

New Amara Cay reflects Florida Keys’ beach vibe



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

The oceanfront Amara Cay Resort in the Florida Keys has a lot of new features for a boutique property, especially its all-new interiors and creative cuisine and cocktails.

Still, the classic Florida attractions — the sun, sand and sea — are right outside the door, and there’s an outdoorsy, barefoot-in-The-Keys informality to the top pursuits: chilling at the large pool heated to a perfect 29 C; vegging out on a hammock on the tranquil, private beachfront amid coconut palms and red ginger bushes; and, revelling in the balmy Atlantic with an exceptional choice of water sports.

Amara Cay is the rebirth of the old Islamorada Resort, which closed for more than six months and reopened in 2015. The re-imagined Amara Cay now embraces the Italian-inspired Oltremare Ristorante, the Island Trendz beachwear shop and the Glass Bowl, an event space for up to 60 people.

The new buzzwords are fresh and natural.

THE NEW LOOK: The makeover includes new decor throughout. The lobby lounge is an airy space that reflects the tropical beach-centric vibe of The Keys with basket-style chairs, sisal carpets, stone floors, reclaimed wood pillars and a bamboo screen, plus colour pops of vivid lime pottery and ferns.

The 88 rooms and 22 suites are modern and spare, dressed in whites and pale neutrals. The look is minimalist and the effect is refreshing. Some of the high points are: balconies in every room, with full or partial ocean views, 47-inch televisions in all the bedrooms and 55-inchers in the suites’ living rooms, Nuxe toilettries blended in France with honey, waffle-weave bathrobes and pristine white beds draped in fine-quality bedding and fluffy duvets.

Meanwhile, the resort has gone green with LED lighting, energy-efficient thermostats that shut off the air-conditioning when the patio doors open, and support for The Keys’ Coral Restoration Foundation that aims to preserve the world’s third largest coral



The decor at the new Amara Cay Resort features pieces made from rattan, sisal and reclaimed wood. PHOTOS: JUAN FERNANDO/AMARA CAY RESORT

barrier reef.

All this has attracted a remarkably international guest roster. I met fellow sun-seekers from Quebec, Toronto, New York, Amsterdam and Stockholm, including two honeymooning couples.

THE MEAL PLAN: Executive chef Dario Olivera has brought zest and adventure to hotel dining with his Italian-inspired cuisine.

Dinner features grilled octopus and baked eggplant as starters; homemade pastas including ricotta agnolotti or tagliatelle with Key clams; and, main courses of braised short rib in sangiovese, semolina-dusted snapper and a local seafood specialty with Olivera’s twist — conch sautéed in lemon and caper brown butter.

His desserts are terrific and authentically Italian — tiramisu crostata al caprino (a sweet goat cheese tart) and zeppoli, irresistible little doughnuts with nutella cream. Olivera actually convinced me that his zeppoli are light — they are in taste, but maybe not in calories.

The Sinful Sunday Brunch features a Bloody Mary cart and choices such as steak and eggs, eggs Benedict, cheese blintzes, fettuccine carbonara, burgers or snapper.

On Mondays, Oltremare Bar crafts Martinis and Meatballs, with choices starting at \$8.

Wine Down Wednesdays opens up a list of more than 70 wines by the glass, from Napa to Tuscany, half of them usually available



Guests at the Amara Cay Resort in the Florida Keys can relax on a tranquil, private beachfront amid coconut palms and red ginger bushes.

only by the bottle.

On Tuesdays to Thursdays, the special is French sparkling wine — \$5 at 5 p.m., \$6 at 6 p.m. and \$7 at 7 p.m.

Sparrows Rum Bar, a tiki-style outdoor lounge perched between the pool and the beach is a breezy spot for tropical drinks with 30 kinds of rum — the Hemingway daiquiri is Keys’ favourite — and casual fare such as fish or sausage sandwiches, Cobb or tropical fruit salads or patty melts.

Even breakfast is exciting: smoothies with honey and Greek yogurt; omelettes with Italian sausage; lemon poppyseed pancakes topped with almond brittle, mascarpone and blueberries; and, the northern Italian poached egg with polenta, Tuscan kale and ricotta.

WHAT TO DO: Amara Cay’s local experts suggest Islamorada highlights such as eco-tours by boat, sunset cruises, swimming with

dolphins at Theatre of the Sea, feeding the tarpons at Robbie’s of Islamorada and sport fishing guided by some of the world’s best captains.

Sea Monkeys Water Sports, on site at Amara, organizes scuba diving, snorkelling, wave-runners, kayaking and paddle-boarding, and also rents bicycles.

The dive shop is known for its six-passenger excursions to exceptional undersea spots for wrecks and marine life (seamonkeydivers.com).

Islamorada’s growing creative community will present Third Thursday Artwalks (Dec. 17, Jan. 21, Feb. 18). They have a street fair ambience, with artists displaying their work and galleries serving wine and snacks.

Prominent painter Michelle Nicole Lowe also has her own gallery, where she exhibits her watercolours of sea life and Florida flora and fauna (305-981-

IF YOU GO

Islamorada in the Florida Keys is approximately halfway between Key West and Miami International Airport, about a 90-minute drive to each.

Amara Cay Resort: 305-664-0073, www.amaracayresort.com; 80001 Overseas Highway, Islamorada, Fla.

Price: Two-night minimum on weekends. Rates start at US\$179 U.S. (May 1-Dec. 26) or US\$289 (Dec. 26-April 30) for rooms or US\$399 for suites (dates are approximate). Resort fee, US\$28 per night, covers Wi-Fi, parking, swimming pool, hot tub, beach setups, bocce ball, shuttle after 4 p.m. within a five-kilometre radius.

Oltremare Ristorante: Breakfast from 6:30 a.m. and dinner from 5 p.m.; Sunday brunch, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; oltremareristorante.com;

Sparrows Rum Bar: 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Info for The Keys: 800-FLA-KEYS, fla-keys.com.

Visit Florida: 888-735-2872, visitflorida.com.

6424, michellenicolelowe.com, moradaway.org).

The Islamorada Fish Company will present the first Stone Crab Jam Festival with seafood, all-day island music, vendor booths and kids’ activities (Dec. 5, noon to 9 p.m.).

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