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Camp on the beach by night, snorkel by day as a family at Bahia Honda State Park and Beach in Islamorada, a unique getaway in the family-friendly Middle Keys.

- Monroe County Tourist Development Council

Ideas for Your Family Vacation in the Florida Keys

By Jodi Mailander Farrell

Think of the [Florida Keys](#) as a 125-mile island chain of family fun.

From beach camping and snorkeling to gentle animal encounters with dolphins and native Key deer, there are so many one-of-a-kind experiences in the Florida Keys that every day can be filled with epic [memory-making moments with the kids](#).

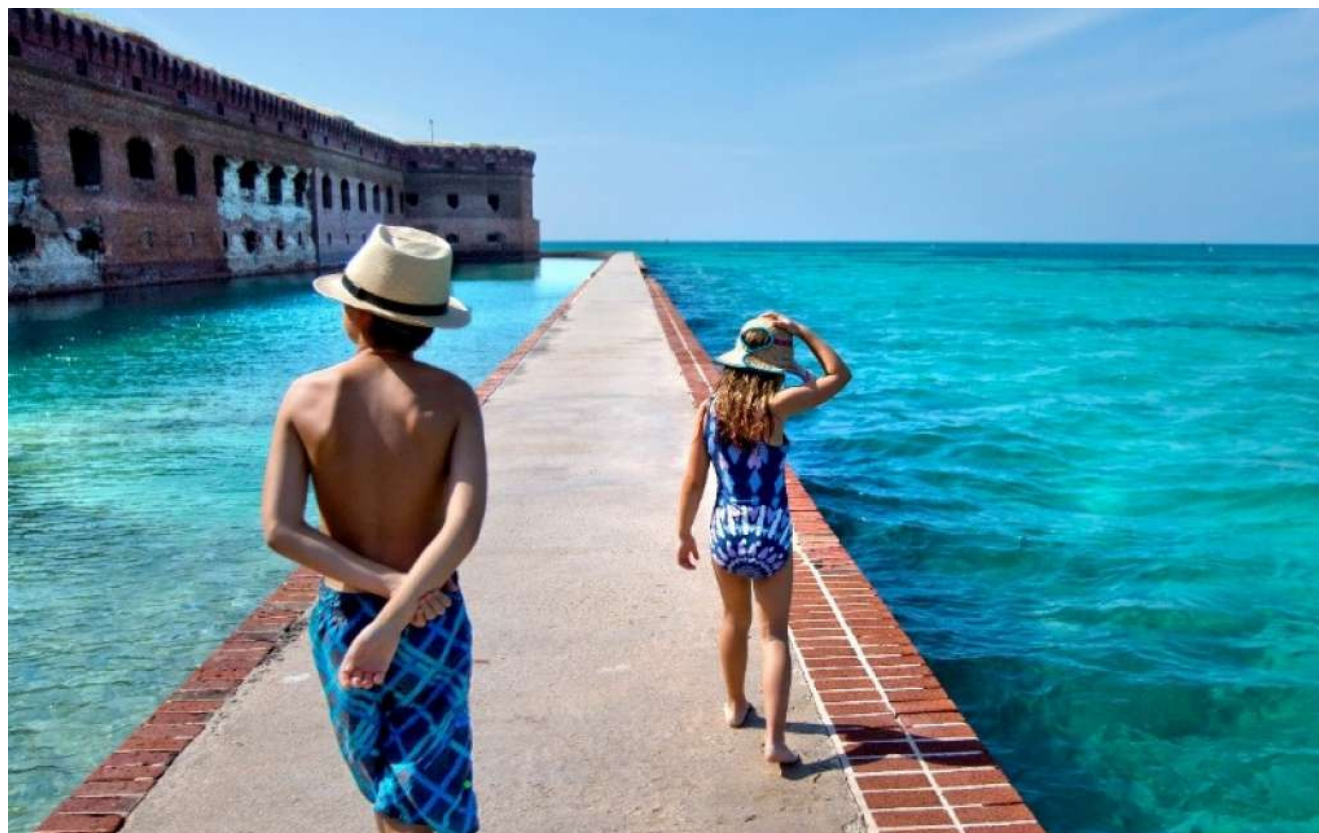
Snorkeling

The Keys are home to the continental United States' only living-coral barrier reef. The reef runs about five miles offshore. The ultimate entry point is at [John Pennoncello Park](#), 102601 Overseas Hwy., in [Key Largo](#), where the remnants of an early Spanish fort have been placed about 100 feet off the beach. [Snorkeling tours](#) that depart from the park daily are best for advanced swimmers, but there are also glass-bottom boat tours for small children and non-swimmers.





with clear waters and a rocky bottom.



