

SOUTHERN[®] BOATING

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MEET ME IN THE MIDDLE

The heart of the Florida Keys holds an array of pleasures

By Risa Men

Halfway down the Overseas Highway lies a group of islands often overlooked by tourists drawn to the revelry of Key West. Yet boating parties craving a true Florida Keys adventure would be hard pressed to find a better port of call than Marathon and the middle Keys. Once a sleepy fishing outpost, the middle Keys are a vibrant example of old meets new. Visitors enjoy easy access to world-class fishing and excellent diving in some of the prettiest water in the world, and



From sunny days out on the water to swimming with dolphins, the middle Keys has the stuff that family dream vacations are made of.

nature thrives in pockets of protected hardwood hammock, mangrove lagoons, and dolphin, wild bird and turtle research centers. At the same time, new luxury resorts and memorable

eateries are blending in with the old Keys environs.

When it came to choosing a destination for Southern Boating's annual center console trip in our ongoing quest to show off the type's versatility and stamina, the middle Keys seemed an obvious choice. This area offers easy, safe access between the Florida Bay and ocean side, something that many of the other islands lack, and thus doubled our opportunities.

Cruisers can cross from bay to ocean at Channel Five, north of Long Key, where the middle Keys begin, and at Moser Channel under the famed Seven Mile Bridge, which marks the end of the middle Keys. Offering 65 feet of clearance, Moser Channel is the funnel through which many sailboats and cruisers cross between the Gulf and Atlantic. In between these two major channels, boats with minimal clearance can pass under the Long Key Viaduct (23-foot clearance) and Vaca Cut bridge (13-foot clearance). The middle Keys have good ramp facilities, some of them public and free to use.

Singh Resorts operates a number of nearby properties that blur the line between resort and residence. Tranquility

Singh Resorts

Bay Beach House Resort is a popular bayside resort featuring two- and three-bedroom homes, a private beach and fine dining in its Butterfly Café. Also on the Bayside, Indigo Reef Marina Homes Resort provides a boat slip for each residence; guests may rent out the homes and slips on a weeks' basis. The Coral Lagoon Resort and Marina has the Boathouse Marina with slips and dry storage and Turnkey Marine, a full-service marine center, onsite.

This year, we hosted two hot new center consoles, each bringing something different to the table. The new Pursuit S 310 Sport showed off this builder's entry into the cruiser-style center console market. It fishes as well as its hard-core fishing brethren, but it offers day cruiser looks and comfort with varnished teak accents and plenty of seating. A custom teak table forward lowers to convert to a sunpad, and a stainless steel pullout refrigerator hidden under the helm seat is a nice touch. The S310 is sleek and stylish, but it also runs hard, and a fiberglass stringer grid molded in the hull gives it its solid ride.

Boston Whaler brought along the new 230 Dauntless, which can be outfitted to fit any activity, from fishing to watersports, especially if owners add on the optional All-Activity Tower that stores skis and wakeboards and tows skiers. It's roomy for its size with comfortable seating for eight passengers. Its award-winning bow seats are comfortable to recline on in the lounge position even at top speed. The 230 handles in tight situations like a small boat, yet it can manage well in heavy seas like its big brothers.

Both boats proved ideal for our activities, from fishing and snorkeling to delicious dockside dining, we planned to take full advantage of the everything the middle Keys had to offer.

When the winds picked up to 20 knots the first day, we were glad to have the

Heron National Wildlife Refuge to the northwest and the Everglades Nation Park to the northeast of Marathon.

Amid the newness, we found an oasis of natural Florida by visiting Crane Point in Marathon, where the Florida Keys Land Trust bought and preserved 63



Clockwise from upper left: Eight-year-old Kristina Walker fishes with the assistance of our senior editor Robb Hanrahan; the crew pulls up to the dock at Pigeon Key in the Pursuit S 310 Sport with the old and new Seven Mile bridges visible in the background; mother and daughter wade to shore from the Boston Whaler 230 Dauntless; and visitors tour the protected sanctuary of Crane Point in Marathon.



Florida Bay option. One of the perks of boating in the Keys is if it's too rough on one side, simply head to the other. This is great news for fishermen-when its blowing too hard for comfortable offshore fishing in the Atlantic they can head over the bay for a variety of fishing options, from natural ledges and artificial reefs to mangrove and flats fishing. Fishing reigns supreme in the Keys, and proof of this was seen with a major tarpon tournament going on the same weekend we were in town. Backcountry fishing hot spots are in the Great White

acres of undisturbed hardwood hammock and Florida rainforest, sang it from development, The preserved land is an epicenter of outdoor education in the middle Keys, teaching visitors about the native flora and fauna, which is sadly missing throughout much of the Keys. Walking down the miles of quiet trails that lead to breathtaking lookout points on the bay is like stepping back in time. Stroll through the butterfly meadow, and visit the Wild Bird Center, where pelicans, ospreys and seagulls are rescued and rehabilitated, mostly by volunteers.

Singh Resorts



Indigo Reef, above, and Coral Lagoon, upper right, offer easy access to your boat from dockside townhouses. Tranquility Bay, right, is home to a popular tiki bar and Turtle Island Watersports, which rents kayaks, wave runners and more.



This little turtle will get a second chance thanks to the Turtle Hospital in Marathon. Visitors can take part in a 90-minute guided educational experience that includes a chance to meet the turtles. All proceeds go directly to keeping the hospital running.

Those with a mind towards conservation and protection should pay a visit to the Turtle Hospital in Marathon. The non-profit hospital is the largest rehab center for sea turtles in the world and home to four endangered species. Bruised, battered and missing fins, the turtles have experienced trauma caused by boat, man and other sea creatures. They are also sweet and responsive to human presence, swimming to follow us as we tour the rehab pools. Many of the turtles will be rehabilitated enough to be released and have a second chance, others will find a permanent home in the hospital.

On Grassy Key, the Dolphin Research Center offers myriad programs to put you up close and personal with Atlantic bottlenose dolphins in a non-touristy setting. The not-for-profit center opens its doors to the public for a look at a real working research and rehab facility, and it allows visitors a chance for a one-on-one encounter with these intriguing creatures. Programs range from a simple dockside encounter with a dolphin for \$25 to the more in-depth dolphin swim for \$180 in the facility's natural seawater lagoons. Those who wish a behind the scenes experience can opt for the trainer or researcher-for-a-day programs starting at \$500.