



SPECIAL REPORT: SUNNY ESCAPES

A chance to sit at Hemingway's desk in Key West

Island is a cultural oasis for free spirits, creative types and at least one lucky writer

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Carol Shaughnessy was a 20-year-old student escaping the Minnesota winter when she landed in Key West 40 years ago. After hopping in a pink taxi and driving alongside the palm tree-studded ocean through the historic Old Town streets lined with bohemian Victorian houses, she felt immediately at home. So much so that, two days later, she called her mother to tell her she was moving there.

"I got a job selling frozen yogurt on a street corner for \$100 a week and I knew I was rich," says Shaughnessy, now a publicist for the local tourism board.

"I never did go back to Minnesota. My life began when I got to Key West."

This tiny island, located at the southernmost tip of the continental U.S., just 150 kilometres from Cuba, casts that kind of magic on its visitors.

Ever since Hemingway made his home here in 1931 (followed by literary luminaries such as Tennessee Williams, Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Frost), Key West has been a refuge for free spirits and creative types attracted by its remote location, tropical setting and frontier spirit forged by previous generations of fisherman, treasure hunters, rum runners, and cigar makers.

That includes a lot of Canadian visitors (who make up its most loyal, international out-of-towners) — 400,000 travel to the Florida Keys and Key West annually, half in the first three months of the year.

Key West is one of five regions in the 200-kilometre Florida Keys necklace of islands. The others are

Key Largo (known as the dive capital of the world), Islamorada (the sport-fishing capital of the world), Marathon (popular for boating and its Turtle Hospital, the world's only licensed veterinary dedicated to treating sea turtles) and Big Pine and Lower Keys (which has a national refuge for miniature Key deer, a species that has come back from near extinction).

Key West is the most famous of the regions, thanks to the slew of celebrated writers who have called it home. (Today, they include authors Judy Blume, Meg Cabot, Annie Dillard and Anne Beattie.)

Its flourishing arts scene includes literary festivals, film forums, a couple of dozen art galleries and Broadway-quality theatrical performances, as well as jazz clubs, piano bars and drag shows that make it a draw for the culturally curious.

Hemingway purchased his home, now a museum, in 1931 for \$8,000 in back taxes. He wrote many of his best-known works, including *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* in the second-storey writing studio that adjoins the house.

For the first time ever, a lucky writer will have the chance to work in that studio for 10 days as part of a 21-day, expense-paid Key West residency this July, by winning a 500-word Flash Fiction Contest (deadline is March 31 and is open to all Canadians except those in Quebec).

One caveat: You have to love cats — the property has about 50 of them, including many six-toed felines, descendants of Hemingway's favourite, the polydactyl Snow White, given to him by a sea captain.

The best way to kick off your Key West vacation is with an Old Town Trolley Tour or a ride on the Conch Tour Train, both of which offer 90-minute tours passing popular attractions.

Tour highlights include the Hem-



Carol Shaughnessy in Dry Tortugas National Park, 110 kilometres west of Key West in the Gulf of Mexico. It's a popular excursion by ferry for visitors to Key West. CAROL TEDESCO/FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU

ingway Home, the Butterfly and Nature Conservatory, Mallory Square (where a nightly sunset celebration takes place), the West Martello Fort and Key West Garden Club, Custom House (dedicated to Key West art and history, it includes an extensive collection of Hemingway memorabilia), the Key West Lighthouse Museum and the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum (named after the treasure hunter who in 1985 recovered a \$450-million cache from the Nuestra Señora de Atocha and the Santa Margarita, two galleons that sank off the Florida Keys in 1622).



Ernest Hemingway's writing studio. ROB O'NEAL/FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU



ROB O'NEAL/FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU

At the age of 20, after hopping in a pink taxi and driving along the ocean, Carol Shaughnessy immediately felt at home.

FIVE QUIRKY THINGS TO DO IN KEY WEST THIS MARCH

1. Celebrate the 105th birthday of playwright Tennessee Williams, whose works include *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with a month-long series of classic movies adapted from his plays, a poetry contest, staged readings from his work and a film forum at the Tennessee Williams exhibit. (twkw.org)

2. Pucker up for a "conch honk" in the 54th-annual Conch Shell Blowing Contest, an island tradition that pays homage to the ancient practice of sailors using the shells as foghorns. It's being hosted by the Old Island Restoration Foundation on March 5. (oirf.org)

3. Catch Here Come the Mummies, a funk/R&B band out of Nashville, Tenn., whose members perform literally under wraps (they are reputed to be well known musicians who perform in disguise to avoid contract

disputes with their record labels). March 6 at the Key West Theatre. (thekeywesttheater.com)

4. Harry S. Truman spent 175 days over 11 visits during his U.S. presidency in Key West, beginning in 1946 when his doctor ordered the exhausted president to vacation somewhere warm. Today, the Harry S. Truman Little White House museum holds an annual symposium (March 11-12) that includes panel discussions, a reception and tours. (trumanlittlewhitehouse.com)

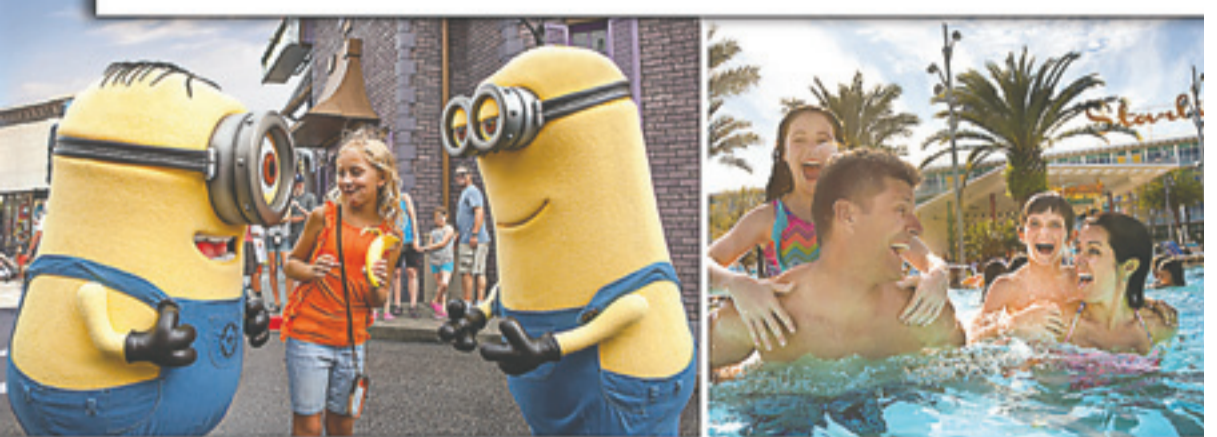
5. View the exhibit Bars, Brews & Blues: Carousing in Key West (until March 29) at the Key West Art & Historical Society's Custom House and learn about several of the island's forgotten watering holes, its newer establishments and the singers and songwriters who kept their patrons entertained. (kwaahs.org)



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