

Key West

& the Lower Keys Travel Guide

UPDATE November 26, 2017

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Giant Land Crabs, Grassy Key

Welcome to our most recent update for the Key West & the Lower Keys Travel Guide. This version includes changes brought about by hurricane Irma, as well other notables, and is meant to be a companion to the full-length book (isbn 978-0-9988589-0-6).

If you see anything we've missed, let us know so we can fix it. editorial@quixotictravelguides.com.



Hurricane Irma: What to Expect

SHOULD YOU VISIT?

Yes! If you want to help the Keys, the best thing you can do is come here for a vacation. There is a misconception that the Keys aren't recovered enough for business, but that is not at all accurate. In fact, if you fly directly into Key West, you might not even realize there was a hurricane at all, except that a lot of hotel rates are superb bargains at the moment.

THE STORM

On September 10, hurricane Irma made landfall on Cudjoe Key, about 20 miles northeast of Key West, as a category 4 hurricane. Sustained wind speeds in the Lower Keys reached around 130 mph, and the storm surge reached 10 to 14 feet. The official time was 9:10 a.m., presumably 9:10 and 17 seconds, which means it hit on 9/10/17 at 9:10:17, though the official record does not specify the time down to the second.

Before landing here, it caused major destruction across much of the Eastern Caribbean, where it was one of only five hurricanes on record to reach sustained winds of 185 m.p.h. It maintained that power for 37 hours. It was a category 5 when it slammed Barbuda, Dominica, Anguilla, the British and U.S. Virgin Islands, and St. Martin, among others. It let up only slightly before hitting Puerto Rico, then moving up the northern coast of Cuba and jumping north across the Florida Straits. Its strength tied the infamous 1935 hurricane, which took out the Flagler Overseas Railroad.

THE EVACUATION

The National Weather Service saw Irma coming a long way off. Thanks to the Keys award-winning evacuation plans, tourists were out several days before it hit, and the locals who wanted to leave, which were many, had enough time to put up the shutters as well. Getting to the mainland was relatively easy. After that, things became a little more difficult, as the true scope of Irma became evident. The storm was so massive in square miles, that nowhere in Florida was spared. As the largest evacuation in U.S. history began, 6.5 million people took to the roads. Gas was sparse, with long lines at the few open pumps, and hotels nearly impossible to find for those who didn't reserve them early. The evacuations grew, as they spread to Georgia and the Carolinas. Highways were jammed up. Back roads remained navigable for the most part.

THE AFTERMATH

The day following the storm came with an apocalyptic feel. Officially one-third of the state was without power. That's 6.8 million people. But that day we drove hundreds of miles around the state, to find no one with power. No stoplights, no gas pumps. Our Key, Cudjoe, was among the last Keys to get electricity back, nearly two weeks later — which sounds like a long time, but considering the scope of the downed power lines, it was a pretty amazing feat.

Of the 10,000 or so residents who chose not to evacuate the Keys, 14 died, though most of those were attributed to natural causes, from ongoing health-related issues. The storm surge, high-winds and a number of hurricane-induced tornadoes destroyed many homes and business, with the hardest hit area being the Lower Keys. As good fortune would have it, however, Key West was spared the brunt of damage.

AS OF TODAY

Key West is pretty much back to normal. The restaurants, bars, hotels and attractions are 99 percent open and cleaned up to the point where you probably would not even realize there had been a hurricane. The rest of the Lower Keys are coming along, albeit at a slower rate. Many businesses are back open, with the exception of most lodging and gas stations between mile markers 40 to 17. Details on closures can be found below.

The debris pile in front of our house near mile marker 21. Debris piles persist along many of the Lower Keys roadways and the overseas Highway.



If you drive to Key West, you'll see some of the aftermath in the form of big debris piles along the side of the road. These will probably persist until early 2018. They are an eyesore, but are diminishing by the week. Deeper into neighborhoods, especially from Big Pine to Sugarloaf Keys (mile markers 40 to 17), most houses have at least some evidence of damage. On the lighter side, they are missing porch screens or have fancy blue tarps on the roofs. On the heavier side, some are simply not there any more. Lack of contractors and slow-moving insurance companies will all but guarantee a multi-year process to get everyone back to pre-hurricane condition. But none of this has much effect on tourists, and should certainly not be an disincentive to visit this winter.

