



Chesapeake Paddler



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Paddling the Keys photo by BurnhamGuides.com

Paddling in Paradise by Bill and Mary Burnham

We are paddling offshore of Big Pine Key in the Lower Florida Keys. Calm water reflects back the azure sky, forming a Caribbean-like mirage. Beneath our hulls, a blue-green field of water frames darker shapes. The surface ripples like some giant's taut muscular skin. With each stroke, we fall into a living tapestry of sky and water.

Everyday can be extraordinary in the Keys. In a kayak you can delve deep into tunneled mangrove creeks where starfish and sponges cling to red mangrove roots. Vast shallow flats alive with nurse sharks, rays and an occasional sea turtle are a virtual aquarium beneath our boats. These shallow tropical waters possess wonders unmatched in the continental United States.

US Route 1 and 40-some bridges link the 100-miles of coral rock islands. Diving and fishing are big draws here, but we prefer to get off the highway onto the Florida Keys Overseas Paddling Trail, for a day trip, and overnight on a primitive island, or our annual 100-mile exodus from Key Largo to Key West.

From a boat you can see up close what you can't in a car—both natural and manmade. It's a treat to paddle beneath the spandrel arches of Henry Flagler's century-old bridges, built to create

a railroad link between Miami and Key West. One of the best examples is the famous Seven-Mile Bridge. Launch from Marathon, take a rest-stop on historic Pigeon Key, an overnight on a primitive island campsite.

Another place you can't get in a car is the Lower Keys Backcountry, made up of more than 200,000 acres of water and small islands. Birding is phenomenal

in this vital nesting habitat for the namesake of the Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge. Royal terns group on sandbars, intermingled with laughing gulls and the odd oystercatcher. A host of herons and



Sunset paddle photo by burnhamguides.com



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Paddling in Paradise (Continued from page 1)

egrets work the flats, while osprey and frigate birds soar high overhead. If you're lucky, a pair of bright pink roseate spoonbill might pass by.

Lodging, dining

Camping is on a handful of primitive islands, state parks and commercial campgrounds. From mom-and-pop motels, funky tiki bars to luxurious resorts, there are literally dozens of establishments that don't mind you launching your kayak or pulling up on their beach in wet shorts and sandy feet.

With the combination of tropical waters, wildlife and habitat, intriguing history and lively places to fuel up on seafood and cold beer, the Keys truly are a paddler's paradise.

CPA Members Bill and Mary Burnham are kayak guides on the Eastern Shore of Virginia (see below). January through March they head south to lead overnight kayak expeditions from the pages of their *Florida Keys Paddling Atlas*.

www.BurnhamGuides.com .



Island camping photo by BurnhamGuides.com



Paddle with the Authors of the *Florida Keys Paddling Atlas*
Overnight expeditions Key Largo to Key West, January-April 2011
www.BurnhamGuides.com

Mary Burnham
305-240-0650
Travel Writer at www.BurnhamVirginia.com
Florida Keys Kayaking: www.BurnhamGuides.com
Eastern Shore of VA: www.SouthEastExpeditions.com

