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FROM ATLANTA TO ... LITTLE PALM ISLAND, FLA.

Little Palm Island like the Florida tropics, only cooler

Follow in the footsteps of Truman, JFK on the island's quiet shores

By ANNE Z. COOKE, STEVE HAGGERTY

For the Journal-Constitution
Sunday, December 14, 2008

The 250 tall coconut palms swaying in the breeze are from Jamaica. The thatch-roofed guest bungalows on stilts are pure South Pacific, although the palm-fronds were hand-woven by weavers from Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

The wicker chairs were made in Guatemala and the hand-glazed bathroom tiles are Mexican. Even the island's telephone booth is a poseur. Sixty years ago, the painted gray shack was the outhouse where former President Harry Truman weighed matters of state during annual fishing vacations.

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STEVE HAGGERTY/Special

The palm-thatched bungalows of Little Palm Island in the Florida Keys offer luxurious getaways that seem far from 'civilization.'

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Harry Truman liked to fish on the island when it was sleepy and undeveloped. But John F. Kennedy's 1962 visit led to tourism.

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In fact, things are seldom as they seem on Little Palm Island resort in the Florida Keys. For a mere 5 1/2-acre bit of limestone, Little Palm Island has demonstrated a magnetic appeal that dates back to the days when fishermen first noticed that the island stays 10 degrees cooler than the mainland.

Today its major attraction is a luxury hideaway for just 60 people who want to get away - really get away - from their pressure-cooker lives.

Luxury is key

Little Palm's 14 bungalows, divided into 28 one-bedroom suites, are arranged village-style on the island, shaded by palm fronds and garlanded by lush landscaping. Most look out on the Atlantic Ocean; others have views of Newfound Harbor. Each has a private entrance, patio and an outdoor shower, with a plantation-themed living room and bedroom, with antique chests, wicker chairs, four-poster net-draped beds and plantation shutters.

Television and telephones are conspicuously absent, and the island's regulars like it that way. You can use your cellphone, but only in your room. The bungalows do have other essential comforts, including mini-bars stocked with (free) sodas and fruit juice, espresso makers and ceiling fans.

The Dining Room serves three meals daily, on tables inside or al fresco on the deck. If you're celebrating an anniversary, ask for a candlelit table set up on the sand, where gentle waves will lap around your toes. The SpaTerre is headquarters for the resort's daily yoga and reiki classes.

Moment in the sun

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If you can tear yourself away from Little Palm Island's sandy beach, there's a reef for snorkeling.

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Little Torch Key near Little Palm Island. Little Palm has all the charm of the tropics but is cooler than the mainland.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Fly to Miami and drive south on the Florida Turnpike to U.S.

1. Continue 120 miles to Little Torch Key, turn left on Pirates Road and left into the Little Palm Island parking lot where you check in and take a boat to the resort.

Reservations: The basic plan for two in a bungalow (including full breakfast, non-alcoholic beverages, water sports equipment and fitness center) ranges from \$595 to \$795 per day. Inclusive plans that provide three meals a day are available, as are off-season packages. The resort has a strict cancellation policy; read the fine print. 800-438-5678, www.littlepalmisland.com.

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A highlight of a visit to this faraway corner is a day trip to the Content Keys, says resort spokeswoman Susan Howarth.

"It's a must-do trip," says Howarth. "Most people have never heard of the Contents because they can't see them from the highway. But these tiny islets are what the Keys are all about. They're uninhabited and still unspoiled, with beautiful sand beaches, and nobody else around. You can take a picnic lunch and spend the day in complete seclusion, bird-watching or snorkeling. And it's a 20-minute boat ride."

Little Palm Island, too, has its own perfect-10 sand beach and reef for swimming or snorkeling. And there are water toys to play with, free to guests: kayaks, two-man Hobie Cats, canoes and water bikes on pontoons. The resort's five motor launches, docked on the Newfound Harbor side of the island, offer sunset sailings, take sightseeing tours through the back country or take anglers out to fish, a popular sport in these warm waters.

The outdoor swimming pool, palm-shaded pool deck and the thatched poolside bar are a stone's throw from the beach.

Water all around

Little Palm Island's first-class dive shop, a PADI center staffed with experienced captains and dive instructors, operates day and night dives off Looe Key Reef in the Florida Keys Marine Sanctuary. Expert divers can explore a sunken freighter, at 120 feet.

Larger watercraft, as well as guests who arrive by private yacht, moor their boats at the Sunset Dock in the deep water channel on the west side of the island. This is also where Little Palm's motor launch, M.S. Escape, picks up and delivers resort guests from the reception center, a 3-mile boat ride away in Little Torch Key. It runs every hour on the half hour, and ferry trips continue until late evening to accommodate guests who've spent the day off-island, sightseeing in the Keys.

Little Palm Island gets its fresh water, a scarce commodity in this archipelago, from the mainland thanks to hard-driving businessman Joseph Kennedy, the father of the late President John F. Kennedy.

When the producers of the movie "PT 109," the story of JFK's wartime service in the South Pacific, were scouting for film locations in 1961, the island's sandy beach and graceful coconut palms caught their attention.

But when Joe Kennedy heard that his son, who visited the site in 1962 during filming, had to endure the constant rumbling of portable electric generators, he bullied the state into installing public utilities. That turned the island into prime real estate. Twenty years later, a group of investors bought the island, spent \$8.3 million building the resort and opened it to the public.

The rest is history.

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