DRIVING PRECAUTIONS

Many of the fences that kept Key deer and endangered marsh rabbits off of the highway are still down. Please drive slowly and use extra caution in the Lower Keys, especially Big Pine. Be attentive for debris in the road, as occasionally it falls from collection trucks. Be patient, as utility and construction trucks are still plentiful.

KINDNESS

Most locals are quite happy to have tourists return. Visitors are vital for financial recovery, since nearly everyone's jobs down here depend on that economy. Getting the busy, winter season underway is also

For several weeks, this was a typical scene. Now most of the boats are back in the water, and not on the shoulder. This photo was taken on Big Pine Key on the Overseas Highway five days after the storm.



helping greatly with a relaxed feeling of the return of normalcy. Trading in rakes and chainsaws for serving a mojito is a delightful turn of events.

We would like to encourage this as a time for extra kindness and patience. Many people here have lost everything — their houses, their belongings — and while most who live here are pretty hearty and strong, empathy from a stranger goes a long way. Also, for many life will continue to be difficult for the foreseeable future. Finding affordable housing and reliable employees was very hard before the storm. Now, with hundreds of mostly lower-income housing units destroyed, it's reached a crisis level. Some are still living in their cars. Others have squeezed into whatever space they can find with a roof, but those situations are stressful. Some have been priced out of the Keys entirely, leaving businesses struggling to find enough help to keep doors open. This will eventually straighten itself out, but a little extra understanding in the interim is a very kind gesture.

Capt. Eddie of the Conch Republic Navy was homeless when Irma rolled through. He weathered the storm sitting in a borrowed van in a metal industrial shed. At one point he could see the garage door pulsing from the pressure, so he rolled the van forward to brace the door with the bumper. It worked. He says his angels, who are ever present in the Keys, protected him. In the background, Summerland Ace Hardware was one of the first businesses to open back up, and out front people could leave food, water, and supplies they cared to share. Capt. Eddie was thankful for that, and offered the employees a genuine conch shell salute in return.



Nature Updates

When we first drove back home, four days after the storm, we were shocked to see a brown landscape, instead of the once-lush tropical flora. It seemed as if every leaf had been stripped, and a strange orange tint filled the air. Within two weeks, the trees began sprouting green again. The natives rebounded faster, like the mangroves and gumbo limbos. Today, the landscape is not quite as lush as it was before, but it is both fascinating and uplifting to watch nature rebound. Our best guess is, by spring, it'll be as green as ever.

As for the wildlife, mostly it is a happy ending. On land, the tiny Key deer maintained their vibrant population, with only 21 dying from the storm despite surges that were two or even five times their height. The hawk migration stayed mostly on schedule, which is a good sign of a stabilizing ecosystem. Great white herons, white-crowned pigeons, pelicans and the other village regulars are readily found. The outcome doesn't seem as hopeful for the endangered Lower Keys marsh rabbits and the Bartram's hairstreak butterfly, both of which have not been spotted widely since the storm.

Under the water, some reefs came out unscathed, but many were damaged, especially by underwater debris such as lobster and crab traps. The reefs and their sea life have survived countless hurricanes, and so a vibrance in species is still evident on a snorkel or dive, at least for now. Global warming poses a much greater risk than do storms. Today, sea turtles and manatees, still roam the waters, along with brilliant fish.

TRANSPORTATION

This is not hurricane related, but definitely worth noting: Thanks to a new state law, ride sharing is now legal. Key West has a great local one, Ride KW, which doubles as a delivery service. Text RIDE to 797979 to download the free app, or visit ridekw.com. Uber is also here now.

Henry & Gladys look for bug treats in the debris piles.



our Jamaican dogwood and shefflera trees five days and 10 weeks after the storm. Though the dogwood lost most of its branches, it began growing leaves straight from its trunk, like a grand, green beard.

