

INSIDE FLORIDA



SHORE THING

In nearby Islamorada, you can count on striking scenery and savory seafood — that's enough to hook just about anybody.

BY M.B. ROBERTS
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

It's Thursday evening around 8. My husband, Ronnie, and I are driving south from Fort Lauderdale for a five-day trip to Islamorada, our favorite spot in the Keys. As we pass Homestead and hit the Overseas Highway, Ronnie sticks his head out the window to check the reddish sky. "Oooh!" he says. "It's going to be a great day on the boat tomorrow!"

I am also thinking of fish. But I don't dwell on the rod-and-reel angle. I am thinking of what kind of fish I'm going to eat tonight and where I'm going to eat it.

"We could stop by The Lorelei," I say. "Or how about Morada Bay?"

Ronnie's head is out the window again. "I think the wind is setting down. I hope the fish are biting!"

Midway through his recounting of "the time he battled the monster sailfish," his stomach gives a loud, conspicuous grumble.

"Whoa!" he laughs. "I guess we should think about getting something to eat."

Since it's late and we feel grubby from our trip, we decide to stop at The Islamorada Fish Company, get a takeout dinner from their Seafood Market and bring it back to the houseboat where we are staying. The houseboat, really a floating apartment complete with a kitchen, small bar and terrific little patio, is docked at Bud & Mary's Marina — both the boat and marina are owned by our friend, Richard Stanczyk.

"Excellent houseboat fare!" I tell the smiling clerk, as I pile smoked fish dip, crackers, a tub of conch chowder and a bottle of chardonnay on the counter. "Oh, and 2 pounds of stone crab claws. Could you crack them please?"

Our bill is \$81, not exactly a cheap takeout ticket. At \$22 a pound, the stone crab claws are definitely the culprits. But I just can't help myself. They are my favorite: messy, succulent and sweet — and they are the perfect, if slightly decadent, main course for our first night in the Keys.

We step down onto the slightly swaying houseboat. Ronnie flings open the backside French doors, revealing a view of dozens of boats docked for the evening and a bright moon high over the Florida Bay. He positions two plastic chairs on the patio and takes a deep breath, filling his lungs with the salty air. The only sound besides the splashing of a pelican landing in the water nearby and the knocking of the boat against the dock is the pop! the wine cork makes when I open the wine. I fill a plastic cup for myself and bring Ronnie (another pop!) a cold bottle of Heineken.

The next afternoon, I sit on our porch and watch the fleet of fishing boats make their way back from the open sea through the channel. They keep a respectful distance from each other and move slowly back to the marina, like bridesmaids gliding down the church aisle. The boat Ronnie is on, *The Catch 22*, is proudly flying nine sailfish flags. It was a great day of fishing, but the sailfish were all released, so I pick him up at the dock and we hop in the car to search for fish we can eat.

Besides the Seafood Market at the Islamorada Fish Company, the main draw is the dockside bar and outside restaurant. We position ourselves at one of the tiki bars, where I attempt to annoy Ronnie by ordering my Back Country Planters Punch in a souvenir coconut. Turns out that in less than 24 hours he has

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completely managed to affect a laid-back Keys attitude and shows no signs of embarrassment. Or maybe he was just too sunburned to show it.

The extensive, casual menu features every kind of fish dish from conch fritters and calamari to blackened dolphin and grouper. There's a raw bar, shellfish and an above-average wine list, but I stick with my refreshing blend of Bacardi Select Black Rum and pineapple, orange and grapefruit juice.

Looming behind the Fish Company is the enormous, two-story Worldwide Sportsman retail store. Inside is a replica of Hemingway's fishing boat, *Pilar*, that tourists may walk through if they can tear themselves away from the rows and rows of rods, reels, hooks, cooking sauces, T-shirts and upscale clothing. On the second floor, the main attraction (unless you're partial to the Tommy Bahama shirts) is Zane Grey's Longkey Lounge, a dimly lit, elegant cigar bar furnished with mahogany, brass railings and western novel-stuffed bookshelves.

The walls are covered with memorabilia such as Grey's rod and gaff, a painting of the world-record marlin he caught in the Canary Islands, and black-and-white prints of very big men of letters and their very big fish.

PINCH ME: Stone crab claws set the tone for a Keys vacation.

Outside, on the wraparound patio, Vin and Betty Sparano are waiting for us. Vin sips a martini and Betty holds a glass of merlot. No coconuts here. We sit down and order. Wine for me. Heineken for Ronnie (he never sways).

Vin fished with Ronnie earlier today. Vin landed one of the nine sailfish, then graciously declined to reel in any more than that. "I'll be here all winter," he says. "Let the other guys have a chance. Besides, who really wants to work that hard?"

Before he retired, Vin was the editor of *Outdoor Life* magazine, which gave him the opportunity to go on many fishing trips. He still contributes to the magazine; in fact, just last week, he published one of his most memorable stories, "So You Want to Buy a Charter Boat and Fish for Free? Yeah Right!" In the story, Vin laid bare the details of his purchase and sale — at a huge loss — of a fishing charter boat. "We figured out we were losing at least \$50 on every trip," Vin says. "My partner and I each put in \$100,000. At \$850 a trip, we could have skipped this nightmare and hired someone else's boat 235 times! Ah, live

and learn . . ."

I notice that Ronnie, who earlier shared with me his "brilliant idea" regarding our retirement fund and a charter boat, is all-too-involved in the crackers and fish dip.

"Want some?" he offers. I elect to be a good wife and not mention it to Vin.

