

Big Pine Key: An Oasis of Natural Simplicity

By: Nancy Moreland

GO GREEN, OFF THE BEATEN PATH, OUTDOORSY

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Say “South Florida” and high-rise, high-fashion, high-intensity images might spring to mind. But three hours south of Miami, South Florida reveals its simpler side on Big Pine Key, one of the largest, least developed keys in a nearly 150-mile chain of subtropical islands extending from Key Largo to Key West.

Sandwiched between the [National Key Deer Refuge](#) and [Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge](#), it’s an oasis of natural simplicity with no malls, zero night life and island-wide speed limits not exceeding 45 mph.

Time Traveling

On Big Pine, “Old Florida” isn’t a marketing slogan, it’s a way of life that revolves around tide charts, weather and what’s biting. For instant immersion into the land of laid-back, stay at [Big Pine Key Fishing Lodge and Campground](#). Wedged on a coral outcropping between the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean, the destination has attracted fishermen and families since 1959. A kumbaya spirit and wholesome diversions (shuffleboard, family movie nights, craft lessons) evoke a more leisurely era. The rooms, ’50s Florida down to the terrazzo floors and jalousie windows, are so tidy you’d think Donna Reed was head of housekeeping. Like much of the rocky coastline of the keys, the property’s sunning beach is fronted by a seawall. To cool off, you’ll need to jump in the pool. With 83 boat slips adjoining the shady campground, this location offers fast access to some of Florida’s finest fishing.

Endearing Locals

Miami may be a stomping ground for the rich and famous, but on Big Pine, diminutive Key deer are the big celebrities. For nature lovers, catching a glimpse of the Bambi-like creatures is more thrilling than the sighting of any rock star. The smallest sub-species of North American white-tailed deer, the animals have had a big impact.

“Key deer were used as a growth management tool on Big Pine. Through the Endangered Species Act, a lot of wild land was set aside,” said Bill Keogh, owner of [Big Pine Kayak Adventures](#).

The deer roam among 22 islands; Big Pine has the largest population. Dawn or dusk is the best time to spot them. Resist the cuteness factor and don’t feed the deer - it’s unhealthy for the animals and is illegal.

A Refuge for Nature Lovers

“With 8,500 acres and miles of hiking trails, Big Pine allows visitors to experience a variety of Florida habitats, from hardwood hammocks to mangrove forests and shoreline,” said Jim Bell, a volunteer at National Key Deer Refuge Visitor Center.

Two “don’t miss” spots include [Long Beach Trail](#) and the [Blue Hole](#). Adjacent to the Fishing Lodge, Long Beach Trail leads to a primitive beach dotted with tidal pools. Further inland, the Blue Hole appears like a mirage in the Florida forest. The old limestone quarry is a rare freshwater commodity on an island surrounded by salty seas. It attracts Key deer, alligators and tourists hoping to see them. The visitor center in Big Pine Key Plaza is an excellent resource for maps and sightseeing recommendations. Hours change seasonally. For updates, call 305-872-0774 or email keydeer@fws.gov.

Humans aren’t the only critters that enjoy Big Pine. Mid-September to mid-November, the skies fill with fantastic fall migrations and the island becomes a rest stop for southbound birds. September’s [Florida Keys Birding and Wildlife Festival](#) takes advantage of the migratory miracle with guided trips and lectures.

Backcountry Beauty

Your Big Pine explorations may begin on land, but shouldn’t end there.

“In the backcountry waters, you get the sense you’re in the middle of nowhere minutes after taking off in your kayak,” said Refuge Ranger Kristie Killam.

On Bill Keogh’s backcountry tours, kayakers travel by motor boat to out islands before launching into clear, knee-deep waters. “Paddling over sponge and grass flats, we see stingrays, sea turtles, baby sharks and other marine life,” said Keogh.

Time-limited travelers can kayak closer to shore, exploring coves and mangrove tunnels. With self-guided “local knowledge” waterproof maps and plentiful landmarks, there’s little danger of getting lost.

Remaining Anonymous

To fuel your adventures, visit the notorious [No Name Pub](#). As if to confuse tourists, it’s actually located on Big Pine Key. The 1930’s grotto-like building has been a bar, brothel, bait shop and general store. Inside, the walls and ceiling are papered with enough dollar bills to jump-start the owner’s retirement. The pub prides itself on being “a nice place if you can find it,” but judging from the out-of-state plates in the parking lot, plenty of people have. Service can be slow, but relax – you’re on island time.

While in the neighborhood, walk across the bridge to No Name Key. It’s a great place to watch for wildlife and an ideal venue for viewing sunrises, sunsets, stargazing and fishing. On No Name, hiking trails are generally unmarked. Likewise, there are no historical markers indicating that Cuban revolutionaries, hoping to overthrow Castro, trained here in the 1960s.

Beginning to sense a theme? Decidedly low key, the Lower Keys of Big Pine and No Name are not the place “to see and be seen,” unless you want to see Florida’s natural beauty and be seen by people who feel the same.

PHOTO



Matt and Melissa Hagen of Pittsburgh, Penn., paddle a kayak from captain Bill Keogh’s Big Pine Key Kayak Adventures through the mangrove thickets of No Name Key.

Credit: Patrick Farrell for VISIT FLORIDA



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