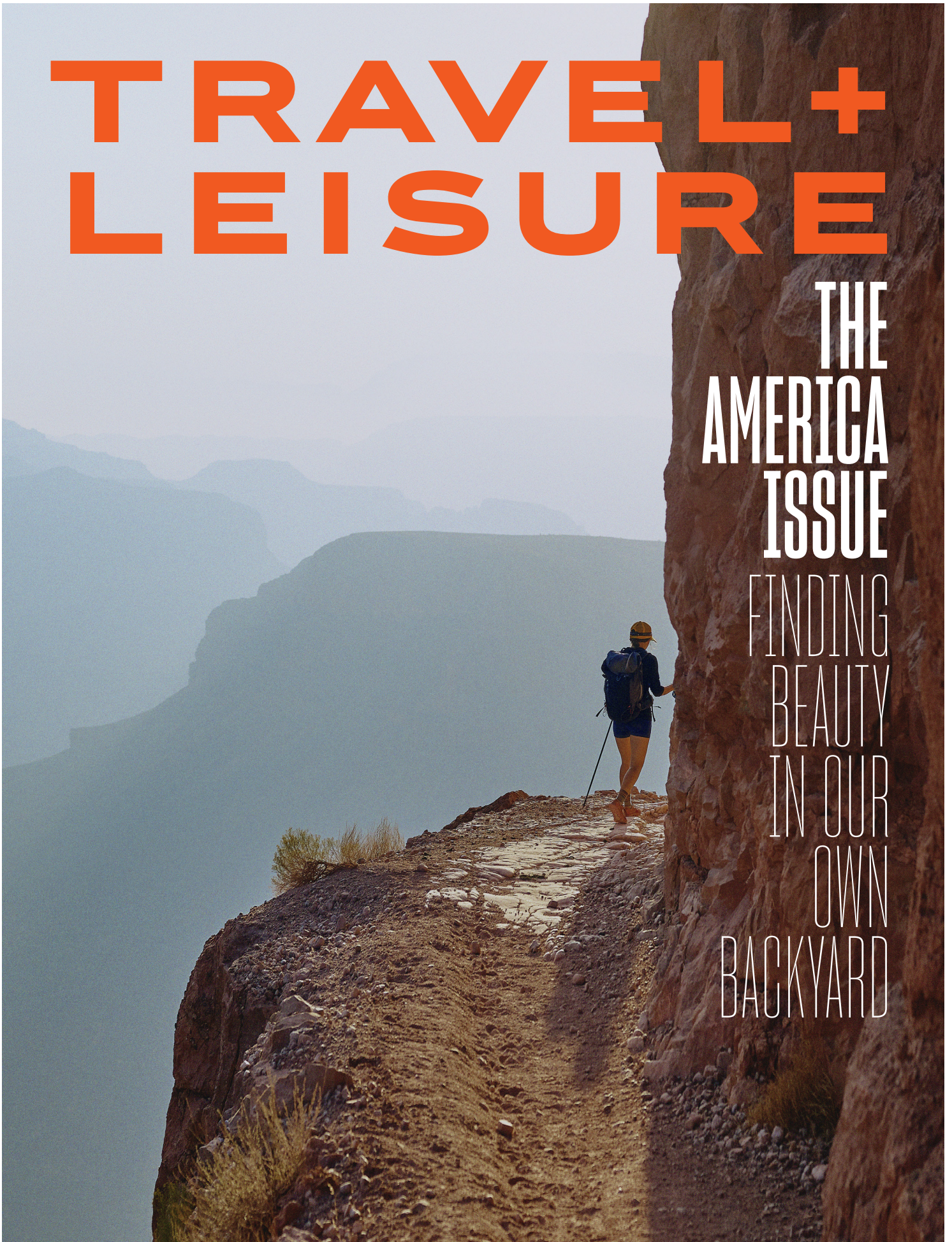


TRAVEL + LEISURE

THE
AMERICA
ISSUE

FINDING
BEAUTY
IN OUR
OWN
BACKYARD





Vacationers and vagabonds have long flocked to the Florida Keys in search of an escape from the cares of mainland life. Now the future of these islands may depend upon letting go of that castaway mindset—and confronting the influence of the outside world. On a road trip down the archipelago, **CHARLES GRAEBER** observes the fragile beauty of life in paradise.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROSE MARIE CROMWELL



◀
The private beach
at Little Palm
Island, in the
Lower Keys.

