Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

Segment 15

Florida Keys Overseas Paddling Trail

Emergency contact information:

911

Monroe County Sheriff's Office: 305-853-3266

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922

FPTA Region: G

Begin: John Pennekamp State Park, Key Largo

End: Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park, Key West

Estimated Distance: 111 miles

Duration: 9-10 days

Special Considerations: The Keys are unlike any other segment in that you can paddle up and back and choose to paddle on the Florida Bay/Gulf of Mexico side or along the Atlantic Ocean. However, once you reach Big Pine Key, you are pretty much limited to paddling the Atlantic side. Distance, duration and wind direction will be determining factors on which side is chosen. The Bay side is longer as the shoreline is more sinuous and there are numerous opportunities to explore a multitude of islands.You can also weave in and out between the bay and ocean through several creeks and channels, taking advantage of prevailing winds and weather conditions. Many of the same campsites can be utilized since they often border channels between the main islands. All mileage estimates in this guide are for the Atlantic side of the keys; they are measured in statute miles, not nautical miles. A GPS unit and good maps are highly recommended to find campsites and points of interest.

For long-distance circumnavigation paddlers arriving from Everglades National Park and Florida Bay, the current point of connection to this trail is to come in from a primitive campsite at Little Rabbit Key to the Indian Key Channel between Upper and Lower Matecumbe Keys. You may choose the alternate yellow route between Flamingo and Key Largo to avoid bad weather.

NOTE: The following text in this Segment represents the Florida Keys Overseas Paddling Trail which runs from John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park in Key Largo to Fort Zachary Taylor State Park in Key West. Also, CT thru paddlers are not required to paddle the Keys in both directions.

Introduction

Paddling in the Keys is a great way to experience both tropical splendor and unique culture. The Overseas Highway is busy, powerboats abound on weekends and holidays, and some of the island towns can become congested during the peak winter tourist season, but by paddling just a short distance to lush, uninhabited islands or down winding tunnels through mangrove forests, it is easy to taste wildness and to experience solitude. Paddlers can enjoy viewing a rich diversity of marine life, ranging from manatees and sea turtles to lobsters, fish, star fish, and rays. An array of birdlife can also be spotted, from migrating hawks to magnificent frigate birds to brightly-colored warblers. Conversely, civilization in the form of great restaurants, lodging, and evening entertainment is often within easy reach of the water. Thus, the best of both worlds can be experienced!

History, too, is a strong part of the Keys experience. Visual reminders of Henry Flagler's overseas railroad of the early 1900s can be seen in the arching concrete columns of several old bridges, including the original Seven Mile Bridge between Knight's Key and Little Duck Key. Remnant railroad depots still exist, and the Flagler Station Over-Sea Railway Historeum can be visited at the Key West Seaport. The Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 destroyed much of the railroad.

Historic sites such as Indian Key Historic State Park and Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park can be visited from the water. Shipwrecks can sometimes be spotted in the gin-clear waters, a testament to how treacherous the Keys' waters were for navigation. Salvaging shipwrecks, known as wrecking, was once the main industry in the Keys.

Because the Keys are a popular winter destination for tourists and snowbirds, advanced reservations for desired motels and public or private campsites are highly recommended. There are some primitive campsites specifically for paddlers at several state parks, details follow in the text below. Please keep these sites clean and follow all regulations in order

for them to remain open for paddlers. Most of these sites are "pack-it-in, pack-it-out" only, with campers following Leave No Trace principles.

Lodging is available in all of the Keys' towns, and there are numerous private campgrounds and Air B&Bs. Several outfitters in the Keys can also assist you in renting or selling equipment or in guiding trips.

Many important land areas and water bodies in the Keys are in the public domain, to be carefully managed for ecological, historical, or recreational purposes. There are some wonderful State parks in the Keys that offer delightful camping options for paddlers. There are two Aquatic Preserves, Lignumvitae Key and Coupon Bight, that conserve underwater habitats. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission manages the Florida Keys Wildlife & Environmental Area. Federal land and waters include Everglades National Park, National Key Deer Refuge, Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge, Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Key West National Wildlife Refuge, and the Key Largo, Looe Key, and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuaries. The Florida Keys Marine Sanctuary covers most waters in the keys, encompassing 2900 square miles, and kayakers should be aware of regulations if planning to fish or snorkel.

