

florida keys + sebastian + south beach



## ISLAND MAZE + florida keys

**A**vast, island-studded domain, the Florida Keys is where foot-deep expanses of clear water extend for miles and liquid trails snake through dark, narrow, creepy-cool mangrove thickets. Of course, you can drop a kayak into the water just a few hundred feet from U.S. 1, which threads through the islands. But we recommend pushing off from the dock at **Big Pine Key's** Old Wooden Bridge Marina in a twin-engine motorboat loaded with kayaks and guide Bill Keogh of Big Pine Kayak Adventures at the helm. It's a more thrilling way to navigate this tropical paradise. >>

in this section



PHOTOGRAPHY **CHRIS LIVINGSTON**

Buzz north for 20 minutes through the 200,000-acre **Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge**. “This is the least populated area of the Keys,” says Keogh, who has been guiding here for 26 years. Along the way, spot key deer on island banks and bottlenose dolphin in the channel. Keogh plops the anchor down some 200 yards from **Crawl Key**, a prime bird-watching destination. Kayaks are lowered into a great stretch of bathtub-deep water speckled with white sand and undulating sea grass as birds fly overhead, soaring to and from the island. “Check out the frigate birds, ibises and pelicans,” announces Keogh. Along the banks, amid a tangle of mangrove roots, small octopuses cling to underwater branches. Barracuda and red snapper lie in wait. “They remain very still in the water column,” he whispers, “ready to ambush small baitfish.”

Three-quarters of the way around the island, there is a small, dark opening leading toward the center called **Secret Creek**. “It’s so narrow that we grab onto the branches and pull our way through,” directs Keogh. Upon entering this shadowy water trail, the temperature drops. “It’s like you’re floating inside a forest,” says the guide. “Many describe it as enchanting.” The deeper you get along this winding path, the more wild it seems. Silverside fish scatter. You can spot mollusks and sea stars in the water and see hermit crabs scuttle about. Twenty minutes later, there’s a small tidal pond, which is just large enough for kayakers to turn around in and head back out.

Once outside Crawl Key, kayakers drift toward the neighboring **Three Sisters Islands**. Interested in taking a few casts? No problem. Keogh has a fishing rod on hand. There may even be time for a snorkel. After all, while gliding through the remote and wildlife-rich shallows of the Florida Keys, it’s hard to be in much of a hurry. [fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com)  
**PADDLE AND EAT** Join a three-hour group outing (\$50) with **Big Pine Kayak Adventures** ([keyskayaktours.com](http://keyskayaktours.com)) at mile marker 30 on Big Pine Key. If you go solo, kayaks can be delivered to your door. Once a brothel, **No Name Pub** still attracts a colorful crowd that pins dollar bills to its ceiling and walls. The pizza has earned itself credibility, with locally harvested Key shrimp as the topping of choice. [nonamepub.com](http://nonamepub.com) —CHRISTOPHER PERCY COLLIER

## PELICAN PARADISE + sebastian

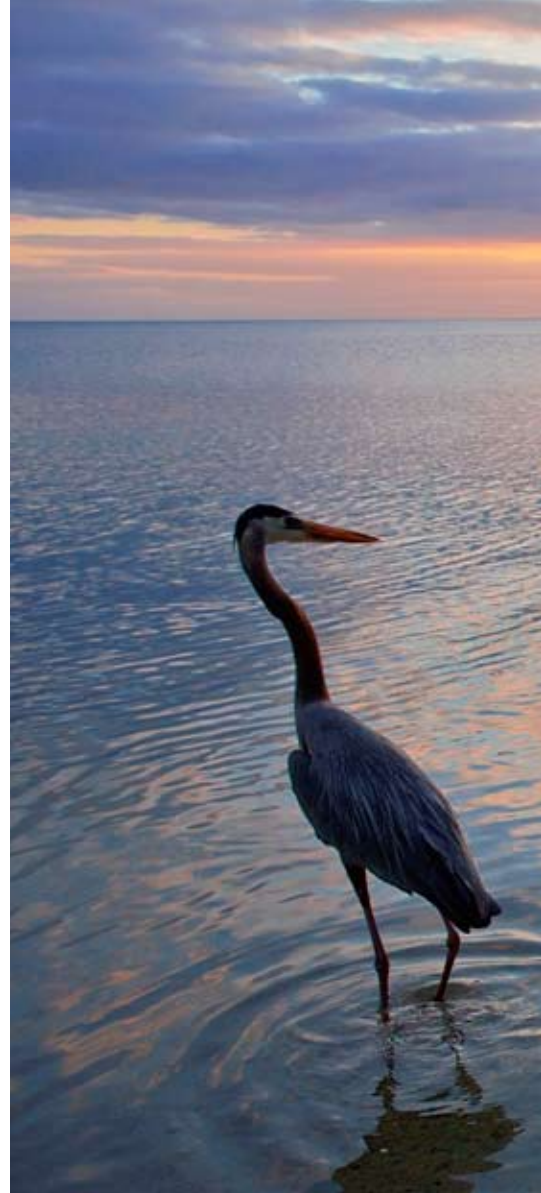
**M**ore than a hundred years ago, America’s conservation movement began with a 4-acre speck in the Indian River Lagoon. When Theodore Roosevelt made Pelican Island the first national wildlife refuge, he protected the birds and their nesting grounds from the onslaught of plume hunters and created one of Florida’s best kayaking areas. Whether he knew it or not, the lagoon is currentless, leaving even the most novice of kayakers to make ripples.