16

YOU'VE MADE the trip, you know the moment I'm talking about. Around 15 miles south of Miami, there's a point when the highways unspool and the horizon opens. You're driving up and over palmetto scrub, then estuary, then swamp. Then the land drops away

and suddenly, you're flying. On one side is the sunrise Atlantic; on the other it's the Gulf of Mexico, the sunset sea. In between lie the Florida Keys, a constellation of fragile, sugar-sand isles dissolving into the impossibly blue currents of the 24th parallel. This is the moment when most visitors—myself among them—like to hoot and holler and wave their arms out the sunroof.

Highway 1 connects some of the larger clumps of coral into a 165-mile road trip, but each of the 1,700-odd dots of sand is an island to itself, both timeless and transient. Every so often a storm blows through and changes the map; sometimes the water that birthed these islets claims them back. This is shifting, almost casual geography, and it sets the tone for travelers. Like tropical islands everywhere, the Florida Keys seduce the visitor with the promise of a blank slate. No passport is required to cross the causeway, but the moment you do, there's no doubt that you've left the rest of America behind.

My girlfriend, Gabrielle, and I have taken several trips to the Keys, enjoying vacations high and low. We've slept in national parks and 1950s motels, quaint B&Bs and posh private resorts. The price tags varied but the sunsets were universally spectacular. It's hard to go wrong. Low-pressure fun is the secret to any Keys trip, but ample time and a good budget don't hurt, either.

This time, work brought us to the islands. In the middle of February, we would spend nearly two weeks driving and diving and honky-tonking between a handful of the resorts that have opened—or reopened—their doors in recent years. Hurricane Irma blew through in 2017, and the hospitality scene had only just recovered. Storms have always raked this region, but in recent decades, higher temperatures and rising waters have made life at sea level even more precarious. The occasional rebuild has long been an accepted necessity,



*A suite at the newly reopened
Bungalows Key Largo. Opposite:
Mangrove trees at water's edge.*

►
*Cruiser bikes
available for
guests at
Bungalows
Key Largo.*



▼
*Local favorite
No Name Pub, on
Big Pine Key.*



▼
*Key deer, an
endangered
subspecies of
whitetail, live only
in the Lower Keys.*



but as storms become more frequent and the cycles of destruction spin faster, it's begun to feel a bit like trying to push back the tide.

So Gabrielle and I traded winter boots for flip-flops, packed up, and flew down. We had left New England for the Florida Keys. What could go wrong?

THE FIRST OF THE ISLANDS is the famous Key Largo, where billboard promises for Mrs. Mac's pies start just across the bridge. The original location of Mrs. Mac's Kitchen is a traditional south Florida wooden house, with license-plate walls and dollar-bill ceilings and a dedicated lunchtime crowd. "Make sure you mention the conch chowder," Gabrielle insisted as my table notes devolved into scribbles and happy stains. We loaded back into the car with a perfect Key lime pie and a bag of whipped topping in what our server called a "redneck cooler"—ice in a cardboard box. Now we needed a siesta.

Our bed awaited just up the road. At the end of a long shell drive we came to the Bungalows Key Largo, a 135-suite property that opened in 2019. A gate swung open like that scene in *King Kong*, and we entered a rain forest with more than 8,000 planted trees framing winding footpaths that led to numbered tiny-house bungalows and 1,000 feet of oceanfront. It was a surprise—an all-inclusive Eden just off the highway, and only an hour from Miami.



Sitting under the palms provided a postcard view of the great blue nothing—the iconic island panorama, at once brimming with life and color and gloriously empty. The ocean is the great equalizer here: it has no price tag, it is everywhere. To me, that's part of the Keys' appeal. This is a storied region and, in some stretches, an exceptionally wealthy and exclusive one, but it's hard to be too stuffy on a sandspit. Every so often the seas rise up and blow away all the pomp and pretension. Time and tide have always wiped the slate clean here, like footprints on a sandbar.

Cycles of destruction and rebuilding have left little trace of history, but for millennia these stretches of calcium carbonate were home to Indigenous tribes. More than 10,000 years ago, the Calusa and Tequesta peoples fished and oystered along the shores, leaving shell middens that predate Mesopotamia by more than 3,000 years. Later came claims by Spain, England, and finally the U.S., each bringing its own wave of rumrunners, pirates, scalawags, and politicians. The islands have technically been part of Florida since 1845, but they still retain a defiant, buccaneer air, one that draws treasure hunters and naturalists, sailors and drunks, artists and writers—and us. There's a reason people come here to get away, or to start over.

