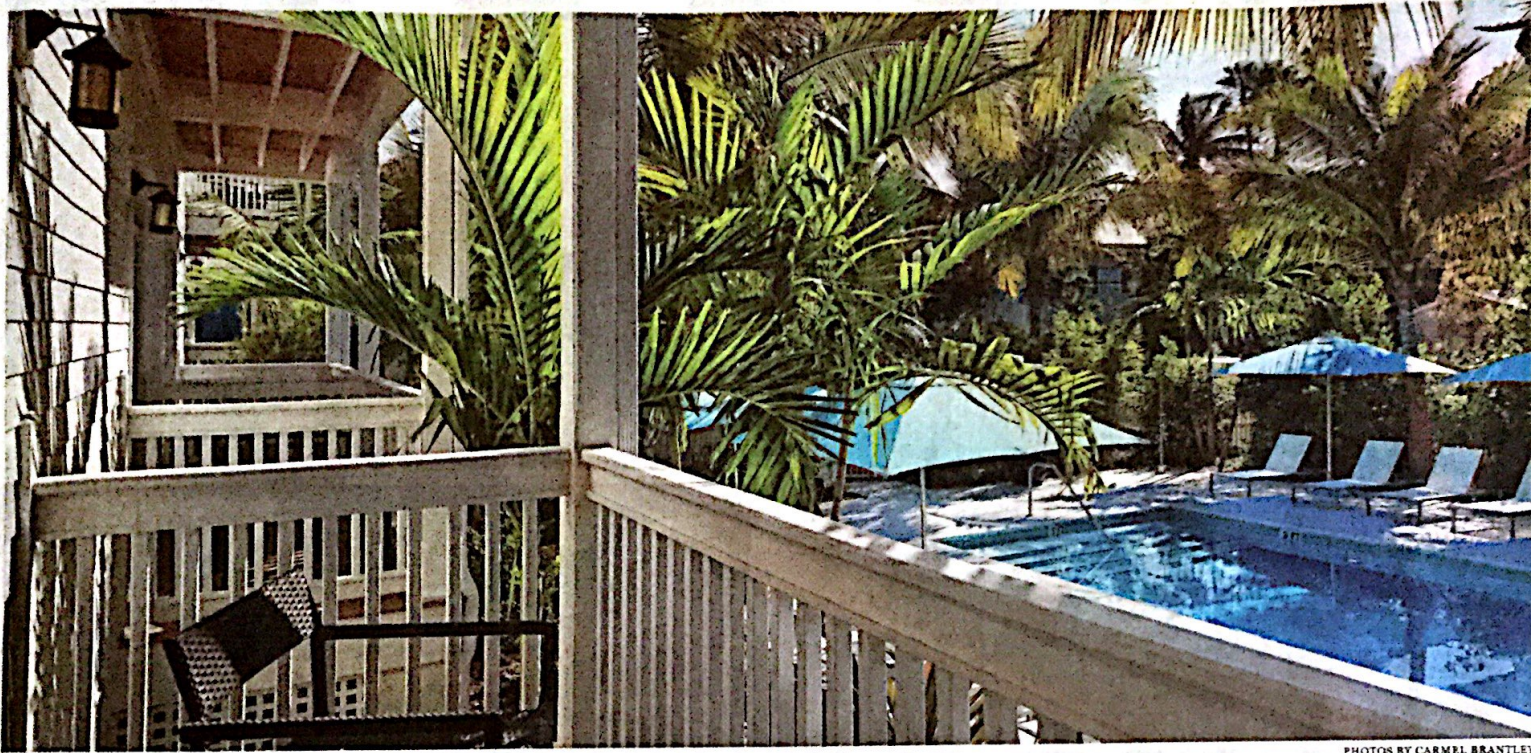


The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD



PHOTOS BY CARMEL BRANTLEY

CHECK IN: KEY WEST

Marker of a changed place

KEY WEST — Something was definitely wrong. I was in Key West, but my hotel room was telling me I wasn't in Key West. On previous visits, my lodging included (but was not limited to) extras such as mildew, uncooperative air conditioners, and large, brazen roaches that aggressively stared me down as I brushed my teeth.

My room at the Marker, the first resort to open in Key West in 20 years, had none of those freebies. I was almost a little disappointed because I always returned from Key West with exceptional tales of sheets showing stains of indeterminable origin and a 3 a.m. wakeup from an adjoining room blasting "Freebird."

Think of the Marker as a boutique hotel that was lifted by a hurricane and dropped on the otherwise higgledy-piggledy landscape of Key West. It's civilized, tastefully appointed, and has a

very good restaurant. In other words, it's relaxing like a resort should be.

When I arrived, the Marker had been open less than a month and the staff was already knowledgeable. The Marker is part of a wave of change that is creeping very slowly into Key West. Across the street, there is construction taking place on a hip microbrewery, and word in town is that a fancy new gym is coming soon.

I think there's room for all of it, especially if the new arrivals are executed as well as the Marker. The 96-room resort is situated on a lot that was once slated for condos. It faces the Key West Historic Seaport and a dive bar where the sounds of mediocre local performers can often be heard from the hotel's three pools.

The rooms are more Caribbean than Key West, although there are subtle reminders of where you are thanks to Ernest Hemingway books and ceramic cats that pay tribute to the author's polydactyl pets. The Marker is a healthy

walk from the bawdiness of Duval Street, which, depending on the purpose of your visit, can be a blessing or curse. It was nice to get a taste of Duval when I wanted it, but I was also grateful for the escape when I needed to relax.

I tend to shy away from hotel dining in resort towns, but returned to the Marker's Cal-Mex restaurant Cero Bodega after my initial assessment because I fell in love with the quesadillas and the bartender (don't judge). The arrival of the Marker shows that not all progress is bad.

THE MARKER 200 William St., Key West, Fla. 305-501-5193, www.themarkerkeywest.com. Rooms start at \$299 a night through March.

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

At The Marker, a private porch with poolside garden (top) and a hot drink delivered, and plenty of room with a view.

