

END OF THE LINE

Simon Murie explores the warm water circumnavigation of Key West



There's something about Key West that pulls the heart strings and tugs the imagination. It's the most southerly point of the mainland USA, nestled in the Florida Keys, a collection of small islands drifting westwards from this state's southern tip. It is quite literally the end of the line as it marks the cessation of Highway US Route 1 on its journey down the US's eastern seaboard from Fort Kent, Maine on a journey of more than 2,300 miles. Its location lends it a frontier spirit and it has more than its fair share of drifters and people who just want to escape everyday life.

Key West and the rest of the Florida Keys sit on the divide between the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, the latter body of water being rougher and colder than the former.

It is also the nearest point (94 miles) between the US and Cuba, so has been at the ringside during the upheavals of the relationship between these politically misaligned powers. Indeed since the Cuban revolution in 1959, Key West, due to its geographic proximity, has received a steady stream of Cuban refugees.

Key West is also symbolic within marathon swimming as it's the site that hosted the arrival of both Susie Maroney's (with a shark cage) 1997 swim and Diana Nyad's controversial 2013 crossing from Cuba.

Closer to these shores and held annually since 4 July 1977, the 12.5 mile "Swim around Key West" has grown into a popular marathon event for locals, out-of-towners and foreigners alike. It was started by Anna Fugina who was recovering from a car accident and who swam for therapy. She wondered whether it was possible to swim around the whole island. She made it in 12 hours and 59 minutes, with no knowledge of the tides.

Since then with a better knowledge of tides and local conditions times have come down – so much so that the record time now stands at 3 hours and 31 minutes. More recently the race has been organised by Bill Welzien, an evangelist minister, who has lived in Key West since 1986. Welzien says: "In the first few decades, the number of swimmers was literally just a handful but recently demand has been big and last year we reached our limit of 85 solo participants by March. This year's race limit of 90 swimmers was reached in January, as well

Key facts

- Water Type: Salt
- Distance: 12½ miles
- Max Depth: 10 metres
- Water Temp: 27°C
- More info: swimaroundkeywest.com



YOU ARE QUITE LIKELY TO SWIM ACROSS TURTLES, CONCH SHELLS, THE LARGE TARPON FISH AND EVEN NURSE SHARKS

as the 10 teams of the two-person relay, so the signs are there that the race is gaining in popularity."

Welzien attributes the increasing popularity to a few reasons. "Key West has a certain mystique, certainly within the US. Also it's the start of the tropics and the water is a beautiful blue. The swim is quite unique in that you can see the bottom most of the way around and you are quite likely to swim across turtles, conch shells, the large tarpon fish and even nurse sharks."

Tabitha Thornhill Jones who competed in the 2013 event reminisces about the wildlife she spotted during the swim. "At mile three I could see the bottom. It was about 16 feet down and with a sandy bottom. Darker blue water started occurring and I saw some clear shapes of stingrays – three large ones, about as big as my own "wingspan". I also saw a small nurse shark swim over them."

Each swimmer has their own kayaker, which if required can be arranged locally. The course starts off from Smathers Beach on the south side of Key West and the route goes clockwise around the island. The race is organised close to either a full moon or a new moon, to maximise the benefit from the bigger spring tides and hence help push the swimmers round the course.

Traditionally the tide is at the most beneficial in the first and final quarters of the race.

The event is local and friendly and that aspect is stressed by the organisers. With small fields, special two and three person categories and earlier starts for slower swimmers, the event tries to be both all inclusive and personable at the same time. In fact, even the event medal is different. It's a medallion, no bigger than a 10p piece.

If you want a swim that is certainly away from the mainstream and quite literally the end of the line then the Swim Around Key West may well be for you. As Thornhill Jones concludes: "This water changed my life. Smathers Beach is the same beach Diana Nyad finished her Cuba - Florida swim on, the same finish buoy. This is healing water. I hope and pray for the opportunity and privilege to go back next year."

Simon Murie



Simon Murie is the founder of SwimTrek (swimtrek.com), the leading provider of open water swimming and coaching camps in the UK and overseas. He is a qualified swim coach with a solo crossing of the English Channel to his name. He is passionate about introducing people to the joys of open water swimming and to finding new swims.