Gladys & Henry

Around March of 2017, two wild "gypsy" chickens began to roam our street. While this is a common site in Key West, they are rare in the Lower Keys. We dubbed them Henry and Gladys, and gave them food and water whenever they came to visit. They were very young, but it was fun to watch them learn to be chickens. Henry handsomely sounded morning wake-up calls, and was particularly chivalrous, letting Gladys eat first. When we left, we feared the worst. When we returned, within a minute of us parking Henry came out of nowhere, sprinting straight for our car. He was disheveled, but intact. We promptly delivered food and water, all the while believing that Gladys had not weathered the storm. That was not the case. Instead she was simply waiting to make a dramatic entrance several minutes later. The eye of the hurricane had passed directly over their heads, and somehow they survived. Unfortunately, in the weeks following, a neighbor's dog attacked Henry three times. Fearing for their safety, we begrudgingly delivered them to the Key West Wildlife Rescue, where Henry could get patched up and the pair could be delivered to a new home, presumably on a peaceful no-kill farm on the mainland.

Lodging Updates

In-season lodging deals have never been better. People have been booking rooms at prices lower than we've ever seen them. All of the Key West and Stock Island hotels and B&Bs featured in the book are open. In the Lower Keys, the **Sugarloaf Lodge**, **Parmer's Resort** on Little Torch Key, and **Looe Key Reef Resort** on Ramrod Key are open.

As of this update the following lodging is closed, presumably for some time to come. If you were hoping to stay at one of these properties, double-check with them, just in case we're out of date by the time you read this: **Bahia Honda State Park** cabins, **Deer Run Bed & Breakfast**, the **Barnacle Bed & Breakfast**, **Little Palm Island** resort, **Melody Key**, **Big Pine Key Fishing Lodge**, **Old Wooden Bridge Marina & Resort**, and **Dolphin Marina Cottages**.

Restaurant Updates

All of the restaurants and eateries featured in the book are open, with the exception of **Sugarloaf Food Company**, which closed permanently, and **Little Palm Island** — sorry, no fancy brunch there for awhile as they rebuild.

We'd like to add that the **Dolphin Deli** on Stock Island has hash browns. Yay! Hash browns are difficult to find in these parts.

We'd also like to add a great New Town eatery. The **Key Plaza Creperie** should have been included in our printed guide. It was an oversight. They have excellent food for breakfast and lunch. Besides amazing crepes, coffee and other French delights, they serve several types of eggs Benedict on weekends, which come on a pretzel roll. The veggie version has spinach, mushrooms, onions, tomatoes, and avocados.

Brunch update: **Hot Tin Roof**, upscale Sunday brunch \$49, from 11:30 to 2:30. 0 Duval Street, 305-295-7057.

The cottages at old Wooden Bridge Marina. We have heard they intend to rebuild.



Bars & Drink Updates

All of the bars featured in the book are open, with the exception of the **Purple Porpoise Pub**. We have been trying to get an update, but their phone is not working. While driving by we have seen the doors open here and there, so we believe they are cleaning up with the intent to restart their enchanting dive bar depths. We hope they don't clean up too much and open back up very soon. After all, it can't be that time-consuming to power-wash the Coleman coolers.

"SAVE DA RUM"

That's what the proprietor of the **Key West First Legal Rum Distillery** painted on the roof just before Irma rolled through. The distiller stayed, producing a special hurricane rum batch. The super-low pressure presumably gives the rum a distinct flavor. They plan to sell some of the 100-bottle batch, and auction the rest with proceeds going to the local nonprofit Sister Season Fund.

Late Night Updates

There's a new 24-hour **Denny's** in New Town Key West in the Winn-Dixie shopping center at 2710 N. Roosevelt, 305-741-7990.

The **Circle K** on Big Coppitt used to be 24 hours, but is not functioning that way for the moment. Their pumps are open, and they have limited supplies in a temporary building out front, but the main store is still being fixed.

Just around the corner from the cottages, the beloved **No Name Pub** looked fine on the outside, but needed extensive interior renovations thanks to heavy water damage from the storm surge. It's now open again, with all of its dollar-bill wall decorations still in tact, and plenty of beer and pizza.



Things to Do on Land Updates

The **Southernmost Point** took a beating, but was quickly restored back to its original charm.

