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A Round-Up of Key West Resorts

Special Winter Travel Feature

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Key West is one of the world's favorite gay retreats, especially among travelers looking to spend a week or two at a self-contained, gay-exclusive resort. There are only three other places in the United States that offer such an abundance of gay-oriented accommodations — Provincetown, Palm Springs, and Fort Lauderdale. Compared to these, Key West stands out because it's warm and sunny year-round, most of its gay resorts occupy vintage buildings in a quaint historic district, and virtually all of them lie within an easy walk of restaurants and gay bars.

This tiny island just 100 miles north of Havana, Cuba, is known for its clothing-optional — in some cases rather racy — retreats. One of these places caters to lesbians, another to gay men and lesbians, and the rest to gay men. This column focuses chiefly on gay-oriented properties, but keep in mind that Key West also has a number of lodgings — from inns to full-service resorts to tiny B&Bs — that welcome both gays and straights.

Many of these are listed on the Web site of the island's gay/lesbian chamber of commerce, the Key West Business

Guild (www.gaykeywestfl.com).

The resorts mentioned below charge the highest rates during the winter high season (roughly mid-November through mid-April), at which time the most basic units, at most properties, begin around \$100 to \$120 per night. Luxury suites can run as high as \$300 nightly or more. Most of properties offer a wide range of rates, depending on room size, amenities, and location relative to the pool or sundecks.

Here's a round-up of some of Key West's most alluring gay accommodations:

Alexander's

This long-popular gay resort has the relatively unusual policy of being both clothing-optional and of welcoming to women and men alike. This makes Alexander's ideal for gay guys traveling with lesbian friends, or for any queer vacationers who enjoy a mixed-gender atmosphere. The effect is that the mood around the pool and hot tub tends to be less cruisy than at single-gender resorts: Aromatic tropical flowers, sundecks, rattan and wicker furnishings, and sparkling tiled bathrooms impart Alexander's with a classy but casual look. The main 1910 house has been flawlessly restored, and several



One of the largest women's resorts in the United States, the recently renovated Pearl's Rainbow is just steps from Key West dining and nightlife. (Photo by Andrew Collins.)

newer units have been added on over the years. A few rooms have romantic private verandahs.

Atlantic Shores Resort

Site of the popular oceanfront bar-and-grill of the same name, the art deco-inspired Atlantic Shores differs considerably from other gay properties in town: It's a motel-style lodging with 72 units facing a landscaped parking lot. It's a bit of a walk from the Historic District but just off Duval Street, the heart of Key West's dining and nightlife; also, straights are quite welcome here, as long as they're cool with the tres gay ambience. Although rooms aren't set around a private pool area, they're just steps from the outdoor bar and grill, whose amenities include a big pool and a long wooden pier jutting into the sea. Hotel guests, but also folks from all over town, flock to this clothing-optional hangout all day, and especially at dusk, when the pier affords outstanding sunset views. The rooms themselves have a standard motel layout, made more cheerful by attractive furniture and festive color schemes;

many have refrigerators, microwaves, and coffeemakers. Devotees of the Atlantic Shores appreciate the fact that you can stay here and never feel forced to meet another guest, but you also have the option of being social at the bar and grill.

Big Ruby's

This resort, though less than a block from Duval Street, is hidden behind high walls from noise and street traffic. The grounds feature towering palm trees and fragrant flowers, an abundance of sundecks, and an outdoor shower large enough for two. Rooms are warm, contemporary, spotless, and full of light — all have TV/VCRs, mini-refrigerators, A/C, and ceiling fans. A complimentary full-cooked breakfast is included in the rates. As for the staff, you won't find a more professional bunch of guys in Key West.

Coconut Grove

Next door to the Oasis (see below), this highly social, all-male compound comprises three buildings with rooms available in a variety of configurations, accommodating from one to six guests. This is one of the latest properties to undergo a full (and much-needed) renovation, and its rooms now look better than ever, with updated furnishings and cheerful yet tasteful color schemes. Amenities include a large pool and hot tub, and the rates are quite reasonable. The roof deck is one of the highest points in the Historic District (which means that you can sometimes ogle cute guys at neighboring properties).

Equator

A recently built gay resort along Fleming Street (the Historic District's main drag), Equator has unusually plush rooms with contemporary Caribbean-influenced furniture. Designer fabrics, feather pillows with comforters, Mediterranean-tile floors, large closets, phones with voice mail and data ports, and strong sound insulation add to the comfort of each unit. Some have wet bars, French doors, cathedral ceilings, and double whirlpool tubs. The tradeoff is that the Equator's grounds, although nicely landscaped, are smaller than at some of its competitors; there's a compact pool and an oversize Jacuzzi tub. This is a

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The 24-hour health club at the Island House includes a five-man shower, sauna, steam room, exercise equipment, and this large Jacuzzi. (Photo courtesy of the Island House.)