

travel

Florida Keys' top six spots

Get your dose of water, nature, Hemingway lore

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

The chain of islands, some mere flyspecks on the map, spill off the southern tip of Florida barely attached to the continent by a string of 42 bridges. Known for its independent spirit, the Keys are a place apart with attractions and activities both conventional and downright wacky.

Here are six cultural attractions not to miss:

Turtle Hospital

The orange-and-white van outside an old roadside motel in Marathon looks like an ordinary emergency vehicle, but get close and you'll see its sign reading "Turtle Hospital Ambulance." That motel was converted long ago into the world's only state-certified veterinary hospital for sea turtles.

Sign up for a tour and you'll go behind the scenes to watch veterinarians and marine biologists using lasers, endoscopes and other high-tech equipment to treat sea turtles that have been injured by boats, lost flippers in fishing lines and have ingested plastic bags, which look like jellyfish to a turtle. The bags inflate in their stomachs making it impossible for them to dive to find food. The most common surgery removes tumors caused by a virus that can leave them blind.

Behind the hospital, walk around the outdoor pool and holding tanks where turtles recover before they are released back into the wild. From 50-75 turtles move through here a year—four differ-



First-time visitors are surprised to learn the Keys are nearly bereft of beaches. But Bahia Honda State Park near Big Pine Key, Fla., offers three outstanding beaches from which to choose. | BOB KRIST—FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU



The Turtle Hospital in Marathon treats injured sea turtles and is open for tours. | PHOTO BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

ent species, three of them endangered. Visit Turtlehospital.org.

Bahia Honda State Park

Many first-time visitors to the Keys don't realize these islands are bereft of beaches. Not so at

this state park 37 miles northeast of Key West. Spread your beach towel on any of three natural beaches—two named among the country's best—for some sunbathing and swimming. Rent a kayak or book a snorkeling tour to see tropi-



Author Ernest Hemingway's Key West mansion is now a museum. | PHOTO BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

cal fish and coral, or pop into the Sea and Sand Nature Center for a look at an aquarium and exhibits of marine life.

Be sure to climb the nature trail to the old Bahia Honda Bridge, originally part of the Overseas

Railway built in 1912 and converted to highway traffic in the 1930s. When the new U.S. Route 1 was built through the Keys, this section of bridge was kept as a monument. From the top you may be able to look down and spot rays and sea turtles if the water is clear.

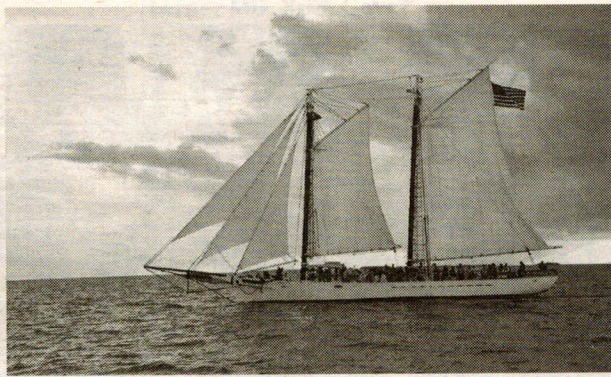
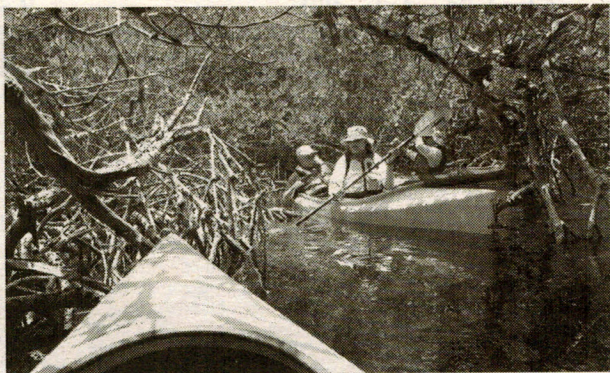
Want to spend the night? Choose from 80 campsites and three duplex cabins. Visit bahiahondapark.com.

Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum

The hard-drinking novelist moved into this Spanish-colonial mansion in 1931. Just down the street from the Key West Lighthouse, Hem joked that no matter how late he left Sloppy Joe's Bar the light always showed him the way home. A urinal from the bar is a water fountain in a side garden where 50 cats, some descendants of his six-toed Snowball, roam. Look for the penny embedded in the patio, thrown here by Hem in a rage after his wife took down his beloved boxing ring and replaced it with Key West's first swimming pool at a price the novelist could ill afford. Inside the home you'll see photos of his four wives and three sons as well as a few furnishings brought from Europe. Above the carriage house, peek inside the studio where passages of "For Whom the Bell Tolls" were written. Visit Hemingway-home.com.

African Queen

Put on your best Humphrey Bogart or Katharine Hepburn persona and ride the African Queen in Key Largo. The narrow 30-foot steamboat, built in England in 1912, was called The Livingstone when she plied the waters of what was



Explore the mangroves (left) on a nature tour by kayak off Big Pine Key, or take in the sunset from the deck of the 130-foot schooner Western Union which has been restored and offers sunset sails off Key West. | PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

CONTINUED FROM
PAGE 32

KEYS

then the Belgian Congo. She was renamed for the 1951 movie that earned Bogart his only Oscar.

The boat was brought to Florida and has since been restored. The boiler was sent to New York for rebuilding before the boat re-entered service this past May. Be one of six passengers to step aboard for a cruise on the Port Largo canals and you'll hear the shrill whistle blow and see the boiler spewing white steam. *Africanqueenflkeys.com*

Kayak off Big Pine Key

Ease yourself into a kayak and look for the web of life in the sparkling water below your paddle. You'll see coral and sponges in odd shapes and sizes. If you're lucky, a human-size tarpon may glide past, or a sea turtle may raise its head above the surface to check you out.

Take a break from the sun and poke into the shade of the mangroves. You'll want to unscrew the handles of your paddles for easier maneuverability in these tight quarters as you follow a narrow stream into a woody thicket. Be prepared to do the mangrove limbo under low-hanging branches.

Big Pine Kayak Adventures offers group nature tours and rents kayaks and



The African Queen, the original vessel from director John Huston's classic 1951 film by the same name, sails on a Key Largo canal last spring. | ANDY NEWMAN—FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU

paddleboards to individuals. On a backcountry charter with owner Bill Keogh, an author and nature photographer, you'll be accompanied by his white lab, Scupper, who rides atop his kayak. Visit *keyskayaktours.com*.

Schooner Sunset Sail

Key West is famous for sunsets, as anyone who has strolled crowded Mallory Square at dusk knows. But a better way to see this nightly light show is from the deck of a masted schooner.

The last tall ship built in Key West, the 130-foot Western Union, spent her working life laying cable from Maine to Venezuela. Step aboard one of the country's oldest wooden schooners and you'll be glad local preservationists saved this 1939 vessel, now on the National Register of Historic Places. Sit back and gaze at her Douglas fir spars and creamy sails as they turn rosy in the setting sun. Visit *schoonerwesternunion.org*.

You'll be tempted to don an eye patch if you sail on

the Jolly II Rover, an 80-foot square rigged schooner that's reminiscent of those manned by rum runners and pirates in the Gulf. Its flaming red sails light up the sky, competing with Mother Nature's show on the western horizon. Visit *schoonerjollyrover.com*

The two vessels often maneuver close to each other to show off and may even bring out their cannons. Fire in the hole!

Katherine Rodeghier is a Chicago-area freelance writer.