

# ATLANTA SOCIAL Season

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(continued)



TRAVEL

*Historic, Wild and Wonderful*

KEY





# WEST

I'll be honest: I had never heard of The Gates in Key West. Now it's one of my favorite new places. It had been years since I visited Key West so when the trip to go and hang out for a few days was presented, I jumped at the chance.



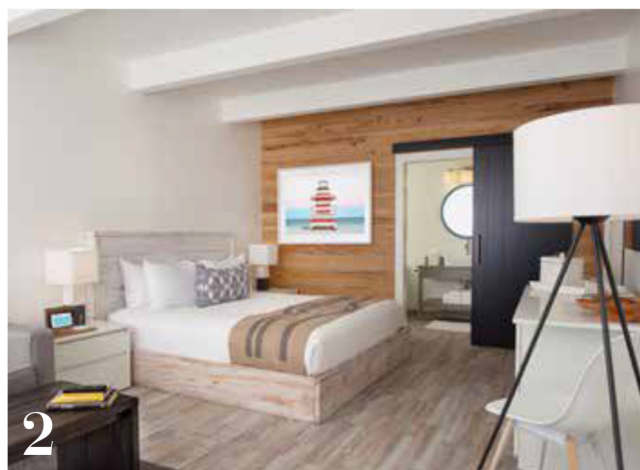


I love it when I'm blown away by the unexpected. I started feeling the island vibe upon deplaning and entering the small airport in Key West and Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville" was actually playing. Then, while waiting for my ride, a young couple insisted on buying me an island drink — something with rum of course. A few minutes later, I walked into a very modern, very chic lobby and was greeted with a complimentary Mary Pickford cocktail made with Key West Rum, pineapple juice, house-made grenadine and a dash of Maraschino liqueur, and garnished with a maraschino cherry.

My eyes were immediately drawn to the art that graced the lobby. Magnificent oversized photographs by local award-winning photographer Jorge de la Torre of the De La Gallery. The designs were simple and vibrant and culturally connected to what is Key West.

After our welcome drink, we were taken to our rooms. My, my! I am always impressed with special touches and I love an eclectic décor. The room (both modern and rustic) had exposed whitewashed beams, a custom platform bed made from hand-washed pine, a table made of petrified wood, and hardwood floors. The room's cool creamy white and neutral colors were infused with colorful highlights, and on the wall hung more beautifully framed images by de la Torre.

The bathroom didn't disappoint either... wonderful Turkish towels, Key Lime organic toiletries and magnifying mirror (needed!). Other fabulous amenities such as a Keurig coffemaker and a Samsung tablet were in every room. At



first, I thought someone had left their tablet and I called the front desk... duh, who knew?

My room was just steps away from a fabulous private pool with free cabanas, and being a boutique hotel, the pool isn't usually crowded. I was also only a few steps from "Rum Row" where the party started!

### Unlock the Keys in Three Days!

The Gates was the perfect place to start our three-day adventure in the Florida Keys.

This upscale hotel is a departure from traditional hotels in the Keys. It has partnered with local artisans and companies



1. The Gates lobby shows beautiful photography art.  
 2. The Gates Hotel king room  
 3. Rodriguez cigars 4. Visitors can enjoy complimentary "Rumaritas" at the First Legal Rum Distillery. 5. Key lime pie even for breakfast



to create an exceptional, one-of-a-kind experience right there on the property, so our first evening was spent getting to know some of them...their food, their spirits and their cigars.

A beautiful crystal chandelier hung over a rustic table in the Rodriguez Cigar Lounge and Garden where my girls' group met. The deck is part of the Rum Row Bar area. We were served appetizers and dinner catered by Catered Affairs of Key West. The team worked with Paul Menta of First Legal Rum Distillery to create the rum pairings.

After dinner, Danny DiFabio, the personable owner of Rodriguez Cigar Company, the oldest cigar company in Key West, along with his Cuban grandmother, introduced us to their line of cigars and demonstrated the art of cigar rolling. They use only cured and aged vintage tobacco leaves and roll the cigar in the traditional Cuban style. It was interesting to watch the process. After the demonstration, many of the ladies decided to light one up. I thought I might retire early because I don't like cigar smoke, but fun won out. I found that it was actually a sweet aroma and not overpowering...of course, outside having its advantages. I still, however, brought my cigar home to a friend. [rodriguezcigarskeywest.com](http://rodriguezcigarskeywest.com)

## Day Two—Sorta Like Riding a Bike

Actually, it was just like riding a bike. After breakfast with the roosters at the iconic Blue Heaven (you must try the lobster benedict and share a piece of the best key lime pie ever), we took a four-hour bicycle tour around Stock





Island led by Billy Kearins, just one of the many who come to the Keys. His company COAST is another partner of the hotel. [coastprojects.com](http://coastprojects.com)

We began the tour at the hotel, biking through the Botanical Garden stopping only to get a better view of some native flora and dilapidated Cuban refugee boats that had found a home in the gardens.

Next came a little taste of Cuba as we biked to El Mocho for Cuban coffee and bread. It was so strong and so good I'm glad they only served us a thimble-sized cup they call "bucci." We stopped off at the COAST's unconventional facilities long enough to silkscreen our own tote bags and taste fresh coconut. I was struck with the beauty of the Bonsai gardens and the simplicity with which Billy approaches life and shares with others.

