



PLAYA LARGO

Key Largo, FL

By Kelly Magyarics

Perched just south of glitzy, showy South Beach and still a two-plus hour drive from anything-goes Key West, it's all too easy to keep heading south on Route 1 and completely pass over Key Largo. That travel strategy is a shame, though, as the town is truly a gem in the Florida Keys. And no resort better melds barefoot luxury with the area's laid-back vibe than Playa Largo Resort & Spa, an Autograph Collection Hotel.

The property, nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and Florida Bay on this narrow stretch of land, encapsulates Floribbean flair and old Florida charm, with 177 accommodations, many of which overlook the water or lush, tropical gardens. Rooms and suites come with a king or two queen beds, with or without a balcony; for more space to spread out, book one of the ten two-story villas, which feature back porches surrounded by flowers and foliage, upper decks and island-inspired furnishings. A sojourn in the



beach house offers the ultimate in luxury, which touts three master bedrooms, wrap-around balconies, a private pool and beach and a lawn to relax or host events from weddings to birthday parties.

Blessedly, this is not one of those resorts where you must awaken before dawn to stake out and claim available lounge chairs; there are always plenty of shady and sunny spots to be had on the deck next to the free-form, zero-entry pool. Treat yourself during your stay to a cabana, set up with loungers on the outside, and a sofa, table and chairs, television and storage on the inside; the Sandy Shores cabana package adds in niceties like a fruit platter, appetizers, infused water, lavender cooling towels, a pitcher of Sangria or bottle of bubbly and a beverage credit. If you are feeling peckish, order a basket of sweet local steamed shrimp or a mahi mahi sandwich with jicama slaw and Key lime aioli delivered right to your seat, and sip it with the Island Menth, a gin riff on a Mojito with muddled lime and cucumber. No matter what your vantage point on the poolscape, it's lots of fun to try to spot the the iguanas who have made the property



their home, either climbing up to or cozying into the leaves at the top of the palm trees, cooling off in the shallow water or even joining you on your chair for a little R&R.

If splashing in the saltwater is more your thing, step into the bay, which is tranquil any time of day. Swim, wade, grab a kayak, Hobiecat or paddleboard, take out a float





and nod off for an hour, or grab your friends and jump on the large tethered inflatable pillow just offshore. There's even a high-top table and Adirondack chairs for four in the water if you care to Froisé--all-day while keeping your feet wet. Just be sure to tear yourself away from the resort one day for at least the morning or afternoon to venture on an expedition to John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park--the first undersea park in the United States--or the adjacent Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Both offer some of the best snorkeling and scuba diving you'll find anywhere.

The less ambitious may opt for an afternoon at the spa, with a light-to-medium massage ("The Soothing Wave") or deep massage ("The Depths), with optional enhancements including hot stones, cold therapy cryosphere, aromatherapy, Moroccan oil body butter or hair mask to offset all that time spent in the sun.

For dinner, reserve a table by the water at the rustic and romantic Sol by the Sea, where you'll find fresh local catches like spicy conch fritters, and the catch of the day seared, grilled or blackened. The sleek Las Olas crudo and sushi bar next to the lobby serves up wahoo ceviche macerated in citrus, papaya, passion fruit and Key lime-infused pisco and tuna tartare with yuzu and avocado. La Marea is known for Mediterranean spins on local ingredients, like grilled whole snapper with kalamata olives, basil and garlic, or pistachio-crusting grouper with capers and heirloom tomatoes.

At sunset, sway the day away on one of the resort's unique tripod hammocks, whose clever metal frames let three of you relax and chat about plans for tomorrow just steps from the water. Each day comes to a close with an Eventide Ceremony, during which guests are treated to a cocktail of the day like a pineapple mojito and invited to write down a concern on a piece of brown parchment and toss it into a metal cauldron: "When you let go of expectations, the world becomes full of opportunities," a framed sign points out.

As the sun sets over Florida Bay, the cauldron is lit and set to float out to sea, taking guests' worries with it--a fitting way to usher in the evening in a locale that's utterly carefree.