At both the **historic seaport** and **Smathers Beach**, a few wrecked boats continue to lurk, though at Smathers the beached sailboat almost looks like a well-placed movie set piece. Outside of Key West, seeing partially submerged and overturned boats is a more common site, along with destroyed docks.

Higgs Beach is open, however the pier lost its decking.

The **Garden Club at Fort West Martello** is open and greening up. Though it got hit hard, its many native trees and dedicated green thumbs are making it an excellent example of the fortitude of both woman and nature in the Keys. Unfortunately the enormous, graceful strangler fig pictured in the guide is no more.

The **Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail**, a.k.a. the bike path down the Keys, has debris piled on some sections between mile markers 40 and 5. I would not ride it at night without scoping it out first in the daytime, as an encounter with a misplaced stump could really ruin the evening.

Curbside Shopping is not a great idea outside of Key West yet. Some locals are understandably touchy about strangers driving around the neighborhoods gawking at the destruction, and picking through the soggy debris piles that were once their beloved belongings.



The **Key West Botanical Garden** also got hit very hard, and lost many of its prized plant residents. As it reopens on Dec. 1, it will serve as an educational experience on the recovery of an ecosystem. Visitors are encouraged, as well as volunteers and donations.

A great activity, which we didn't discuss enough in the printed version: **Lloyd's Tropical Bike Tours**. Lloyd is a force of nature in the true spirit of Key West, who takes lucky participants around town on an unconventional pedaling tour of off-the-beaten path attractions. He uplifts the spirits while piquing the senses with tastings of local, seasonal fruit picked straight off the plants, plus interactions with some of the town's most colorful characters. Two-hour tour. lloydstropicalbiketour.com, 305-428-2678, 601 Truman Ave., Key West.

Bahia Honda State Park is now open for day use only. It was probably the hardest hit of all Florida State Parks. We haven't yet walked the beaches there, so we'll update this soon when we have more to report.

Key Deer National Wildlife Refuge lost a lot of trees and leaves, but as soon as the winds passed, the dedicated emergency staff were out finding kiddie swimming pools to fill with fresh water for the deer and other animals. Very few deer were killed in the storm, though that was not the case for the Lower Keys marsh rabbit and some other endangered animals and plants that have yet to be fully accounted for. The bookstore is still an excellent place to start nature

Anti-looting signs were prevalent in the weeks after the storm, but some were eventually altered to address more pressing needs. What initially read "Disabled veteran needs help. Looters shot on site" became "Disabled Veteran needs beer + ice." Priorities, Keys-style.



exploration, where the staff can point you toward the trails currently cleared and suitable for a walk in the woods. It's interesting to walk now, with less foliage things are visible that once were hidden in the tangled forest.

Perky Bat Tower fell over. There is talk about resurrecting it, if a grant or donations can be found. For now, the road is closed to the public.

Grimal Grove is in the midst of a big cleanup, but they are bringing in fresh fruit from Homestead, which is for sale at various farmers markets.

We haven't yet visited the **Jumping Bridge**, but I think it's safe to say that the bridge and canal are still there. We'll report back, but if you visit in the meantime, be careful for debris that could be in the water under the bridge.

Boca Chica Beach... we'll let you know about this one soon as well.

Veterans Memorial Park is not yet open. We are not sure the exact reason, but are speculating that they won't open it until they repair the bathrooms.

Arts, Literature & Events Updates

6 "There are no happy endings. Endings are the saddest part, So just give me a happy middle And a very happy start."

7 Shel Silverstein's house exists now only in memory.



Things to Do in the Water Updates

General note about **boating safety**: there are still hidden debris dangers in the waters. For example, in our bay there's a boat tower hidden just inches below the water. In shallow water, keep it slow for safety. Also, the sandy channels have shifted in many areas, which means if you have a GPS track that was reliable pre-storm, it may not be post storm.

Higgs Beach is all good, except the sweet little pier is closed until it gets a new top.

Bahia Honda State Park is open for day-use only. The water is still there. Many of the leaves have not yet started to regrow, though. It's pretty brown.

The artificial reef **USS Vandenberg** shifted 30 degrees, and the bow now points due east. The deck is slightly deeper, which makes for a little shorter dive. The Goliath grouper still live there.