Richie Moretti started over here in the late 1970s. "I was lucky," he told me. We were standing with about 50 excited people and one 144-pound loggerhead sea turtle on Sombrero Beach, so Moretti had to shout above the crowd. "I came down and got involved with something bigger than me," he said. "And that saved my life."

Moretti didn't move to the Keys to start a sea turtle hospital. The way he tells it, he'd been a mechanic with money to spare and had come from New Jersey with his speedboat to rescue inner-tube refugees from Cuba like the ones he'd seen on the news. The Keys seduced him, and he decided to stay. He bought a chain of video stores and a motel next door to a strip club called Fannie's.

What the place needed, Moretti thought, was a tourist attraction. "The kids wanted to see something that looked like their cartoons," he said. In the 1980s, those cartoons were turtles—mutant ninja ones. Moretti took in a giant hawksbill that had been mauled in a fishing net and paid the vet bills; the next time a fisherman found an injured sea turtle, Moretti got that call, too. "They had nowhere else to take them," he explained, tugging his ponytail. "That's how it started."

Now the Turtle Hospital on Marathon Key is a legit research and veterinary facility with university affiliations. The old Fannie's space houses turtle-size medical imaging equipment and a surgical center where the stripper pole used to be. Tours start and end at the gift shop, which has more than paid for the care and rehab of the thousands of injured or sick chelonians that have come through the doors. So far, 1,500 have been released back into the wild. Most are the green or loggerhead variety—like the one on Sombrero Beach.

We watched as sheriff's deputies parted the crowd, giving hospital manager Bette Zirkelbach and four volunteers room to walk the rehabbed reptile to the high-tide line. The loggerhead had gained weight since the Coast Guard rescued her from a tangle of fishing nets. Hospital vets had saved her flipper, and now she was fat and healthy and raring to get home. The crowd cheered, the giant loggerhead paddled the sand, and in an instant she was in the surf, and gone. These turtles are endangered, but they've outlasted the dinosaurs. Even in a wetter, warmer future, my money is on the 200-million-year-old in the shell.

It had been a long 24 hours, but I had a job to do. That meant dinner, and a visit to the wood-paneled sanctuary of rum named for the Keys' most famous author and alcoholic. Hemingway's is the on-site saloon at Bungalows, and Jason, its charismatic head mixologist, quickly converts short-term resort guests into fanatic regulars. Gabrielle chatted with a private eye who teaches martial arts while I joked with his partner, a stand-up comedian and spirit medium. And so it went: Jason the barman mixed herbal infusions in his metallic maraca ("a Havana Spice Rack"); Marie the mystic gave me a

► *The oceanfront Isla Bella Beach Resort, in Marathon.*



◄ *A guest room at Little Palm Island.*



message from my recently deceased mother (she feels better now, thanks). Before we knew it, Gabrielle and I were riding the resort's free-range beach bikes between the palms in a giddy moonlit slalom.

We woke late to mid-morning sunlight through wooden blinds, well-rested but too late for breakfast. Outside, the palm trees were heavy with ripe coconuts. It only took a nice tree-maintenance guy with a ladder and a few swift whacks of a machete to release the cloudy liquid I know to be nature's own Gatorade.

THE FARTHER SOUTH you travel in the Keys, the funkier and saltier it gets. The dividing line between the Upper and Lower Keys is the Seven Mile Bridge. It's really only 6.79 miles, but that's long enough. From its apex, the boats below looked like grains of rice. Gabrielle pointed out our starboard window to a tiny island, windswept by Irma. "It's like a desert island in a *New Yorker* cartoon," she said. I imagined pacing its length, inventing captions.



The Keys are full of empty places like these, protected from development. The region also has several resorts that make maximal use of every inch of surface area that their island allows. Isla Bella is one of those: a sprawling, family-friendly 199-room complex with on-site restaurants and gift shops and charters and motorized water toys and multiple pools you can access with a bleep of your electronic wristband. The welcome packet includes a map, so you can find your way around.