A large number of shorter paddling adventures are available in the Keys other than the sections outlined here. To learn more, check out *The Florida Keys Paddling Atlas* by Bill and Mary Burnham (Falcon Press) and *The Florida Keys Paddling Guide* by Bill Keogh (Backcountry Press). Up-to-date trail information can also be obtained by calling or visiting local outfitters. Whether you are planning to paddle an hour or a week or more, seeing the keys by kayak offers many rewards.

1. John Pennekamp State Park to Tavernier, 12 miles

John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park is an appropriate beginning point for the Keys trail. Dedicated in 1960 and named after the late John D. Pennekamp, a Miami newspaper editor and strong supporter of establishing the park, this was the first undersea park in the United States. While the famed coral reefs are considered too far offshore for a kayak, the park offers several types of tours in which to safely view the reefs and rich marine life. Call 305-676-3777 for more information on these tours. The park also boasts a large aquarium and visitor's center, two nature trails, full facility camping, and 2.5 miles of marked mangrove wilderness trails for canoes or kayaks. Approximately 100 feet offshore from Pennekamp's Cannon Beach, you can snorkel or glide over the remnants of an early Spanish shipwreck.

You can begin this section at Pennekamp's kayak and canoe launch along Largo Sound. Be watchful of boat traffic as you make your way to the Atlantic along the park's canoe and kayak trail, heading south along a tidal creek through the mangroves. Paddle along Key Largo to Tavernier. Tavernier Key is owned by the FWC and is a great rest stop.

Tavernier Creek can take you to the bay side, if so desired. Accessible motels along the bayside include Coconut Palm (305-852-3017), Island Bay (305-852-4087), and Creekside Inn (305-852-2351). During the peak spring season, some of these motels may require a two or three-night minimum stay.

2. Tavernier to Islamorada, 9 miles

In his *History of Tavernier,* Jerry Wilkinson writes, "In early writings, the harbor between Tavernier Key and Key Largo is mentioned as a rendezvous area for Bahamian wreckers. It offered a haven from Atlantic gales and a good view of the Upper Keys reefs. In the early 1820s, it is believed that slaves were gathered on Key Tavernier to be smuggled into the Bahamas by wreckers, but this has never been documented. It was used as a relay point for some escaped slaves en route to the Bahamas."

The Keys history website, along with several good books, can inform you more about fascinating aspects of Keys history such as the wrecking industry, sponging, early native inhabitants, Flagler's railroad, devastating hurricanes, and more.

Leaving historic Tavernier Key, it is a fairly straight shot along Plantation Key, once the site of a large Native American village. A huge Indian mound that stood on the island for centuries was leveled for construction in 1958.

When you reach the town of Islamorada, you can arrange for Islamorada Lodging at one of several resorts and motels. Waterfront motels that are considered kayak friendly include Conch On Inn Motel (mm 89.5) 305-852-9309; Coconut Cove Motel (mm85) 305-664-0123. The Whale Harbor Channel in Islamorada is a link to the bay side. Islamorada is known as the fishing capital of the world.

3. Islamorada to Long Key State Park, 15 miles

The first of many long bridges separate Upper and Lower Matecumbe Keys in this section. On the Atlantic side of the bridge is Indian Key, famous for a Seminole raid in 1838 on the Key. Dr. Perrine and several others were killed, though many family members successfully hid in a turtle kraal beneath the house. The island is now a state park and can be visited seven days a week from 8 AM to 5 PM. Tours are available at 9 AM and 1 PM Thursday through Monday. Just to the southwest of the park is the San Pedro Underwater Archeological Preserve State Park. In good weather, you can glide

over or snorkel the remains of a 1733 Spanish treasure ship, which lies in 18 feet of water. Look for the five white mooring buoys marking the site approximately 1.25 miles south of Indian Key. You can tie your kayak to these while snorkeling.

On the other side of the bridge is Lignumvitae Key, famed for harboring now rare lignum vitae trees. Meaning "wood of life" in Latin, the tree was used to treat diseases ranging from syphilis to gout, and its dense wood was used for submarine propeller shafts and other specific uses. Rare orchids, tree cacti, and a historic homestead can also be seen in this state botanical area. Note that the park is also open from Thursday through Monday, from 8 AM to 5 PM. Tours are available at 10 AM and 2 PM.

