

Duck Key in the Florida Keys: A Lively Family and Fishing Vacation

By Dwight Brown

Surprise, surprise, there is a hot vacation destination midway between [Miami](#) and Key West. One and a half hours from the heart of Miami, there's a sign for Duck Key on Route 1, the Overseas Highway, before it hits the world-famous Seven Mile Bridge. Take the left turn. The road leads to a quiet but developed archipelago anchored by the family-friendly [Hawks Cay Resort](#).



Photo by: Dwight Brown

A Stellar Resort's Humble Beginnings

In the 1820s and 1830s, Duck Key was the site of a salt manufacturing operation. In 1951, Bryan W. Newkirk, who had developed Coral Gables, purchased the island for about \$47,000 and turned it into a 400-acre island community. With an airport 12 miles away in the city of Marathon, and Miami International Airport just 90 miles away, the possibilities became even more endless in 1952 when a wooden bridge connected Duck Key to highway U.S. 1. Newkirk made all the canals waterways that could flush with the tidal changes. He carved out five islands, Indies, Centre, Harbour, Plantation and Yacht Club islands, with 10 miles of paved roads and four decorative stone bridges. Newkirk's Indies Inn opened in 1960. In 1983, it was bought and became the Hawks Cay Resort.

A Fun Resort

From Miami, after the scenic drive on picturesque Route 1 that takes you through the [Everglades](#), across historic fishing bridges and along the tranquil blue and green waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Florida Bay, you turn left at the 61-mile marker on to Duck Key and into the AAA Four-Diamond Award-winning Hawks Cay. You're greeted with

an instant serenity by a resort that looks like a well-groomed country club. No traffic. A few people walk around the grounds, sauntering in and out of the 225 two- and three-bedroom tropical-styled, cream-colored villas and hotel rooms. When you check in at the main desk, you get a better sense of the property as families with kids seem to be the dominant presence. Across the lobby, out back, is a big pool. A clearer picture of what this self-contained haven offers vacationers, particularly families, comes into view: high-quality accommodations, loads of activities on an isle where you really can't get lost.

The heart of the property is the main pool where everyone gathers for swimming, scuba lessons, sun worshipping and the scene. Next to it is a well-conceived Saltwater Lagoon, with a man-made, circular beach. When the tide comes in, the lagoon is higher, when it leaves it is lower. This beach scene is an anomaly in the Keys; if you haven't been here, you might think the Keys' islands are laden with dazzling shorelines, but in fact there are precious few. Lots of vacationers arrive at Key West, anticipating a world-class beach, only to find there is none. Hawks Cay has that covered. Calmness on its beach. Shrieks and laughter at its main pool. Dead silence at his adults-only Tranquility Pool, where it's so quiet you could hear a mojito straw drop.

Stay Active. Or Not!

Dolphin Connection: Guests train, feed and swim with four Atlantic bottlenose dolphins that reside at Hawks Cay. It's a unique facility, the only one of its kind in the continental United States to offer free daily dolphin viewing. The viewings start at 10 a.m. and run every 90 minutes throughout the day. With a small teacher/vacationer ratio, kids can ask all the questions they want and not wait three minutes for an answer. There are only a few participants. No crowds in a gigantic theme park. This is an intimate experience.

Sundance Water Sports: Stand-up paddleboarding, kayaking, jetskiing and Segway tours are mainstays. If you've never jetskied before, the teacher Elio, after some very simple and basic instruction, takes you out solo the first day. You follow 40 yards behind him as he heads out into the open bay for a tour. Relax, enjoy and hold on for dear life. It's exhilarating.

The Marina: You can drive to Hawks Cay, or yacht here and tie up in one of 85 boat slips. Dock overnight, and you can use any of the resort's five pools, restaurants and other facilities in between fishing (mahi mahi, bonefish, snapper, tarpon and grouper) or diving expeditions. At sunset, head over to the Marina and the fishermen come back with the catch of the day. If you're staying in one of the condo rooms with kitchens, you can cook the fresh fish yourself. Or while you are at the marina, take a sunset tour, where the ocean waves sway and the cocktails flow.

Cliff Drysdale Tennis at Hawks Cay: If you're a real tennis player, you'll love the resort's tennis facility, where U.S. Open Doubles Winner Cliff Drysdale's management company runs a tight ship. Drysdale's pros are always as skilled as they are gregarious, and Garrett, the resident pro, fits that mold. If your back hand, game strategy or serve is a bit rusty, he's the one who can bring it back to life with private lessons or in clinics on four hard courts and four clay courts.

Indies Club: You're a saint if you've brought the kids along on a vacation. But even saints need a little alone time. Drop the little people off at the Indies Club where they can do arts and crafts, go swimming and snorkeling or sail on Tiki boats in the saltwater lagoon. They can even hang out with kids their own age at "Kids Night Out" parties, and the older ones at "Teen Night Out." Lots of resorts offer "kids programs" that are no more than glorified babysitting services, and many only function at a two- or three-star level. Hawks Cay's programs brings class and a professionalism to the endeavor, which is best exemplified by their brain-building classroom activities, their Sports

Field (perfect for a pick-up soccer game) and their extremely unique Putting Course, with 18 holes and pars designed for kids. You can nurture your own [Phil Mickelson](#) or [Annika Sorenstam](#).

Calm Waters Spa: Tell the kids you love them, wave goodbye as you drop them at the Indies Club, then run over to the spa for a self-indulgent treatment and relax. Start with some strength training or aerobics at the Florida Keys fitness center. Rest on a lounge chair and zone out. Then try a Key Lime Mojito Body Treatment or a Deep Ocean Facial followed by a candlelit whirlpool dip, eucalyptus steam room or dry sauna.

Driving Around and Day Trips

Get in your car and go for a drive. The awe-inspiring [Seven Mile Bridge](#) in the [Florida Keys](#) is technically not a destination in and of itself, but when it comes into view, and you're driving up its inclines and down its declines that dip down close to sea level, you will rank it as one of the best drives in America — on par with California's Pacific Coast Highway. You can park the car and go fishing at certain spots. Other points of interests in nearby Marathon: The [Turtle Hospital](#), the gardens at [San Pablo Church](#), which is well festooned during the holiday season; [Curry Hammock State Park](#) (you can kayak around the entire Island in 90 minutes).

Dinner!

Ocean is the resort's main restaurant; with its expansive windows, it overlooks the pool and fire pit and serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dine indoors or outside and start with the chilled shrimp — you get a dozen, enough to share if you're in a generous mood. The Pizzetas are popular, but when you're in the Keys, take the opportunity to dine on local fish, like the Pan Seared Local Snapper with Serrano peppers, capers and green olives and vegetable risotto.

Alma is the resort's higher end restaurant. Start with the Tapas Truffle Mariquitas, then the creamy Cauliflower and Rustic Bread Soup, and for the man entrée Alma's Seafood Paella for dinner, with fresh Florida catch of the day, shrimp, Spanish chorizo sausage and Calasparra Spanish rice. When in doubt, Key Lime Pie for dessert.

When you leave Duck Key and Hawks Cay Resort, you might have a hard time determining what you liked the best. The private Jet Ski lesson? The delectable fresh snapper? The tranquil circular beach lagoon? The tennis lessons that saved your game? The solitude of the adults-only section? You might have a hard time deciding, but your kids might have a clearer response. Good money is on the dolphin experience. Or maybe beating you on the third hole at the kids' putting green.

Visit travel writer Dwight Brown at www.DwightBrownInk.com