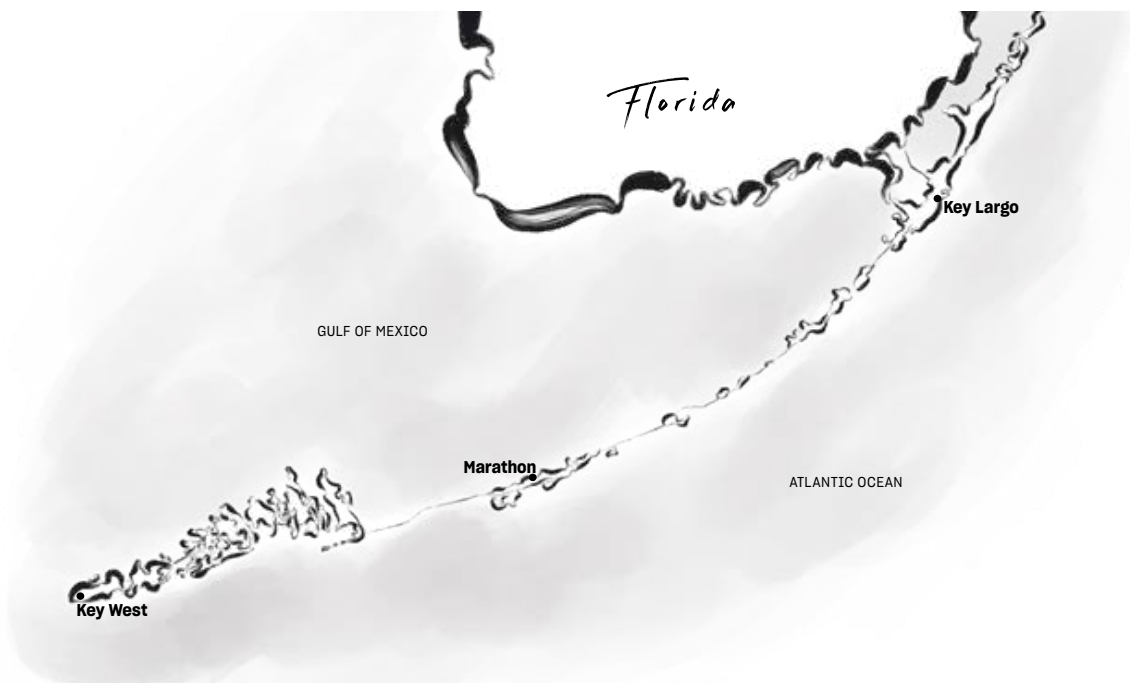
This was all-new construction, built on four feet of fill dirt and an RV campground that Hurricane Irma had washed away. The destruction had been extreme, though hardly unexpected. Such storms tear through every decade or so, shifting the landscape and depositing wrecks and treasure. Each time, Keys residents have built back, shrugging off the upheaval as the price of living in paradise.

The next morning I boarded a dive boat headed to Molasses Reef, in the National Marine Sanctuary. I suited up, checked my regulator, and jumped in, following the anchor

line 30 feet down. The currents teemed with graceful eagle rays and spotted moray eels, but the great boulder-like coral heads were pale and dead, useful only to the nurse sharks that slept in their shadows. Bone-white arms of staghorn and elkhorn corals lay sidelong, cracked and dusted with debris like the ruins of an ancient temple.

For eons these reefs protected the Keys, forming a living underwater wall that blunted the force of the big ocean rollers that would otherwise chip away at the islands. Now the reefs are dying. Warmer, more acidic oceans are lethal to the tiny symbiotic algae that give color and protection to the living polyps we call coral—a deadly process known as bleaching.

This is a global problem, but it hits close to the heart for residents of the Keys. When evidence suggested that common sunscreen ingredients might be toxic to the algae, or that boat anchors were trashing the coral below, even those for whom the term *environmentalist* was a slur were quick to change brands and behaviors. This wasn't



about red versus blue, or pickup versus Prius. The reef was too important to become a matter of politics.

But now a mysterious new plague has invaded. Scientists call it stony-coral tissue loss disease. Its cause is probably a bacterium; they don't yet know. But what's clear is that it kills the living soft tissue of the coral, leaving the calcium carbonate husks dead and empty. Since the disease appeared in 2014, it has wiped out more than 90 percent of all native Keys corals—what marine biologists call a “functional extinction.” Unless Keys locals work together, the reef will never recover.

Which is, to say the least, a major bummer—and a

much heavier truth than I expected to catch on a carefree Keys vacation. But when Gabrielle and I drove to Mote Marine Laboratory's research center on Summerland Key, we found an equally surprising bit of good news. Mote scientists had identified survivors among the bleached corals. They'd isolated the individuals capable of handling warmer and more acidic seas and implanted them into the dead reef. The corals they sowed are thriving—and reseeding the reef with hardy new polyps.