Surrounding the island is the Lignumvitae Key Aquatic Preserve and the Lignumvitae Key Management Area. Encompassing 10,000 acres of seagrass meadows, deep-water channels, and hard-bottom communities, look for tarpon, bonefish, permit, sea turtles, lobster, and other marine creatures in the clear waters. Most of the seagrass areas are zoned off-limits to combustion engines.

Past Lower Matecumbe Key, Long Key sticks out like a huge boot. Early Spaniards called it "Cayo Vivora," which means Viper Key because its shape is said to resemble a snake with open jaws. On Long Key, you'll see remains of coral reefs formed 100,000 years ago when the sea level was 20 to 300 feet higher than today. When sea levels dropped during the last Ice Age, the reefs died and formed the islands of the keys. The highest point in the Keys is 18 feet above sea level, while the average is less than 10 feet above sea level, the main reason why the Keys are so vulnerable to hurricanes.

Long Key is famous for Henry Flagler's Long Key Fishing Club, which attracted such notables as western author Zane Grey. Grey summed up his time spent on Long Key: "Into my memory had been burned indelibly a picture of a sunlit, cloud-mirroring, green and gold bordered cove, above the center of which shone a glorious fish-creature in the air." The original fishing resort was destroyed in the 1935 hurricane.

Camping in Long Key State Park is on the Atlantic side where you can reserve one of the park's 60 scenic campsites in the campground (all bordering the Atlantic Ocean). The park also offers nature trails, an observation tower, and ranger-led interpretative programs. Long Key does have one "first come first serve" primitive campsite for "walk-ins." Paddlers, hikers and bicyclists have priority. Call to be "penciled in" and confirm—305-664-4815. The camp fee is $34.51 per night. This is a primitive site with no grill, picnic table, etc.

Note: due to Hurricane Irma, the Long Key State Park campground is closed for reconstruction but four primitive tent sites are available. Check the State Park website for updates.

4. Long Key State Park to Curry Hammock State Park, 13 miles

In this section, you'll pass several small islands and cross a long section of open water. Duck Key, which was bypassed by both the railroad and overseas highway, is the first large island you'll encounter. In the early 1800s, Charles Howe utilized the tidal creeks and pools of Duck Key for making salt. At that time, salt was the main element used in preserving meat.

You have the option of paddling to the inside (along the Overseas Highway) or outside of Duck Key to Tom's Harbor Keys for a good rest stop, and Grassy Key. Just past Grassy Key is Little Crawl Key and Curry Hammock State Park. For camping reservations at the park, visit Reserve Florida State Parks or call (800) 326-3521 or call the park at least 24 hours in advance to check walk-in availability (305) 289-2690. Take a walk through the hardwood hammocks and view one of the largest populations of thatch palms in the United States. The trail site is at the west beach picnic area.

5. Curry Hammock State Park to Molasses Keys, 15 miles

Take your time paddling through this section. First, you can take a break at Sombrero Beach in Marathon. Make sure to use the kayak launch site on the west side of the swimming beach at the mouth of Sister's Creek.

As a side trip, you can take Sister's Creek (just west of Sombrero Beach) and then paddle through a labyrinth of shallow mangrove tunnels that wind through Boot Key, but be careful not to become lost! Once on the trail again, you'll cruise alongside a famous Keys landmark—the Seven Mile Bridge just past Marathon. You can view the new bridge, built in 1982, as well as the longest surviving bridge segment of Flagler's railroad. Imagine the work that went into the original bridge. Top-quality cement was imported from Europe. Huge floating concrete mixers had to be used. Dams were built around each column to keep out water, as workers labored to bridge the span. Several hurricanes dealt serious blows to men and machines during the overall project. The fact that the bridge remains is a testament to the quality of workmanship and materials. The new bridge is also acclaimed as a major architectural and engineering achievement. All 23 Flagler bridges are on the National Register of Historic Landmarks.

A little over two miles down the old bridge from Knight's Key, you can stop at Pigeon Key Marine Science Center and tour through a restored village and museum. Pigeon Key originally housed workers for the Flagler Railroad. What survives are eight restored

Flagler-era buildings. Be sure to land on the beach on the north side of Pigeon Key. There is an entrance fee.