Camping at Dry Tortugas National Park on a remote island off of Key West is unlike any other overnight experience.

- Visit Florida

Beach Camping

Calusa Beach inside [Bahia Honda State Park and Beach](#), 36850 Overseas Hwy., in [Islamorada](#) is ranked one of the top spots in the Keys for swimming and snorkeling; it also has [campgrounds and cabins](#) for unique overnight stays that can be booked in advance on the Florida State Parks [website](#).

For the ultimate adventure, charter a trip to [Dry Tortugas National Park](#), almost 70 miles west of Key West. The 100-square-mile park, accessible only by boat or seaplane, is home to the 19th century Fort Jefferson and remote campgrounds.

Swimming with Dolphins

At the [Dolphin Research Center](#), 58901 Overseas Hwy., in Grassy Key, there's a menu of





dolphin trainer programs.

Also in the Middle Keys, [Hawks Cay Resort, Spa & Marina](#), 61 Hawks Cay Blvd., in Duck Key offers the country's only hotel-based dolphin connection program.

In Islamorada, [Theater of the Sea](#), 84721 Overseas Hwy., has been a family-owned marine mammal adventure park since 1946, with swimming and snorkeling dolphin programs.



Spend an educational afternoon at the Turtle Hospital in Marathon, where endangered and protected sea turtles are rehabilitated and released.

- *Turtle Hospital*

Animal Encounters

[Robbie's of Islamorada](#), 77522 Overseas Hwy., is a longtime, only-in-Florida restaurant tucked under a bridge in the Middle Keys. Purchase a bucket of bait fish to watch a school of 100 tarpon that hang out here.



Also in the Upper Keys, the [Florida Keys Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center](#), 93600



creatures.

In the Middle Keys, the [Turtle Hospital](#), 2396 Overseas Hwy., in [Marathon](#) offers kid-friendly guided tours with lessons about the rehab and release of endangered and protected sea turtles, along with coloring books.

Found only in the lower Florida Keys, endangered Key deer are about the size of a big dog. The best place for [deer spotting](#) is the [National Key Deer Refuge](#), 179 Key Deer Blvd., in Big Pine Key.

At the end of the island chain, the [Key West Butterfly and Nature Conservatory](#), 1316 Duval St., is a glass-canopied, lush urban oasis filled with more than 1,000 butterflies that are not timid about landing on visitors.

Family Photo Spots

The [Key West Sunset Celebration](#) happens every evening at [Mallory Square](#), where the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico meet for a sundown festival featuring carnival-like acts and entertainers. The glowing pink-and-orange sunset is the perfect backdrop for a memorable snapshot.

On the other side of the island, the [Southernmost Point](#) iconic landmark on Whitehead Street is a must-do photo opportunity for a southernmost family selfie. The red, black and yellow marker overlooking the Atlantic Ocean on Whitehead Street is the southernmost spot in the United States, just 90 miles from Cuba.

Tours

The hop-on-and-off [Old Town Trolley](#) – which cruises by 12 landmarks, including the Southernmost Point, [Key West Aquarium](#) and [Hemingway Home and Museum](#) – is a great way for families to get around Key West. Kids ages 12 and under ride free, and tickets include free admission to the Overseas Railroad Museum.

Also in [Key West](#), grab a self-guided tour map at the main entrance of [City Cemetery](#) at the intersection of Angela and Margaret streets in the Town for a spooky time tracking down memorials and family plots, along with headstones with humorous endings, such as the famous one that reads, “I told you I was sick.”





Best Beaches

A favorite sandy spot for locals, [Sombrero Beach](#) in Marathon Key is a small, manmade retreat off Mile Marker 50 in the Middle Keys, with a gentle surf, restrooms and accessibility for beach goers with disabilities.

In Key West, [Smathers Beach](#), 2601 S. Roosevelt Blvd., is one of the island's longest stretches of beach, with water sports rentals, volleyball nets and picnic areas.

Historic Sites

Introduce the kids to Nobel Prize-winning author Ernest Hemmingway at the [Hemingway Home and Museum](#), 907 Whitehead St., in Key West, where he wrote many of his famous novels. Along with tours of the home and writing studio, there are more than 40 six-toed cats that are descendants of Hemingway's cat that freely roam the property.

