

CHILLING AT CHEECA IN FLORIDA KEYS



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

Water, water everywhere. And perhaps a Key Lime cocktail to drink.

Cheeca Lodge and Spa in the Florida Keys is a deluxe island resort buoyed by the exquisite turquoise waters of the Atlantic Ocean. This vintage sport, family and honeymoon getaway is an extraordinarily beautiful property that embraces a variety of lodging styles, many inclusive sports and a terrific range of cuisine that features Florida seafood, steaks, sushi and Italian.

You can toss away your car keys and eat, drink and play on site, so it is an ideal de-stressing destination and a car-free kids' zone. You also can customize your getaway. A family-style vacation is rich with picnics, sandcastles on the beach, snorkelling, fishing off the pier and Camp Cheeca nature explorations.

If romance is in the air, you might lounge at the adults-only pool, which has butler service, and eventually wind up the day with a warm clam-shell massage at The Spa at Cheeca Lodge. Cheeca is wedding and honeymoon heaven. Imagine the bride making an entrance crossing a footbridge to a tiny island of fountains, waterfalls and a riot of tropical flora — and later that night, the newlyweds cocooning in a secluded oceanfront bungalow. If variety is the spice of romance, the honeymooners can change the pace at Cheeca's new affiliate, The Marker Waterfront Resort, which is scheduled to open by Christmas.

I had a third vacation style in mind. I was keen on sports, and many are included in the room rates. Cheeca has its own beach-cruiser bicycles, fishing pier, tennis courts (the new pro holds clinics) and a nine-hole, par-three golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus. You can borrow the gear for all three, at no charge, so I was all set.

Cheeca is also a hub for superlative water sports, some on the frisky Atlantic and others on the tamer Florida Bay, a 10-minute walk away. You have to factor in some additional fees, but The Keys are famous for such out-



Cheeca Lodge and Spa in the Florida Keys is a deluxe island resort on the Atlantic Ocean offering great amenities. **CHEECA LODGE AND SPA**

standing experiences as scuba on the world's third-largest coral barrier reef, para-sailing and windsurfing on the high seas, paddle-boarding through a mangrove ecosystem or thrilling deepsea fishing with some of the most experienced and entertaining sea captains in the U.S.

FAB FLORIDA FOOD

Conch chowder, fresh seafood and key lime pie are musts. Here are some of Cheeca's most delectable choices.

- The beachside Tiki Bar serves cocktails, wood-fired pizzas and interesting casual fare like shrimp-burgers or spicy Cuban roast-pork sandwiches. Even the lean cuisine is fun — mushroom burgers and avocado salads.
- Atlantic's Edge specializes in Florida seafood, including pink shrimp from the Keys, snapper, stone crab and grouper. Crab cakes and cowboy steak are all-American classics, with sides like truffle mac 'n' cheese and horseradish potato gratin. If you reel in a big catch, chef Richard Smith will prepare it for you — grilled, onion-crust, blackened or fried.
- Limoncello is a fun trattoria with an antipasto bar, homemade pasta and such crowd-pleasers as

IF YOU GO

Islamorada is a 1.5-hour drive or 110 kilometres south of Miami International Airport.

Cheeca Lodge & Spa: 800-327-2888, 305-664-4651; www.cheeca.com; 81801 Overseas Highway, Islamorada, Fla.

Sample rates in January (mid-week): main lodge rooms start at \$449 U.S. (all with outdoor soaking tubs on private balconies); family-friendly suites start at \$259; oceanfront bungalows (adults-only) start at \$429.

Resort fee, \$39, covers beach setups, two swimming pools (lap pool for adults only), Wi-Fi, valet parking, business centre, DVD movies, tennis courts, bicycles, fishing pier, sea kayaks, fitness studio, golf.

Extra: meals, tennis clinics, fishing charters, sunset cruises, Everglades tour, babysitting, Camp Cheeca day/evening (ages 5-12). Children's menus available. Free shuttle covers

veal meatballs, seafood pasta or chicken Parmesan. Children have their own menu and the gelato bar is a heat-beating treat for all.

- Nikai Sushi is an Asian-inspired journey that starts with flights of sake and martinis infused with cherry blossom, ginger, lychee and wasabi. Then, chef

three-kilometre range.

The Spa at Cheeca Lodge: ages 18 and over; beauty and body services for men and women; pool, fitness or yoga classes (\$10); private training available; Sea Breeze relaxation massage, \$145.

Cheeca Watersports: 305-517-4451, paddleboards, sea-kayaks.

On Islamorada: Theater of the Sea (swimming with dolphins), History of Diving Museum. Pops-in-the-Park holiday concert (free), 4 p.m., Dec. 20. At Robbie's Marina, you can hand-feed two-metre tarpon (salt-water fish) from the pier. Morada Way Arts & Cultural District presents Third Thursday (of every month) Art Walk with gallery exhibits, food, music (free), 6-9 p.m., Dec. 18, Jan. 15, Feb. 19.

Info for The Keys: 800-352-5397/800-FLA-KEYS, fla-keys.com. Visit Florida: 888-735-2872, visitflorida.com.

Dana Rose orchestrates delicate sushi and sashimi, and fine salads of edamame, squid and seaweed. One standout dish is the hamachi mariachi with cilantro purée and jalapeño.

ROOMS WITH VIEWS

- The lodging — total 214 units

— is spread out across the resort in three different sizes and styles, each with its own exceptional features, so you can craft you own vacation.

- The largest and most deluxe accommodations are in the main lodge, an elevator ride up from the lobby and restaurants. These super-sized rooms have sitting areas and private balconies with open-air soaking tubs — truly a coveted treat. The Florida Keys have Bahamian and Cuban heritage, so the decor is island-inspired. Tropical flowers bloom against soft neutrals and dark wood adds a touch of jungle drama.
- Cheeca's family-friendly one-bedroom suites overlook either the resort's lagoon or gardens. They have kitchenettes, screen porches and living rooms, with the option of adding even more space with a second, adjoining bedroom.
- The bungalows were overhauled recently with new decor and updated bathrooms. The best aspect — the superb setting — hasn't changed. These love nests are oceanfront, tucked into gardens of palms and flowers, with private staircases down to the beach.

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