

OUTLET: Smart Meetings Magazine

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Smart meetings

July 2022

2022 SMART STARS WINNERS

The List that Makes Dreams Come True

MID-TIER ATTRACTION
WHY PLANNERS LOVE SMALLER DESTINATIONS NOW

ALL INCLUDED
THE CASE FOR PACKAGE DEALS

NEW AND RENOVATED
FRESH OPTIONS IN YOUR FAVORITE PLACES

+
IDAHO
CHICAGO
MISSOURI
PORTLAND
COLORADO
PUERTO RICO
FLORIDA KEYS

• • • SITE INSPECTION: FLORIDA KEYS

Authentic Incentives

MEMORABLE JOURNEYS START HERE

BY JT LONG

The Florida Keys have come a long way since Key West was designated a U.S. territory 200 years ago. This 125-mile-long string of islands connected by an oversea railroad turned highway surged in popularity with incentive planners over the last two years as it offered an exotic, tropical feel with all the domestic comforts. Between Miami and the southernmost point in the Union, what has stayed the same is the friendly authenticity of the area. Residents love their chosen home and are happy to show it off. We scouted some of the hot spots south of Key Largo and came back with this report.

ARRIVE

The Florida Keys, a 125-mile-long chain of islands at the southern tip of the Florida peninsula where sunset is celebrated nightly, are easily accessible via nonstop flights through Miami International Airport (MIA) if you are starting in the Upper Keys or Key West International Airport (EYW) if your home base is in the Lower Keys. Six airlines—Allegiant, American, Delta, JetBlue, Silver and United—operate more than 20 nonstop routes to EYW from major U.S. cities and a new \$80 million terminal will bring even more starting in October 2024.

MEET AND STAY

In Key West, resorts range from the renovated, ultra-boutique Grand Maloney Hotel to independent resorts and branded airport-adjacent properties. **Southernmost Beach Resort** lives up to its name with 293 guest rooms on six ocean-front acres. A recent \$15 million renovation added to the tranquil blue vibe, leaving a fresh, clean feel to guest rooms with access to three swimming pools, a private tanning pier, fun cabanas, al fresco bars and break-out rooms. Southernmost Beach Cafe is the resort's open-air restaurant and a great spot to pick up coffee before going to take the requisite Instagram photo at Southernmost Point landmark.

Opal Key Resort & Marina Key West on the waterfront adjoining Mallory Square and jubilant Duval Street, offers 178 guest rooms, more than 16,000 sq. ft. of meeting space and a 37-slip marina that has been the gateway for countless fishing and sunset excursions.

Key West Marriott Beachside Hotel tucks 221 guest rooms and more than 13,000 sq. ft. of meeting space into an oasis near the airport that puts the Gulf of Mexico at the top of the incentive agenda with a private beach and a locally curated "bourbon program."

An hour north of Key West, **Isla Bella Beach Resort** turns every guest into a VIP with 199 oversize, tastefully decorated guest rooms complete with private balconies overlooking the beach. More than 24,000 sq. ft. of event space, including a secluded peninsula is a picturesque backdrop for an awards gala under the palms. The marina at Marketplace Cafe offers guided watersports rentals. **Mahina** oceanfront restaurant pairs lobster-crusted mahi-mahi with stunning sunset views.

guest rooms are built around a massive swimming pool, marina and white-sand beaches. In addition to nearly 40,000 sq. ft. of event space, a private beach house and event lawn areas allow each group to feel special. Reserve a chimenea to make s'mores and participate in the nightly sunset Eventide burning ceremony.

EAT

The Keys draw foodies for signature conch fritters, an infinite number of variations on rum runners and, of course, Key lime pie—the traditional variety with meringue or dipped in chocolate on a stick (yum). Consider offering local fare via stations along Old Town Trolley Tours stops. It doesn't get more real than that.

DO

When in Key West, arrange for the **Harry S. Truman Little White House** white glove tour complete with literal gloved access to memorabilia and a drive around town in the presidential Lincoln Cosmopolitan stretch limo.

Hosting a more adventurous group? Rent the gardens fronting the historic colonial-style retreat at **Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum**. All that Nobel Prize-winning creativity still lingers in the air along with the famed polydactyl (six-toed) cats.

Looking for a CSR experience that will soften even the hardest shelled attendee? **The Turtle Hospital** cares for and rehabilitates injured sea turtles. Guests can participate in releases back into the wild if the moon and the turtles align.

Hawks Cay Resort at Duck Key boasts Dolphin Connection, a saltwater lagoon with a pod of bottlenose dolphins that put your attendees in the water with some of the smartest mammals on the planet. The Preferred Hotel Group Lifestyle Collection resort offers almost 50,000 sq. ft. of meeting space.

On Key Largo, the largest stretch in the Overseas Highway, **Playa Largo Resort & Spa, Autograph Collection's** 144

Florida Keys Reef Tract is the third-largest living coral barrier reef in the world.



Southernmost Beach Resort



The Turtle Hospital

Need to Know

2,000 sea turtles treated by The Turtle Hospital since 1986

2.2 miles of newly refurbished Old Seven Mile Bridge with access to landmark event space at Pigeon Key

90 miles Distance from Southernmost Point Bouy to Cuba