

TRAVEL



# ISLE OF TRANQUILITY

So close but yet so far away from Key West is an island resort swimming in solitude. **By Barry Glenn**



SUNSET KEY GUEST COTTAGES, A WESTIN RESORT

Sunset Key is just a 10-minute boat ride from the Key West mainland.

## Watching the sun set in Key West is a little like attending the symphony:

Decorum dictates that the audience hold its applause until the end. But when that last sliver of burnt orange has dipped below the Gulf horizon, the revelers lined up along Mallory Square clap and whoop, cheering something that has happened for eons but never grows old.

It's not a bad way to end the day, before you board a launch and head back to your ritzy surroundings on Sunset Key, a 27-acre private island sitting 500 yards off the square in the general direction of where the sun disappeared.

How ritzy? Well, if you haven't been to Key West in a long time and remember it mainly for its gritty charm (as in the smell of spilled days-old beer wafting from an open-air bar out onto Duval Street), Sunset Key will have you reassessing your view of the Conch Republic.



Sunset is a time of celebration—and creative and often bizarre performances—along the waterfront at Mallory Square.

Most of this former spoil island (created by dredging) is adorned with multimillion-dollar houses. But seven acres are reserved for Westin's Sunset Key Guest Cottages, with their pastel-colored wood finishes, tin roofs, and Adirondack chairs. The bright interior décor of these pricey abodes is what the hotel chain calls a combination of "Caribbean island and Old Florida." While the style looks sumptuous, you may not even notice it because you're too busy staring out the French doors at the azure waters, imported sand from the Bahamas and palm trees just steps away. Walk out onto the wraparound verandah and you'll find fresh fruit and muffins left on a table not far from the hammock in which you'll probably take a nap around noon. Or maybe you'll

wait until after your hot stone massage at the resort's brand new spa...ahhh.

Sorry, where were we? Better yet, where *are* we?

That's the beauty of this 39-cottage layout: You're in Key West, but you could just as well be on a Caribbean island hundreds of miles away. Moreover, you choose how much time to spend on the mainland and the island, because they're only a free 10-minute boat ride apart.

So you can hang out in the morning with the seven-toed cats at the Ernest Hemingway Home (descendants of Papa's originals), grab a beer and listen to a colorful off-color medley at Sloppy Joe's bar, then watch the antics of buskers in Mallory Square—from the shirtless kid who juggles fiery wands to the chap who coaxes his bewildered Basset hound to

## Before You Go

Check out [fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com), a site maintained by the Florida Keys & Key West tourism council. There you'll find schedules of events, listings of accommodations, dining and recreational options, not to mention videos of bikini-clad girls partying with Ernest Hemingway look-alikes.

## Getting There

Remember the good old days when you prayed that an accident didn't back up traffic for light years on the Seven Mile Bridge? Now you can get to Key West in 70 minutes via a nonstop flight that **AirTran** ([airtran.com](http://airtran.com)) runs Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. In early August, the fare for a mid-September trip was \$89 each way.

## Where to Stay

If the Sunset Key cottages ([westinsunsetkeycottages.com](http://westinsunsetkeycottages.com)) are too pricey for you, there are plenty of other options. Westin also operates its **Key West Resort & Marina** right on Mallory Square ([westinkeywestresort.com](http://westinkeywestresort.com)). In the old town section, the **Santa Maria Suites** ([santamariasuites.com](http://santamariasuites.com)) and the **Southernmost on the Beach Hotel** ([southernmostresorts.com](http://southernmostresorts.com)) get top billing by travelers who write reviews on [tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com). Among bed and breakfasts, **Ambrosia Key West** ([ambrosiakeywest.com](http://ambrosiakeywest.com)) has a big fan base and is just a couple of blocks off Duval Street.

Ambrosia Key West >>



SUNSET: FLORIDA KEYS & KEY WEST TOURISM COUNCIL; POOL: AMBROSIA KEY WEST



Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum

## Where to Play-Land

Mallory Square is your headquarters for wacky pre-sunset entertainment by an array of street performers. A trip to **Sloppy Joe's** bar ([sloppyjoes.com](http://sloppyjoes.com)), not to mention the purchase of a T-shirt, are near the top of the Tourist 101 syllabus. Atop other must-see—or try-not-to-stare—lists is the nearby **Garden of Eden** ([bullkeywest.com](http://bullkeywest.com)), a rooftop bar that's clothing optional. On the more genteel side, the **Key West Museum of Art & History** ([kwaahs.com](http://kwaahs.com)) operates out of the historic Custom House, and displays art and artifacts related to the city. And no matter how many times you've been, a tour of the **Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum** ([hemingwayhome.com](http://hemingwayhome.com)) will inspire you to re-read his classics.



Relaxation abounds on Sunset Key.

bay at a ringing bell. Once that foolishness is over, head back to Sunset Key and Latitudes, the new upscale Westin restaurant that features items like sweet potato crusted grouper and Florida lobster tail. Your dinner can be served under the stars with a touch of torch light and brisk ocean breeze if you desire.

The Westin also can set you up with various activities out on the water (and, yes, you better believe that everyone who lives and works here was relieved that the oil slick no longer appeared to be a threat to their paradise). A particularly fun time is the full-day trip offered by Danger Charters, in which a sailboat takes you several miles out to kayak and snorkel. The colorful crew members include captain Haig Smith, who steers the boat wearing a shirt that says simply, "Work less."

Chances are, however, that

you'll have to work more to earn the cash it takes to enjoy the cottages' rarefied air of exclusivity, whether you're putting up a wedding party or just seeking a romantic weekend. Stated rates in September range from \$575 a night for a one-bedroom garden view cottage to \$1,100 for digs that feature two bedrooms right on the water. But there are discounts for Florida residents, and the resort is offering a special that includes two nights, two spa treatments and daily breakfast for two, priced at under \$1,200. It's good through the end of the year.

Plenty of time to get keyed up about a getaway. [📷](https://www.instagram.com/dangercharters)

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## Where to Play-Sea

Several charter boat operators sail out of the marina near Mallory Square, among them **Danger Charters** ([dangercharters.com](http://dangercharters.com)), which offers half- and full-day kayaking and snorkeling tours, as well as sunset cruises (don't be surprised if a dolphin or two tag along). **Dream Chaser Charters** ([dreamchasercharters.com](http://dreamchasercharters.com)) can provide everything from a wedding at sea to gourmet dinners, all aboard a 43-foot trimaran sailboat. Fishing boats and dive operators are plentiful in Key West, too: For a list of offerings, check out [fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com)



Kayakers on a Danger Charter trip can explore waters surrounding mangrove islands.



## Where to Eat

**Blue Heaven Restaurant** ([blueheavenkw.com](http://blueheavenkw.com)) is a favorite of tourists and locals alike, serving breakfast, lunch and Sunday brunch, and tempting diners with offerings like yellowtail snapper with citrus beurre blanc sauce. For a decent burger served a variety of ways (including topped with pineapple and avocado), stop in at **Cheeseburger Key West** ([cheeseburgerland.com](http://cheeseburgerland.com)) on Duval Street. If you're in the mood to get away from the Duval scene, walk a couple of blocks to **Colombian Grace** ([colombiangrace.com](http://colombiangrace.com)), where you'll revel in superb sangria and dishes like "Mom's Casserole," made with fresh grouper and baked in sauce of white wine, fish broth, herbs and cheeses.

◀ Blue Heaven Restaurant