

Forbes

3 Reasons Key West Is On Our Fall Travel Radar



The Gates Hotel Key West Lobby (Credit: The Gates Hotel Key West)

Key West has a distinct smell. We're not talking about the odor that comes off the Gulf of Mexico when a strong breeze hits, either. This particular aroma is more pleasant, almost sweet. But it's not the fragrance that one of Kermit's freshly made Key lime pies offers. No, this smell is equal parts aloe vera, lemon and natural goodness, and it's the basis behind much of the Key West Aloe product line.

Nose-approved samples of the toiletries can be found all around the city, from upscale hotel bathrooms to standalone shops on Duval and Greene streets. Like a perfumer's perfect mix, fresh botanicals and a community-first business mindset come together well at Key West Aloe.

That sort of homespun recipe isn't exclusive to lotions and shower gels, though; it's essentially the backbone of a city that saw its first European settlers in the 1820s. Ernest Hemingway wrote some of his finest work here in the 1920s. In the decades since, Key West has made its name with sunshine, seafood and as little stress as humanly possible.

This fall, the city of about 25,000 full-time residents will show off many of those special qualities that have entranced travelers through a host of new businesses and seasonal happenings. Forbes Travel Guide editors saw, smelled and tasted all that they could during a recent trip, coming up with a trio of reasons that make Key West so appealing this season.



The Gates Hotel Key West Pool (Credit: The Gates Hotel Key West)

A lavishly laid-back new hotel

Already famously one of Florida's most easygoing destinations, Key West somehow turns up the chill vibe even more with The Gates Hotel, a just-over-a-year-old property not far from Key West International Airport that could easily double as a New England summer cottage if it weren't lounging in the Florida heat.

From the outset, this place states its case for calm. The reception desk, for example, isn't much of a desk at all; think of it more like a valet stand with an attendant whose sole mission is to get you to your room as quickly as possible. Reclaimed whitewash beams and a soothing white-tan-and-blue color palette help the mood even more.

Once you have your key — be sure to take note of award-winning photographer Jorge de la Torriente's images along the lobby walls — walk past a retro-chic pool area as you approach your room. When you get inside, you'll feel as if you've entered a space from which you could almost envision Hemingway writing "One Trip Across." The platform beds are made from hand-washed pine. The burlap throws feel like something pulled off a schooner. Naturally, the bathroom vanity is filled with Key West Aloe products.

Weekends around the pool and small stage tend to get lively when local DJs and musicians grab the microphone. With or without the tunes, your night can potentially rock after a few drinks at the mellowed-out Rum Row bar. And if you need a bit of sustenance to go with your colorful cocktail, head over to The Blind Pig, a Caribbean- and Cuban-tinged food truck on premises cooking up deliciously sloppy shrimp tacos that rank among the best we've had in South Florida.



Southernmost Beach Cafe (Credit: Southernmost Beach Resort)

A smorgasbord of other dining options

Of course, Key West's good eats don't stop at The Gates Hotel. Or with the famed Key lime pie or conch fritters for that matter. With fishing boats lining the city, it's easy to see why wahoo and tuna are so abundant around these parts. The Stoned Crab, Seven Fish, and Blue Heaven have long served as local institutions for superb seafood. Stylish new hotel [The Marker Waterfront Resort](#)'s Cero Bodega only adds to the region's culinary lexicon by serving up delightful Cal-Mex dishes (think shrimp quesadillas and mahi-mahi sandwiches) in a relaxing, open-air space.

If you want a larger food sampling, this fall's inaugural Wine Dine Key West couldn't be better timed. From September 16 to October 16, many of the city's finest establishments — selections range from lunch at Forbes Travel Guide Recommended [Southernmost Beach Resort's Southernmost Beach Café](#) to dinner at Forbes Travel Guide Recommended [Casa Marina](#), a [Waldorf Astoria Resort's Sun Sun](#) — will orchestrate special menus at easily digestible, pre-set prices.

Playing off of Germany's Oktoberfest, the Key West Brewfest (September 1 to 5) is the city's annual opportunity to show the world how to properly wear lederhosen in a tropical locale. If your Labor Day weekend is typically filled with barbecues or beaches, tweak tradition just a splash with a stop at this event, which will be centered around Southernmost Beach Resort. This year's highlights include beer-pairing lunches and brunches, a brew cruise and suds-heavy parties back at The Gates Hotel.



"Time for Fun" Statue Outside the Key West Art and History Museum (Credit: DeMarco Williams)

The fun doesn't stop

Make your way to Key West First Legal Rum Distillery for wonderful libations and a history lesson in Prohibition around South Florida. Let spirited owner (and The Stoned Crab chef) Paul Menta take you to the back of the former Coca-Cola bottling plant and show you how the chef-distilled process (everything revolves around sugar cane being "cooked" in stills) works to create Key West Devil's Rum, Duval Street Spiced Rum and other smooth pours.

Just two blocks from the distillery are Duval and Caroline streets, a corner known worldwide for its live music offerings and overall jovial energy. No matter when you visit this fall, you'll be swayed by guitar plucks and velvety croons coming from nearly every direction. But should you plop a seat at the Little Room Jazz Club, we'd fully understand. (We love listening to Ericson Holt's soulful blues notes on Tuesday nights almost as much as the locals.)

[The Fantasy Fest](#) (October 21 through 30) will certainly cater more to Marvel Universe followers than music lovers, but that doesn't mean the costume-clad revelers won't shake a leg (or fake tail) at The Marker's Rock and Roll Revitalizing 1960's Pool Park on October 26.

Many of the other moments on the action-packed itinerary will circle around the 2016 theme of "Political Voodoo & Ballot Box Barbarians." While we're still scratching our heads over what that means exactly, we do know that the boisterous 10-day fest will consist of lavish parades, burlesque performances, and pirate parties. Think of the whole thing like Comic-Con having a dance-off with Mardi Gras. Sounds a little wonky, right? Well, Key West wouldn't have it any other way.