

CHECKING IN

The Marker resort adds luxury to quaint Key West



ROCHELLE LASH

Florida buzz! The Marker Waterfront Resort is a chic new boutique beauty that opened this winter in the quaint Key West Historic Seaport.

The 96-room hotel embodies the island charm of the Florida Keys — the breezy, sun-baked lifestyle, fresh seafood, cocktails on the patio and unparalleled water activities, including deep-sea fishing. But The Marker will be a game-changer.

At the heart of Key West's harbour action, The Marker adds an upscale and fashionable experience to a town whose style is primarily quirky and offbeat. The appealing boutique hotel is a model of contemporary cool and seaside luxury, built around a courtyard of tropical gardens, three swimming pools (one for adults only), a hip bar and Latin-inspired food.

A series of two-storey townhouses, The Marker's look is a fresh mix of modern spaces with traditional Key West elements. It is an updated take on "conch architecture," with gabled roofs, a wide veranda and latticework balconies. The friendly butter-yellow exterior and the pristine white trim create a cottage look, but the interiors are sophisticated.

Perch anywhere and you get a taste of the tropics. You can settle into a rattan chair on the inviting porch and gaze at the flotilla of boats bobbing in the harbour. The lobby is warmed by contemporary-classic decor in a pretty palette of greys, gold and cream, with accents of dark tropical hardwood.

Palm fronds import a gentle brush with nature, so you are always close to the glorious Florida climate. The swimming pools are strikingly beautiful oases of aquamarine waters surrounded by white lounge chairs and sun-brellas.

The guest rooms are airy and stylish, dressed in marine blue and crisp white with ebony contrasts. The scene is modern — sleek furniture, flat-screen TVs and white-tiled bathrooms with soaking tubs and glass walk-in showers. The Marker has four room categories, all with private



The Marker Waterfront Resort provides an example of Key West's cottage-style 'conch architecture.' PHOTOS: THE MARKER WATERFRONT RESORT

balconies but with different views: pool, garden, Old Town and marina, which is the most expensive.

Cero Bodega is inspired by the Latin heritage of the Keys, but it calls itself a "California-style tequila bar and kitchen." Specialties include huevos rancheros for breakfast, plus casual lunches and suppers of Ahi tuna tacos, kale salads and truffle burgers, plus more refined fare: seafood paella, tequila-braised ribs, ceviche, pollo à la plancha, guacamole and Florida snapper, stone crab and lobster. At the bar, happy hour features Spanish wine and zingy drinks of rum, vodka and tequila infused with citrus and herbs.

Key West is intimate and whimsical. Tourist trolleys tootle along streets lined with gingerbread mansions. Within a few blocks of The Marker are Ernest Hemingway's Home and Museum, the Key West Aquarium, the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center and Duval St., the main drag that is throbbing with casual shopping, dining and music. The Marker's Conch-ierge — a word play on the Keys' abundant large mollusks — can set up fishing charters and dolphin-watching.

I think of Key West as Hemingway territory (To Have and Have Not, A Farewell to Arms, 1930s) for his love of marlin fishing and the inspiration he found among the tropical guava trees and coconut palms — not to men-



The Marker is a luxurious new boutique hotel that features three swimming pools, one reserved for adults, and a courtyard of tropical gardens.

tion Sloppy Joe's Bar, where he favoured extra-dry martinis, double daiquiris and absinthe. But literary masters Tennessee Williams (Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, 1950s) and Robert Frost (The Road Not Taken, 1920s) have also been drawn to Key West's carefree atmosphere and beautiful waters and sunsets.

Today, the community has a rich cultural life of live theatre, literary events and gallery-hopping — and VIP visitors to The Keys ranging from literary to showbiz. A new generation of celebs has made the island scene: cultural icons Madonna and Oprah Winfrey; authors Alison Lurie and Judy Blume; and such

stars as Marisa Tomei at the Key West Film Fest (annually in November). Sissy Spacek, Kyle Chandler, Chloë Sevigny and Sam Shepard recently wrapped the Netflix family thriller Bloodline, to be streamed March 20.

Key West is the southernmost town on the U.S. mainland, and it celebrates its status with a freethinking ethos and a party air. Jugglers and street musicians entertain nightly in Mallory Square and the bars hop with Hemingway's legacy.

It's also a community that prides itself on diversity. The first same-sex marriages in Florida took place in Key West in January and the all-new GayKey

IF YOU GO

Key West is an approximately 3.5-hour or 260-kilometre drive south-west of Miami International Airport. Regional flights connect to Key West.

The Marker Waterfront Resort: 855-969-3206, 305-501-5193; themarkerkeywest.com; 200 William St., Key West, Fla.

Price: The Marker has a best-rate guarantee and offers a 20 per cent discount if you book 30 days in advance and pre-pay. Rates start at approximately \$449 US in high season (Nov.-June) and \$279 in low season (July-Oct.); includes three swimming pools (one is adults only), Wi-Fi, parking, fitness centre.

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

West Same-Sex Wedding Expo launched last week with a bouquet of such services as creative ceremonies, flowers, music, catering and cakes, photographers and videographers, decorations and attire.

The Taste of Key West, on April 13, will showcase the best of local restaurants to benefit AIDS Help Inc. The culinary fest will take place on the waterfront, overlooking Key West Harbor, a lively, scenic five-minute walk from The Marker (aidshelp.cc, 305-296-6196).

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