

Destination: Florida Keys

When you know the Weather Channel's doom and gloom prediction by heart, and the winter blahs have dropped anchor in your life, it's time to break free and escape. Climb aboard,

hoist a sail and feel the warm breeze on your face. Now, listen to the gentle swoooosh of your boat's hull against the waves as you sail through the bluest water you can imagine. No

need to change currency or languages, you're cruising through the southernmost (and some say the best) part of the United States, the Florida Keys.

If you begin your adventure in Key West you may never want to take the boat away from the dock. It's a tough town to leave. In between waking up over a great cup of Cuban coffee and heading out to romp through all the infamous night spots, there's a lot of history and fun to explore. But, once you toss off your dock lines and point your bow out of the harbor, your fun meter will *really* start to climb.

As we head out the south channel we decide to aim for the reef. No, we're not planning to add to the shipwreck history of the Keys, just take a peek below the water and do some snorkeling. It's a short sail out to the Western

Sambos, where we quickly tie off to a mooring buoy. Reef Relief, a local organization, provides buoys that protect many popular dive and snorkel spots from anchors that inflict damage on the coral. The Keys are bordered by the world's northernmost coral reef, and the views you'll experience below the water are truly awesome. We use a disposable waterproof camera to capture shots of the sea life as well as our jumbo smiles.

Back aboard we crank up some tunes while we enjoy fresh water showers on the "back porch." We're sailing two hulls, a catamaran, and it's a wonderfully stable platform for our snorkeling adventure. The day before we arrived, a cold front blasted through the Keys. We're now able to enjoy the strong NW breeze and a fast beam

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reach as we head off under sail for Little Palm Island, our evening's destination. The crew has fun playing with the GPS navigation system, but as long as we keep the land to our left, we're on course. Sailing in Hawk's Channel, we zigzag through a maze of floating balls that mark the crab traps. Stone crabs are in season from October through May, and we've decided that



Rick Bauman

*Escape the
gray – set sail
and run away!*

*by Susan
Davidson*

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our NASCAR-like steering skills have earned us the tasty, but expensive, treat. We begin to anticipate the sweet taste of the crab claws, and argue over whether they'll taste better dipped in mustard sauce or warm melted butter. Ahhhh, this IS the life.


As the sun drops close to the horizon, we reach Newfound Harbor and anchor a short distance from what the chart calls Munson Island. We look up as a seaplane buzzes overhead and watch as it lands nearby and taxis up to Little Palm's dock. Our arrival may not have been as grand, but as streaks of pink and orange spread through the sky, we settle into

the cruiser's ritual: the sunset celebration. The blender begins to hum and the crew gets creative with the rum and the fruit. With boat drinks in hand, we honor the sunset and toast a great day on the water.

We dinghy ashore in time for our 7:30 dinner reservation, and the sight of the white linen tablecloths makes us glad we chose to spiff up our attire. Little Palm Island is an intimate resort with a top notch chef, and while some of the crew order the stone crab appetizer, others are lured into a spicy "lobster martini" with jasmine rice and an exotic pineapple sauce. The dining room's unrestricted view over the beach is as killer as the culinary creations that produce con-

tented sighs throughout our evening.

During our meal we plan tomorrow's adventures. A short sail away, Bahia Honda State Park has a top-rated beach that we want to visit. We'll swim and rent sea kayaks before sailing onto Marathon, the heart of Vaca Key. Getting from point A to B becomes incredibly satisfying when you're using the wind and a modest amount of skill and knowledge.

Cruising under sail is a special way to explore the Keys. So, quit dreaming. Inject some color into your life and Go Sail the Keys! 

Susan Davidson is a Florida-based writer and avid sailor. Sue suggests that you begin your Florida Keys search at www.keywestparadise.com/sail.

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