Primitive camping is on Molasses Key, a private island just over halfway down the Seven Mile Bridge on the Atlantic side, but far enough away from the highway to avoid most of the traffic noise. The north end of the big island is set up for paddlers with a platform and a couple of ground sites cleared. The cabin is reserved for paid guests only. There is no overnight camping fee for FPTA members registered for the CT. Others will be charged a suggested donation. Contact Chris Kale (one of the owners of Molasses Key) before use at (813) 376-6989 (text is preferred). Provide the requested date, estimated time, and your contact information. All trash and human waste must be carried out. Please practice "Leave No Trace" principles. Be mindful of swift currents and the potential for strong winds when crossing these open spans of water.

6. Molasses Keys to Bahia Honda State Park, 7 miles

Some places just seem more graced with beauty than others. Bahia Honda State Park is one of them. Arching palms frame sandy beaches and coves alongside sparkling clear water. An old section of the Flagler railroad bridge (the only trestle bridge along the route) across the Bahia Honda Channel gives the park a historic flavor.

This is a very popular state park, considered one of the top beaches in the world, so reserve campsites early. There is camping near the bridge in the Buttonwood Camping Area (sites 12 through 25 are electric sites along the water) and eight non-electric sites (cheaper) along Florida Bay in the Bayside Camping Area. You may want to access the park on the north side of the abandoned railroad bridge along the west end of the key if the surf is strong along the Atlantic beaches.

Campsite #80 on the bay side is available to paddlers on a first-come, first-serve basis. Paddlers must first register at the park's ranger station and pay a $50 fee. If you plan to use the site, call the park at (305) 872-2353 on the morning of your planned arrival to ensure that the site will not be released for use by the general public. The site is held by the park until 3 p.m. each day to allow for paddlers to get the first shot. If it is occupied, they have an "emergency" trail site that fits 4-5 tents that can be requested for $21 a night. No picnic table or fire ring so it would be considered a primitive site.

At the far end of Sandspur Beach, don't miss the nature trail that follows the shore of a tidal lagoon. Here, you can see two national champion trees: the silver palm, a threatened species, and the yellow satinwood. The endangered lily thorn can also be seen. The park boasts one of the largest stands of silver palms in the United States.

If Bahia Honda is booked, try camping at the Big Pine Key Resort just across the Bahia Honda Channel (305 872-2351). You can land at the boat ramp via the inlet parallel to U.S. 1. Sites 10 through 14 and 40 through 46 are tent sites right on the water. The campground has a convenience store, pool, and laundry. Bicycles can often be rented if

one wants to ride the two or so miles to restaurants and a larger grocery store in Big Pine. It's 2.5 miles to the Winn Dixie, and 5 miles to the No Name Pub.

Be on the lookout for endangered key deer, which roam freely on Big Pine Key. The Key deer is the smallest subspecies of the Virginia white-tailed deer, having become isolated in the middle keys about 4,000 to 10,000 years ago when sea levels rose. Big Pine Key also contains a high level of biodiversity, with 466 documented plant species.

If you stay at Big Pine Key Resort, you can cut about 3.5 miles off your next day's paddle to Sugarloaf Creek.

Another option just before Big Pine Key is Camp Sawyer, on West Summerland Key, owned and operated by the Boy Scouts of America. It is available for camping based on availability with advanced confirmed reservations. Please adhere to Camp Sawyer rules so it remains available. Contact Natalie Rembiscz, 305-664-5616, natalie.rembiscz@scouting.org.

7. Bahia Honda State Park to Sugarloaf Key KOA, 17 miles

Part of the beauty of paddling this stretch is that once you pass Spanish Harbor, you can paddle alongside several remote islands more than two miles from the main highway, so traffic noise is minimized. You'll also cruise through the 6,000-acre Coupon Bight Aquatic Preserve, located on both sides of Newfound Harbor Keys. On the Atlantic side of the keys, look for circular domed formations which are living coral patch reefs. By snorkeling, you can spot brightly-colored tropical fish along with larger grouper, snapper, snook, and barracuda. Besides providing necessary habitat for marine life, patch reefs such as these baffle wave energy, thus helping to provide storm protection for the islands.

