



THE KEY TO MY HEART

They say no one is an island, but if I was an island, I'd want to be Key West. Gorgeous, creative and super queer, it's hard to visit and not fall irretrievably in love. Like so many travellers before me, I'm bewitched, besotted, totally bonkers for the "Conch Republic". Let me try and explain why.

For a start, I'm obsessed with Old Town, where the streets are lined with palm trees and candy-coloured 19th century homes that look like dollhouses. It's all so perfect you feel like you're on a film set. I swoon over the antique shutters, verandas and darling little "gingerbread mouldings". I'm told that the different designs in the wood lacework indicate the trade the residents had back in the day – ship's wheels for sailors and spindles for tailors. "Ooh, I'd love to live in that one there with the hearts!" I exclaim. I'm casually informed, "That was a brothel".

On every street I find something new to delight in – the rainbow zebra crossings, the 25 foot sculpture of a 1940s sailor smooching a nurse in seamed stockings, Judy Blume's bookshop (bookandbookskw.com). Yep, the legendary teen author lives in Key West and has a bookstore full of

ROXY BOURDILLON DISCOVERS WHY LGBT HOTSPOT KEY WEST, FLORIDA IS THE PERFECT PLACE FOR ROMANCE, RELAXATION AND BEING YOURSELF


Roxy flew with Delta from London Heathrow to Key West. Return flights start from £500 (delta.com). The trip was made possible with help from Florida Keys tourism (fla-keys.com) and Newman PR (newmanpr.com).

signed editions and personal recommendations. I'm so thrilled I can't help but shout out, "Are you there, Judy? It's me, lesbo!"

I take a selfie (ok, 100 selfies) with the Marilyn Monroe statue outside the enchantingly retro Tropic Cinema (tropiccinema.com). It's all so eminently Instagrammable. There's a "wow" moment waiting around every corner. Oh, and there are also these wild chickens that just sort of roam about, adding to the quirky, boho charm. Don't mind them. They're as laid-back as the rest of the island's inhabitants. Key West is so accepting of diversity, even its chooks are a protected species.

I decide the best way to explore is on two wheels. I take the Key Lime Bike Tour (keylimebiketours.com), perch my helmet atop my tropical hair corsage and pedal my lime green vehicle as slowly as possible without toppling onto the tarmac. The main thing keeping me going is the promise of a slice of key lime pie at the end – that and the dazzling views. Our tour guide Clint is a treasure trove of local anecdotes. He tells us he came to Key West after his partner died. The island nursed his soul back to life and he's never left. For so many, Key West

is a refuge, a restorative safe haven away from the hustle and bustle and bruising prejudice of everyday life. It's somewhere you can be yourself, find yourself and have a ball doing it.

You see, the sunshine isn't the only reason Key West feels like paradise. As the southernmost point of the US, the island's far enough away from the mainland to do its own thing and it's historically been open-minded. The official motto is "one human family" and since the early 20th century it's been a mecca for artists, writers and queer folk. Lesbian poet Elizabeth Bishop moved here in the 1930s and gay playwright Tennessee Williams made it his home in the 40s. Decades later, in Duval Street's Pink Triangle, you'll find many a gay bar. There's a permanent rainbow flag outside the town hall and there's even a dedicated Gay and Lesbian Tourism Centre (gaykeywestfl.com). Its number one travel tip: "If you can hold your liquor, you're good to go".

During my stay, my home is Alexander's LGBT Guesthouse (alexanderskeywest.com). It's all whitewashed wood, black and white vintage art prints and Frank Sinatra tunes by the pool. I haven't stayed at an LGBT hotel before and I love the

PHOTOS NAOMI DIXON, CREATIVE COMMONS