

# KEY PLAYER

*Written by Jeffrey Cohen*

In the sun-drenched Florida Keys, where business is often conducted during sport fishing excursions or over Rum Runners, and relaxation is the order of the day, visitors are encouraged to remove their watches, silence their cellphones, slow down, grab something cold and bask in the leisurely pace of “island time.”

Surrounded by lush lawns studded with palm trees, Amara Cay Resort boasts an idyllic location toward the top of the island chain in Islamorada. The sport fishing capital of the world, Islamorada may be the only place on the planet where it’s possible to catch a sailfish offshore and pursue bonefish, tarpon and snook in the backcountry, all in the same day. Also a globally renowned mecca for scuba diving, enthusiasts from all over the world visit the region to explore the extraordinary reef line and teeming shoals.

Here in the Keys, bracing whiffs of fresh ocean air float in on gentle breezes, the steady crash of breakers providing a soothing background of white noise. At Amara Cay Resort, a relaxed attitude pervades every interaction, establishing this as a destination steeped in all the comforts of the carefree Keys lifestyle. In a nutshell (or perhaps a conch shell?), this is laid-back luxury at its best.

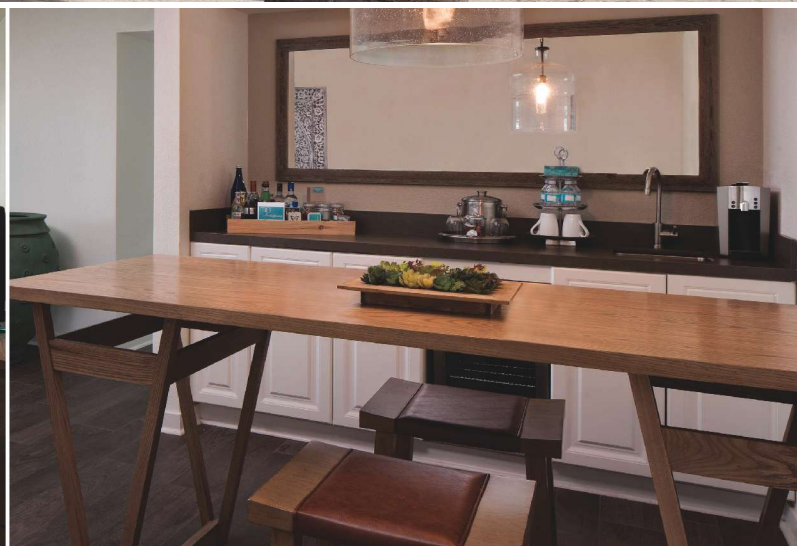
Part of a small family of resorts that includes La Siesta Resort and Marina, Pelican Cove Resort and Marina, and Postcard Inn Beach Resort and Marina (a complimentary shuttle runs between the four properties), Amara Cay welcomes guests with warm hospitality. Upon arrival, the frenetic rush of daily

life begins to slow to a comfortable amble. Time begins to stretch out. On the first day of our visit, a manager greeted us with a smile and a “you’re in the Keys now, so go ahead and slow down” explanation that assured us everything was going to be just fine for the next several days.

From Miami, Islamorada lies about 80 miles due south along a spectacular Overseas Highway stretch of U.S. Route 1, the two-lane strand that bisects the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico all the way to Key West, setting the scene for a picturesque journey on the approach to the islands. In keeping with the leisurely pace of life here, traffic moves like molasses, but with scenery like this, who cares?

Recently, our kids graciously decided that it would be okay for my wife and I to join them for a few days of leisurely family bonding in lieu of a more raucous spring break. An early morning flight to Miami had us arriving at the resort just in time to catch the tail end of a poolside Sunday brunch at Sparrow Rum Bar & Grill, one of two on-site restaurants. My wife and I enjoyed the ahi tacos and a Sparrow burger garnished with jerk slaw, all the while easing into island time with a couple restorative rum-based cocktails. The kids, meanwhile, cooled their heels after the long (for them) trip, bouncing to the beat of music and a poolside DJ. After lunch, the four of us further immersed ourselves in the local spirit with a long-awaited dip in the pool and the ocean.













Boasting stunning views of the ever-present aquamarine water and swaying palm trees, our luxurious suite was so close to the beach, you could almost feel sand in your toes just stepping out of bed. Airy, spacious and appropriately decorated in subdued maritime shades, the room's tonal palette beautifully accentuated the unrivalled natural beachscape just outside the windows.

With our family's wide-ranging spectrum of tastes and appetites, we were particularly impressed with Oltremare, where gracious servers and staff capably handled our various requests at breakfast and again at dinner. Offering delicious traditional and continental breakfasts, along with bar bites in the evenings, the eatery infuses classic Italian cuisine with a tropical twist.

And speaking of diverse tastes, our children couldn't be much different in temperament: the responsible, serious sixth-grader who did homework on the flight down vs. the rambunctious, happy-go-lucky 9-year-old who can't remember whether he left his on the plane or under his bed. In spite of their differences, however, both found a way to make the necessary compromises to get along for a fun vacation, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves playing ping pong, feeding tarpon by hand, kayaking, snorkeling and biking past various locations used in the southern gothic Netflix thriller "Bloodline."

Sunsets are sacrosanct in these parts, and locals and guests alike take viewing opportunities very seriously. To that end, the Tiki Bar at Postcard Inn does it right with a nightly Conch Sunset Celebration, a grown-up playground featuring cocktails, outdoor games and festivities. You might even glimpse a few manatees frolicking around in the marina if you're lucky. We followed up this lively evening fête with dinner at Ciao Hound, the resort's casual-chic Italian pizza kitchen under the direction of Chef Trevor Scott. Charming and easygoing, this skilled kitchen leader has a natural flair for Italian cuisine — Ciao Hound specialties include pan-seared Florida shrimp with creamy polenta, grilled mahi-mahi puttanesca and Tuscan sirloin steak. Showy plates featuring messages written in balsamic vinegar are gently doused in olive oil to encourage dipping with the tender house-made focaccia, perfectly prepared pastas are made in house and desserts are exquisite. (Don't worry, you can always swim off any extra calories.)

All told, Amara Cay Resort offers more than enough amenities and activities to keep families and couples entertained in a blissful beach setting.

Just leave your watch and day planner at home. **sl**

For more information, visit [amaracayresort.com](http://amaracayresort.com).