Coupon Bight itself is a shallow tropical lagoon where you can spot numerous wading birds and possibly key deer along the shore. Sea turtles nest on the preserve's beaches. These waters are known for harboring large numbers of tarpon in the spring.

Camping is at the Sugarloaf Key KOA, 800-562-7731. This full facility commercial campground is located on the Atlantic side of Sugarloaf Key along a well-marked channel. GPS on the map is for the boat ramp. Kayakers can stay in a spacious primitive tent area for less than the regular fee. Some paddlers stay at an unauthorized campsite near a collapsed bridge along Tarpon Creek.

For another option, you can camp on Picnic Island (see map MM 39-27 on the website) about 5 miles past Big Pine Key Resort and almost 9 miles from Bahia Honda. This island is less than ideal since it is popular with boaters, but there is room for a few tents. From Picnic Island, it is about 23 miles to Boyd's Campground if taking a direct route.

8. Sugarloaf Key KOA to Boyd's Key West Campground, 20-21 miles

On your way to Boyd's, you'll paddle along Sugarloaf Key. An 1850 census reveals only three males residing on Sugarloaf Key. One was known as "Happy Jack." Believed to have a fondness for whiskey, he survived by trapping deer and raising fruit. Other colorful Keys hermits of the time included Paddy Whack, Jolly Whack, Red Jim, and Lame Bill.

Sugarloaf Key is better known for a 35-foot tower that remained unoccupied. In 1929, trying to control the hefty mosquito population, R.C. Perky called in for outside help to build a giant bat house. Stocked with imported bats, the bats promptly flew away and the tower failed to attract new bats. Nevertheless, tourists continue to flock to this national historic landmark. The tower was located on the west side of Sugarloaf Sound on the bay side, but has since collapsed during Hurricane Irma.

A good rest stop and launch site is Sammy Creek Landing, on the east side of Sugarloaf Creek (see map) where there are picnic tables and a pavilion.

Paddle alongside Boca Chica Key through the Western Sambos Ecological Reserve believed to contain the greatest habitat diversity in the Lower Keys. Nearshore patch reefs are accessible to kayakers while bank reefs and other coral formations may be too far offshore.

Proceed to Key West, the largest of the Keys' towns and one that boasts a culture all its own. Boyd's Campground is located on the east side of Stock Island about a half-mile south of the main highway. It boasts several waterfront tent sites along with a heated pool, laundry facilities, game room, and convenience store. You can email for reservations or if you are planning to arrive within two days, you can call directly at (305) 294-1465. There are also several oceanside resorts and motels in Key West.

The old part of Key West is about five miles west of Boyd's Campground. Buses or taxis, Ubers or bike rentals, or your own two feet, can take you to numerous museums, restaurants, and other attractions. Key West is a great walking town. Don't miss the sunset celebration at Mallory Square, where people-watching is a bonus.

9. Boyd's Key West Campground to Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park, Key West, 7 miles

Cruise along several scenic beaches, such as the renowned Smathers Beach. You may want to stop for a photo at the southernmost point in the continental United States, identified by a huge red-topped metal marker just past South Beach. The end of this segment is Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park. You can only land at the designated

kayak launch spot on the eastern end of the park's beach if you notify the park in advance and state that you are a long-distance paddler in need of a rest stop or being picked up: (305) 292-6713. You need to check in at the admissions gate before using the park and touring the fort and/or the person picking you up will need to pay park admission. Normally, only those day users who have launched from the park are allowed to land at the park.

Construction of Fort Taylor began in 1845. Union forces occupied it during the Civil War to control blockade-running ships. This helped Key West to prosper during the war since numerous ships from several nations were seized and brought into Key West's harbor for disposition. The fort was used again during the Spanish-American War. Today, Fort Taylor is noted for containing the largest buried arsenal of Civil War cannons in the United States.

You can end (or begin) your journey here, or turn around and head back to Boyd's Campground. Another option is to circumnavigate Key West, but beware of large ships (such as cruise liners) entering or leaving Key West harbor just past the fort. Taking this route will add three to four miles to your return trip to Boyd's Campground.

Note: If you are doing the entire circumnavigational trail in one swoop, you are welcome to shuttle back to the point where you entered the Keys. No need to paddle the same water twice.