Nomadic SUP recently announced that they will not reopen. We are sorry to hear that, guys. You will be missed by many. We hope that this is not the end, but rather the beginning of a great new adventure.

The water is still amazing, both above and below.



Marinas, RVs & Camping Updates

Cow Key Marina is open (it was closed for renovations when we printed the guide). It also has food now: Hoss & Mary's Grub Shack.

The **Big Pine Key Fishing Lodge**, marina and campground is now reopen, but with limited services. Available: swimming pool, crafts, activities, exercises, a few picnic tables, some construction noise, friendly faces and service, limited boat dockage, sunsets, fishing, Key deer, free coffee, boat trailer storage. Not available: Laundry service, games in the rec room, store (but there will be a temporary structure with a few things), fuel (they are guessing maybe that will be available sometime in December), TV, Internet (again, maybe December).

The **Old Wooden Bridge Marina** was completely destroyed. They intend to rebuild and reopen. Capt. Bill Keogh, whose **Big Pine Kayak Adventures** was based out of the marina, is open for business. The lost many of his kayaks, but still has plenty to deliver an outstanding tour. **Dolphin Marina and Cottages** are closed, but intend to rebuild and reopen. **Cudjoe Gardens Marina** should reopen any day now. **Sugarloaf KOA** campground and marina are closed until around October 2018. **Bahia Honda State Park** is currently closed to camping. No opening ETA has been set yet. **Sunshine Key RV Resort** is closed, but they are working on rebuilding.

The old Wooden Bridge Marina was completely washed away. When we came across it, there was nothing left but an empty lot and proof that even in a tragedy, nature can have a sense of humor. The toilet and Coronas need no explanation, but we are not sure for what purpose the lids were spared.



Shopping & Provisions Updates

Don't believe everything you see on TV news... a few unscrupulous reporters were standing in front of this destroyed trailer, saying that **Baby's Coffee** was no more. Just behind this structure is the actual building, where the owners were actually being heroes, handing out free food and supplies to anyone in need. Baby's is reopen, and would love more customers.

The Stock Island-based artists cooperative **Coast** has opened up a Key West retail store, for cool T-shirts and local art. 803 Whitehead Street in Old Town.



Baby's Coffee, alive and well... and soon to have a new sign.

The trailer some news readers were misidentifying as Baby's.



Kids & Dogs, Chapter 11

The Key West Botanical Garden got hit very hard, and lost many of its prized plant residents. As it reopens on Dec. 1, it will serve as an educational experience on the recovery of an ecosystem. Visitors are encouraged, as well as volunteers and donations.

Boca Chica Beach: We'll let you know as soon as we visit.

The Drive to Key West Updates

John Pennekamp State Park is open except for the Mangrove Trail. **Anne's Beach** is open, but not as lush as it once was. **Crane Point** nature center is open and invites all to "come see how nature heals."

Pigeon Key is not yet open, but will be soon, albeit in much different shape than before. Many of the buildings are heavily damaged and most of the mangroves are gone. This wasn't the first direct hit the tiny island took. In 1935 the Labor Day hurricane hit with 200 mph winds and a 30-foot storm surge.

The **random tree** on the old **Seven Mile Bridge** is still there. Before the storm, Fred (the tree) posted on his Facebook page that he hoped everyone made it to the mainland safely. A few days after the storm, he posted "Did you really think I was going anywhere? #fredaintdead." Surely he will have better Christmas lights than ever in the coming weeks.

Veterans Memorial Park is not yet open. We are not sure the exact reason, but are speculating that they won't open it until they repair the bathrooms. **Bahia Honda State Park** is browner than it once was, but is open for strolls on the beach and snorkeling in the water.

Both **gas stations** on Summerland Key (around mile marker 25) are closed, as well as the Big Pine Shell. There is currently no gas between Marathon (mile marker 47) and Big Coppitt (mile marker 12).

Fred the Australian pine tree is alive and well, and ready to don its annual Christmas decorations. This photo is a little old. Fred is taller now. Thanks, Fred, for letting us use this photo from your Facebook page, even though you don't know that we did.

