them in our dogged focus to get to Key West as quickly as possible.

Thankfully, our hostesses at the Key Lime Inn on Truman Avenue, where we park our bikes and find our shuttled bags with dry clothes waiting for us, provide tickets for complimentary cocktails at an adjacent lounge. We shower, don the first truly clean clothes we've worn in days, and head out to explore the city of Ernest Hemingway fame.

Our rambles, now on foot, take us to one of my favorite independent booksellers in the country: Key West Island Books, where I pick up some evening reading from both local and Cuban authors. We then head to the aptly named Southernmost Point (90 miles from Cuba) and to oceanfront cocktails and sunset views at the Casa Marina Resort.

Of course, our time in Key West could not be complete without a visit to

the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum on Greene Street, where we marvel at the collections of gold and silver as well as the personal history of this treasure seeker who hunted the sea floor for three decades before finding the sunken 1622 Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* that made him famous. Then it's on for too-early-in-the-day drinks at Margaritaville (after all, it's five o'clock

somewhere), bath souvenirs from The Sponge Market, and cabaret viewing and dinner at La Te Da on Duval Street. Ninety miles and four days later, the calorie indulgence seems fair.

Susannah and I stroll back to our little bungalow-style room at the Key Lime Inn, arm in arm, plotting our next road trip, which may (or may not) involve bicycles. <<

## TIPS FOR BIKING THE KEYS

- To avoid hauling lots of gear on your cycling trip, consider having it shuttled to your accommodations each night or having it shuttled to Key West. Many bike rental shops offer this option. They will also pick up your bikes in Key West.
- Make sure you have critical safety and support gear with you, including a bike helmet, bike gloves, padded bike pants or shorts, sunglasses, a rain slicker, sunscreen, a tire pump, plenty of water and high-energy snacks.
- Keep in mind that this bike trip isn't for young children, as there is a fair amount of road riding on busy Route 1, and even where the bike trails are complete, they do crisscross the highway regularly. Only experienced road cyclists should take this journey. Cyclists have been killed on Route 1 as a result of collisions with automobiles.
- While most of the cycling along Route 1 through the Keys is relatively flat, the journey still requires physical fitness. Not only do many of the bridges have substantial uphill stretches, but you'll also encounter high winds when riding across or next to open water, which makes it feel as if you're pedaling uphill for miles.