A drive across the Seven Mile Bridge, the longest segmental bridge in the world should include a stop at [Pigeon Key](#), accessible from a visitor center at the west end of Marathon Key. The small island includes a museum and remains unchanged since it housed the workers who built Henry Flagler's railroad in the early 1900s.

Indoor Retreats

In Key West, two museums – the [Key West Shipwreck Treasure Museum](#) at 1 Whitehead St. and the [Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Museum](#), 200 Greene St. – are a great way to spend the afternoon digging into the island's centuries-old history with shipwrecking. Harry Potter fans will enjoy the Fisher Museum's Potter-inspired "Renaissance Science, Magic and Medicine" permanent exhibit that explores the traditions of alchemy and astronomy.

The [Key West Aquarium](#), 1 Whitehead St., has touch tanks and an open snail

More Family Fun

Traveling to other Florida destinations with your gang? Here are more ideas around the Sunshine State.





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[Ideas for Your Family Vacation in Fort Lauderdale](#)

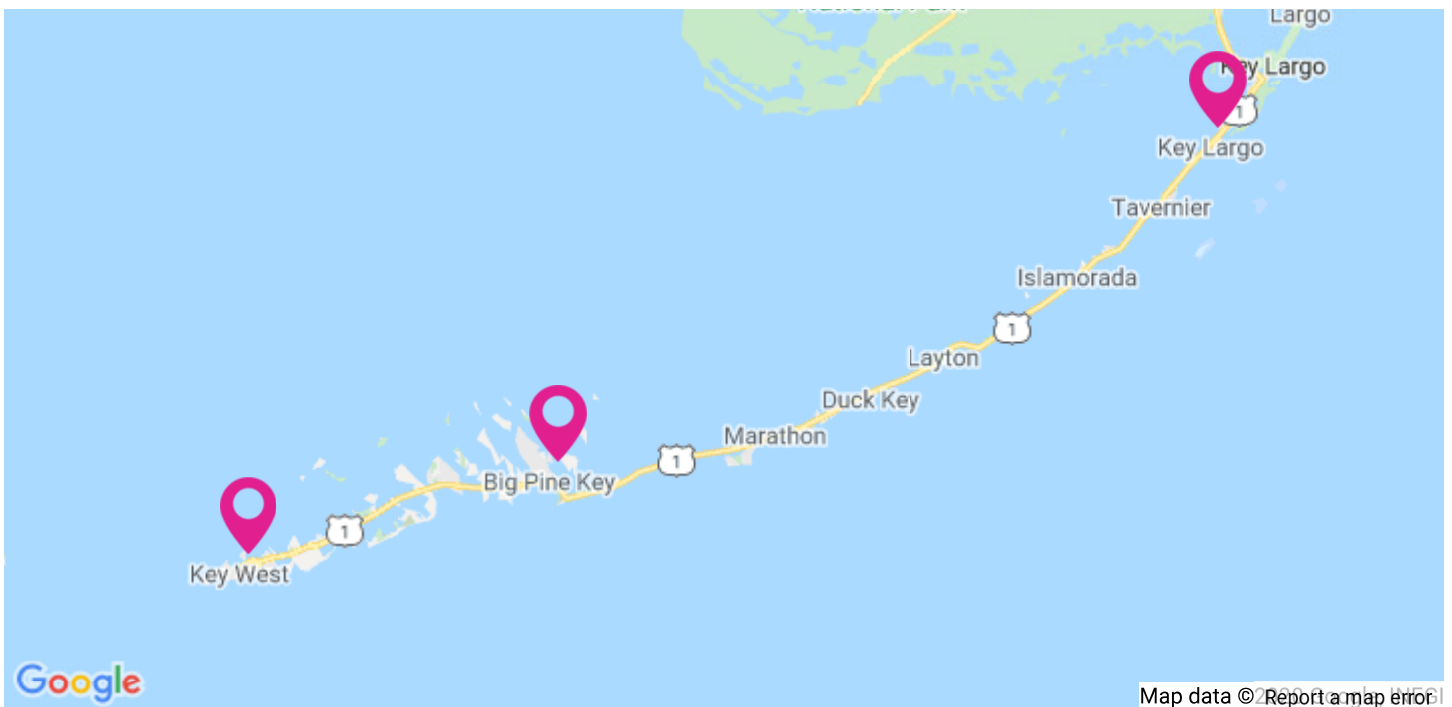
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PLACES TO REMEMBER





KEY LARGO

KEY WEST

BIG PINE KEY

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