

FLORIDA WAYPOINTS
24° 53.893' N / 80° 42.330' W



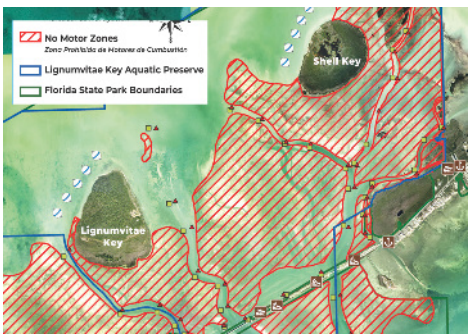
Florida Keys, Unabridged

The flats here are world-famous for bonefish. This would be a small one by local standards.

David Reilly



Lignumvitae bloom. Above: writer and barracuda. Below: No-motor zone detail (good paddling or poling).



Florida DEP

Lignumvitae and Shell keys are a couple of must-know spots near Islamorada.

BY CHRIS DUERKSEN

The Spanish and the British took turns occupying Lignumvitae Key in the 1700 and 1800s, and the namesake trees that covered the key were cut and exported to Europe. The incredible density, strength, and self-lubricating properties of lignumvitae lumber made it a hot commodity. It was used in key parts of ships like propeller shafts and other products like cricket balls, British police truncheons (ouch!), mortars and pestles, clock gears, and fishing rods. Later, it even was used in parts of the first U.S. nuke sub and the upper portion of Pete Seeger's banjo.

In 1919, a wealthy owner of a chemical company named Matheson bought the entire island. He built a beautiful coral rock home that survived the devastating 1935 hurricane and now serves as the park visitor center. Proposals were made in the 1960s to build a causeway to the key and develop it, but citizen protests led the state to purchase the island in 1971 and create a state botanical park.

Nearby Shell Key, about two miles to the northeast, is well-known bonefish flats. There is no development on the island, and visitors are not allowed to set foot on shore of this bird sanctuary. Like Lignumvitae Key, angling is a moveable feast on the surrounding seagrass meadows and mangrove-studded shorelines.

Lignumvitae and Shell keys are reachable only by private craft such as skiffs

or kayaks or, in the case of Lignumvitae, state-approved tour boats. To protect the extensive seagrass—over 8,000 acres—the park is implementing an ambitious program that features an extensive no-internal-combustion motor (NICM) zone. In addition, it includes a prop scar repair program, upgraded navigational markers and mooring buoys. Where use of internal combustion engines is forbidden, if the engine is turned off and tilted up, access is allowed with electric trolling motor or pushpole. Of course, kayaks, canoes, and other self-propelled watercraft are welcome. The paddle out is only about a mile from several informal launches on US Highway 1. Safe Harbor Angler House and other marinas on nearby Islamorada also provide access.

Barracuda love to hide on the edges of potholes and ambush prey. Bonefish roam the area on incoming tides, and feisty, but modest-sized, snapper are abundant near the shorelines. Jacks are common in the deeper water. Channels that lace the area are home to tarpon. It's a fun place to fish.

On a recent trip to Shell Key, fishing buddy Steve Keeble met me on the south side. I focused on the potholes for barracuda, while Steve worked the shoreline with a white Gulp! Swimming Mullet, catching snapper and quickly jumping a tarpon. At the northeast corner of the

key where the water is deeper, I spotted a couple of 3-foot barracuda. I twisted to cast, but the motion caught their eyes and they headed to the next county.

Then we reached a cove wall-to-wall with fish. Ten casts, ten hits, half-dozen 'cudas released. Not bad! FS

IF YOU GO

LOCATION/LAUNCHES: Near Mile Marker 79 on US 1 just southwest of Islamorada. A limited number of informal launches are available for kayaks and other non-motor craft along the highway.

RAMPS/BAIT & TACKLE SHOPS

- Safe Harbor Angler House, 80500 Overseas Highway, Islamorada (305-664-5247)
- Bud N' Mary's, 79851 Overseas Highway (305-664-2461)

- Florida Keys Outfitters, 81219 Overseas Highway (305-664-5423)

BOAT RENTALS

- Bud N' Mary's (above)
- Sand Dollar Boat Rentals, 80015 Overseas Highway (305-990-5207)

ACCOMMODATIONS & DINING

- Safe Harbor Angler House (above)
- Sun Outdoors Islamorada RV Park, 87395 Old Highway 1 (844-728-3617)
- Hungry Tarpon Restaurant, Robbie's of Islamorada, 77522 Overseas Highway (305-664-0535)
- Square Grouper Islamorada, 80460 Overseas Highway (786-901-5678)