With 5,400 surrounding acres of barrier islands and mangrove caves, **Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge** offers kayakers some of the best viewing. Paddle the shark-tooth-shaped island filled with thick black and red mangroves and a garnish of buttonwoods. Keep an eye out for year-round residents, like egrets, herons, ibis and anhingas—and any of the other 26 species—that hang out here.

You’ll soon realize that the pelicans are the star attraction. Except for a few no-show periods (the latest was a two-year span after the 2004 hurricanes), these large fish-eating birds with deep-pouched bills are clockwork visitors. White pelicans migrate from northern Minnesota

## star light, star bright

Urban kayakers launch their watercraft right into **Biscayne Bay** for an evening paddle around Miami’s Intracoastal islands, just a stone’s throw from the cacophony of South Beach. With each swoop, the melodious rhythm of paddles hitting the water replaces the fading sounds of traffic. Watch the sun drop between downtown’s skyscrapers, followed by the moonrise and stars filling the sky as you glide past million-dollar homes and distant cruise ships. The final destination is the white, sandy shoreline of Monument Island, a spit of land with an obelisk honoring Miami pioneer Henry Flagler, for a bonfire and weenie roast, complete with s’mores. **South Beach Kayak** offers “Fool Moon” and starlight guided cruises for \$45. [southbeachkayak.com](http://southbeachkayak.com)





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**Clockwise from top:** Exiting a red mangrove corridor in the Keys; the White Heron Refuge’s mirror-like waters; kayakers’ anchored vessel; No Name Pub, a Keys landmark since 1935.

and Canada in winter and roost from November through March, while their smaller brown cousins nest from February to July. Wood storks rent out the island in May and June and fill up the branches with white puffs of newborn chicks. Boundary markers keep out the overzealous, but you can float about 50 feet offshore and get up-close looks with binoculars.

Between paddle dips, scrutinize the lagoon for bull, lemon and bonnethead sharks (sister of the hammerhead), the occasional dolphin, and gangs of blue and spider crabs feeding in the wheat-like sea grass. (Tip: Polarized sunglasses help you scan below the surface.) Adult loggerhead turtles are often spotted cruising in from the Atlantic following moon jellyfish, and ospreys and even bald eagles soar above.

Although Roosevelt never visited Pelican Island, he made sure everyone else could—especially the pelicans. [fws.gov/pelicanisland](http://fws.gov/pelicanisland).

**PADDLE AND EAT** The Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge entrance is a dusty road off A1A north of Sebastian. **Tropical Kayak Tours** ([tropicalkayaktours.com](http://tropicalkayaktours.com)) offers equipment and an expert guide. The three-hour outing (\$45) departs from the park. For good eats, make tracks to the **SandBar at Capt Hiram’s Resort** (mile marker 66 on U.S. 1 in Sebastian). Your kayak attire will fit right in among the sandy floors, leaning palms and Indian River views. Grab chilly beers and fill up on Capt. Jim’s sautéed crab cake. [hirams.com/sandbar.cfm](http://hirams.com/sandbar.cfm) —MATTHEW SOLAN