Lunch at Hogfish Bar & Grill was the last stop before going back to the hotel. I had never had hogfish before and I loved the hogfish tacos, especially with a cold beer.

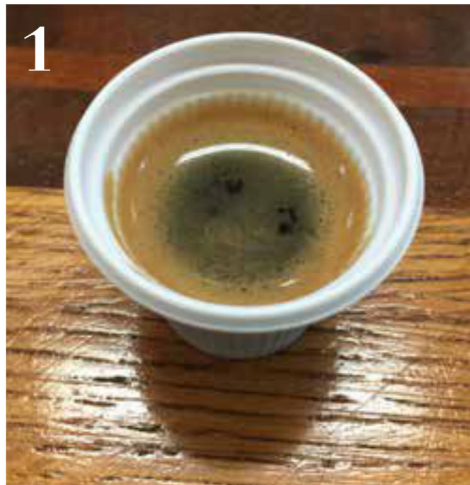
After a swim and shower, we headed off for dinner at the Historic Seaport in another iconic restaurant, Half Shell Raw Bar, where our fish had just been caught and our oysters freshly shucked. Conch ceviche was popular with our group as well. But that was only a prelude to our sunset sail...a must when you visit Key West.

1. Bucci—a "shot" of Cuban coffee

2. Lobster and bacon benedict at Blue Heaven

3. Kayaking through ancient Mangroves

4. Can't go to The Keys without tasting Key lime pie



## Red Sails in the Sunset...

Just add a little Jimmy Buffett. What better way to end our first full day than sailing off into the sunset with a little "Commotion on the Ocean?" We enjoyed the Cory Heydon Band aboard The Fury Catamaran as we sailed the same waters where swashbucklers, rum-runners and old Ponce de Leon himself did many years ago. Then, it was as if time stood still as we watched that beautiful red ball gently sink below the horizon as it said goodnight to us. I'm just not sure there are many things more beautiful than that.

## Day Three—Just Add Water

Saturday morning The Blind Pig brought breakfast to the room so our last day packed full of adventure could get started early. Yesterday by land; today by water, as we set out to explore the Mangroves with kayaks and paddleboards. Our guide from Lazy Dog Adventures was perfect—both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about what she does.

We started our two-hour quest paddling out into the channel in search of tropical fish, crabs, sea stars, sea cucumbers, sponges and various aquatic birds. But paddling through the protected Mangrove forest is something everyone visiting Key West should experience. Still unspoiled by development, these ancient Mangrove trees seemed almost magical. Truly an awesome experience on a perfect day.

## So Much to Do, So Little Time

After a quick lunch right there on the waterfront, it was time to go back to The Gates for a quick shower and change for our first afternoon stop—a tour of the First Legal Rum Distillery and a sample of free Rumaritas. You'll think they brought back Captain Jack Sparrow "Pirates of the Caribbean" to show you how they distill their legal spirits, but its owner, Paul Menta. Funky names are given to the rum made with Florida sugar cane infused with coconut, vanilla, and key lime. [keywestlegalrum.com](http://keywestlegalrum.com)

Next, I was so excited that part of our adventure included a visit to de la Gallery. This artist's fresh and modern approach to the landscapes of Key West and Cuba are definitely worth the visit. (To see some of his images visit [delagallery.com](http://delagallery.com) and yes, I brought one home.) There are



### If you go:

Delta: Direct flights daily

The Gates Hotel:  
[gateshotelkeywest.com](http://gateshotelkeywest.com)

(305) 320-0930

Also, check out The Gates' newly renovated hotel next door.

24° North. [24northhotel.com](http://24northhotel.com).





several really nice galleries on Duval that feature artists in every medium.

### **Restaurants and Bars, and Restaurants and Bars**

I can only describe Duval Street as a tropical Bourbon Street. What an experience walking from the gallery down Duval to where we were to have dinner. Live music coming from almost every bar we passed. At one point as a Cher lookalike comes out of the bar singing, a bus driver actually stops the bus, gets out and dances along.

What a surprise when we got to our restaurant, a beautifully restored Victorian-style mansion — still on Duval

but down from the bustle. Nine One Five was an exceptional restaurant. It had to be; the chef has cooked for James Beard — twice. We all ordered different things and shared. Everything was wonderful! It is a place I'll definitely take my husband Jim when we return to Key West.

### **Get Your Running Shoes On**

So how do you conclude a trip that has been packed with so many exciting experiences? Why a scavenger hunt, of course. It had been a long time since I had been on a scavenger hunt, but when our group broke up into two teams to follow clues (often misleading), solve riddles and find Pinky, the stuffed flamingo, as we ran and explored the uninhibited side of Key West — I was in!

### **Day Four — Goodbye Key West**

Ernest Hemingway fell in love with Key West when he arrived in 1928. He said it was unlike any place he had ever been. It was certainly fun for me and The Gates Hotel was a delightful place to call home for a few days.

My trip was jam-packed (thank you Gates concierge who arranged all) and I recommend it to anyone who wants to touch and feel — to really experience their vacation. But then, you can also go to Key West and do nothing at all. Just soak up the beauty of the beautiful beaches and re-read "A Farewell to Arms." Let me leave you with a famous quote by Mr. Hemingway, Key West's most notable author:

"My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way."

Me too!