It's difficult to overstate the significance of a breakthrough method that could potentially reestablish generations of coral mass in the coming months and years.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY



If it works, the decaying coral deserts will grow and bloom again. And that's not just a feel-good story for coral. It also impacts everyone who cares about these islands. If the Keys are to survive, the reefs must thrive.

LITTLE PALM ISLAND Resort & Spa knows about rebuilding. It bounced back after 120-mile-an-hour winds and a nine-foot storm surge destroyed the just-refurbished resort in 1998, only to be hit by 130-mile-an-hour winds from Hurricane Irma in September 2017. The beaches shifted, but the four-acre island remained, and so the resort was built back again, finally reopening in early March 2020.

Road-Tripping the Keys

Where to Stay

Bungalows Key Largo

This resort has stand-alone lodgings, many with outdoor ocean-view tubs. *bungalowskeylargo.com*; from \$449 per person, all-inclusive.

Isla Bella Beach Resort

Find an abundance of watersports and family-friendly activities at this 24-acre complex. *islabellabeachresort.com*; doubles from \$319.

Little Palm Island

For over-the-top luxury, this private-island retreat is unbeatable. *littlepalmisland.com*; suites from \$2,490.

◀ A loggerhead at the Turtle Hospital. Far left: Coral samples at Mote Marine Laboratory's Elizabeth Moore International Center for Coral Reef Research & Restoration.

Where to Eat

Mrs. Mac's Kitchen

An unpretentious stalwart with excellent conch chowder and Key lime pie to write home about. *mrsmacskitchen.com*; entrées \$10–\$43.

No Name Pub

This tucked-away spot has been a Keys institution since 1936. *nonamepub.com*; entrées \$12–\$24.

What to See

Mote Marine Laboratory

The Keys outpost of this nonprofit focuses on coral research. Book the Reef Revival program for a facility tour and a dive visit to Mote's underwater nursery. *mote.org*.

Turtle Hospital

Learn about sea turtle rescue and rehab efforts and feed the residents at this facility in Marathon. *turtlehospital.org*.

Gabrielle and I had several days to see the results.

If the Keys are a world away from mainland reality, and the Lower Keys another world away from that, Little Palm Island is one world further—a resort with a Key of its own, and the only private-island getaway in the United States. Much has been written about this adults-only spot, and perhaps that's the best way to describe it: Little Palm Island is the sort of place that gets written about.

We arrived by a vintage motor yacht from the reception lounge on neighboring Little Torch Key, and from that moment on, we allowed ourselves to drift. After a few days some pelicans became familiars, and several of the herons got names. We never did decide whether it was best to have breakfast delivered to our deck or our sunroom, or if we should abandon pretense and eat under the canopy of the four-poster bed, but we did order late dessert and wine to be brought by after dinner, when we'd watch the trees turn to silhouettes and the moonshine run out over the open sea.

In the afternoons, we'd wander to the pool and the bar beside it to consider lunch, or paddle to explore the tidal streams and the flotsam of sponges and conch shells of the island next door. Later we would return, sunbaked and in need of a nap, to rinse and rest and rise again. We'd dress for dinner and make our way to a table on the western tip of the island, where each night the sandbar met the tide and the sun met the sea. It was only a few days, but we allowed ourselves to get lost in them. It's easy to do at Little Palm.

And then, on our last day, the world came to us.

It was just before cocktail hour. Two men in sail-rigged kayaks had arrived from the Lower Keys and beached on the sandbar where Gabrielle and I were hunting for sand dollars. We got to talking. I forget what they said exactly, the joke—maybe something involving bleach, maybe it was an elbow tap instead of a handshake. But the point was made. In the real world, the pandemic had arrived. I had not expected the fourth horseman of the apocalypse to arrive smoking a Kool and carrying a tie-dyed fanny pack. But in the back of my mind, somehow, I knew. We both did.

We had allowed ourselves not to think of it for a while, to focus on this turtle, that bird, that sunset. For nearly two weeks we had put off worrying. But finally it was too late to ignore.

Escape from worry is the ultimate luxury. But ignore it long enough and, eventually, it catches up with you. Those who call these Keys home have learned that pretty literally. They're not escaping; they have built their lives there. And so they joined forces—divers and fishermen, rednecks and eggheads, wealthy and broke—and are working together to fix the reef, and to save their home, and ours.

It's not a perfect parallel to our current global problem, but it's hopeful, and I'll take it. We've weathered storms before. We'll come together, fix this, and build back. Maybe then we will once again have the luxury of unworried sleep. I'm confident these coral islands will be here when we do. ♦