The next evening, we return from a great day of fishing on the flats, the shallow waters bordering Islamorada. Ronnie is ecstatic after landing two enormous (one was 160 pounds!) prehistoric-looking Goliath groupers.

"Grouper?" I ask, when he lands the beast and struggles to hold it for a picture. "They're good to eat, right?" I ask, anticipating an evening at Squid Row or one of the restaurants in town that will cook your catch.

"Well, yeah," Ronnie says, as the guide helps him put the fish back in the water. "But the Goliaths are up to 80 years old. They're protected."

So, after a shower and a heavy dose of hydrocortisone on the many gashes the grouper left on his arms, legs and stomach, Ronnie is dressed in his favorite silk tropical print shirt.



WINED AND DINED: M.B. Roberts enjoys a drink on the deck of her rented houseboat as sunset hits the Upper Keys. Photos/Ronald C. Modra

IF YOU GO: ISLAMORADA

Lodging: Bud & Mary's Marina, P.O. Box 628, Mile Marker 79.8, Islamorada, FL 33036; 800-742-7945; www.budnmarys.com. Fishing charters, accommodations and dive shop.

Eating: Islamorada Fish Company, 81532 Overseas Highway, Islamorada, 800-258-2559; www.islamoradafishco.com. Seafood Market (next door).

■ Zane Grey Long Key Lounge (next to Islamorada Fish Company, upstairs inside Worldwide Sportsman).

■ Lazy Days, Mile Marker 79.9, Oceanside, 305-664-5256.

■ Lorelei Restaurant & Cabana Bar, 96 Madeira Road, Islamorada, 305-664-2692; www.loreleifloridakeys.com.

■ Morada Bay, 81600 Overseas Highway, Morada Bay, 305-664-0604.

■ Pierre's (next door), 305-664-3225.

■ Squid Row, 81901 Overseas Highway, Islamorada, 305-664-9865.



Staff graphic

— M.B. ROBERTS

"Come, mighty fisherman," I say, smiling. "Let's go find some young fish."

We arrive at Morada Bay just before sunset. The whitewashed, Key West-style bungalow has a wide porch with pastel painted tables and chairs and sits on a breathtaking chunk of white sandy beach, dotted with white Adirondack chairs and palm trees. The view of the bay is spectacular, especially at sunset.

Digging my feet into the cool sand, I close my eyes and imagine myself never moving from this spot.

When the sun hits the horizon, we move inside and sit at the bar, taking in the well-polished, vintage surfboards and decades-old black-and-white photos of California surfers and a video of '60s-era surfing films. I ask the bartender about the display of flags hanging behind the bar.

"They are sailing flags, I think," he says. "They belong to the owner. He's French."

Despite the casually elegant atmosphere, the menu is a little pricey (Sugar Cane Pink Skewered Shrimp, \$24), but the offerings are tasty if not in the normal American super-size portions. I ask if I can add shrimp to my house salad.

"I'm sorry," the bartender says. "The chef won't substitute. He's French."

Next door, just a few yards down the beach and through a gorgeous bougainvillea-lined walkway (turn left at the urn with the fresh rose petals floating in the water), is Pierre's, arguably the most upscale restaurant in Islamorada, also owned by Morada Bay's French proprietor.

Pierre's is almost too chic to be in the Keys. Just down the street sit places like Slimy's Raw Bar and Woody's, the adult entertainment club that warns patrons with a sign on the front door: "Adult Humor and dancers. If total nudity offends you, do not enter."

Pierre's is the anti-Woody's. Walk up the steps of its grand wraparound porch and enter a scene from *Out of Africa* with wicker furniture, overstuffed leather couches and slow-moving ceiling fans. We decide to sit at the

bar and check out the menu, featuring the likes of Hickory Smoked Free Range Buffalo Rib-eye with Foie Gras Yuca Cake, \$38, and Soy Lacquered Sea Bass, \$35.

The barkeep, a burly, 40-ish man dressed in khaki shorts and shirt, makes us feel at home, so we decide to order drinks and an appetizer. OK, we're too cheap to order a full meal. Still, the bar, officially named The Green Flash Lounge, is lively and friendly and I am pretending to be Hemingway's girlfriend as I sip my mojito and check out the black-and-white (I think I have identified a Keys theme here) pictures of robust people riding elephants and horses.

The next evening is our last in the Keys. There are dozens of terrific restaurants we could choose for our final fete.

"Hey!" Ronnie says. "The fleet's coming in . . ."

We sit on the back porch to watch the boats while we decide where to go.

"The Lorelei?" I ask. "Or Lazy Days is good. We could walk there."

Just then a GQ-handsome guy in shorts and a tank top climbs down the steps of an enormously sleek 50-foot yacht docked nearby and walks past us.

"You guys have the best seat in the house," he says.

"It's great here," Ronnie says, popping open a Heineken.

I go inside to pour a glass of wine and notice our neighbor, Paul, who works at the marina and lives on the houseboat next to ours, making his way down the dock.

"Paul, come have a beer with us!" I call out the window.

"Oh, I haven't had a drink in 20 years!" he says, laughing. "I could have water though."

Several years ago, Paul and his son were driving to Key West when their car broke down in front of the marina. Richard let him stay the night in one of his houseboats. Paul has been here ever since.

"Where you guys going to eat?" Paul asks.

"I don't know," Ronnie says. "We've got a few stone crab claws left in the fridge."

"Well, we wouldn't want to waste them," I say, settling into my chair. "Look. The sun's about to set."

M.B. Roberts' last story for Travel was on mountain biking in North Carolina. She lives in Nashville, Tenn.