

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

FLORIDA

KEY SPOT TO RELAX

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Walk into the lobby of the new Playa Largo Resort & Spa on Key Largo, and they'll immediately put a pineapple mojito into your hands. This will accomplish two things: It will quickly readjust your attitude, softening the memory of your flight to Miami and the hour-and-a-half ride to the island, and it will give you something to sip as you loll on a waterside hammock. (Those hammocks! You will spend some time hammock-hopping for sure.)

As you take in the inviting white-and-aqua scene of pool, cabanas, and pool bar, you'll notice something wonderful: There's an actual beach out there. As veteran Key-goers know, beaches are a rarity on the islands. Playa Largo boasts a lovely little slice of powdery sand along Florida Bay. In the distance: the green dots of nearby islets. An eco-friendly trip on a zodiac (easy to book through the resort) will give you access to the tangle-y mangrove tunnels that are home to iguanas, alligators, manatees, and abundant bird life. You'll slip into the waters of Everglades National Park and marvel at the solitude. The bustle of the Overseas Highway — and the crazy scene of Key West at the end of the road — will seem very far away.

Back at the resort, one of the Auto-graph Collection Hotels, you'll discover civilized pleasures. Among the four on-site dining venues, the signature spot is La Marea. Sit indoors or outdoors (along one of the LED-lit fountains) and dig into a rib eye steak aged 21 days, or a meltingly rare tower of yellow-fin tuna. The most memorable dining experience here, in our opin-

ion, is at Las Olas, the lobby bar. There's tropical sushi, hard to resist, but the real star is the selection of ceviches (try the black grouper one, with just the right amount of kick), perfectly paired with a pisco sour.

Hard to believe this spot was once the site of an RV park. Happily, swathes of greenery were spared during construction, sprouting alongside the four towers that house 144 guest rooms and suites. The resort also offers 10 bi-level bungalows and a 4,950-square-foot three-bedroom beach house. All of the rooms are similar in décor and amenities, an easy-going look of soft beachy tones, porcelain tile flooring, luxury bedding, and a 48-inch entertainment panel for TV and streaming movies. Interactive iPads enable guests to communicate with staff, arrange housekeeping, make restaurant reservations, and keep track of the outdoor temperature (which will definitely be higher than what you left behind in Boston.)

Besides lolling in a hammock and nibbling seafood, you'll happily spend your time in the Ocean Spa getting a beach-inspired treatment (sea mud mani-pedi, anyone?), hooking up with a boat or paddleboard at the watersports area, meandering the nature trail, or perhaps exploring nearby attractions like John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. Those white snowflake-like things you see underwater? They're "upside-down" (Cassiopea) jellyfish. Happily, actual snowflakes are very far away.

PLAYA LARGO RESORT & SPA 9745 Overseas Highway, Key Largo, Fla.; 305-853-1001; www.PlayaLargoResort.com. Room rates (during high season, December-April) from \$469.



HERE

MEDITERRANEAN COOKING SECRETS

Taste the flavors of the world at Trade Secrets, a monthly Sunday cooking class that journeys through the Mediterranean. Offered by James Beard Award-winning chef Jody Adams at her Boston restaurant TRADE, the debut class features foods of Greece (Jan. 15) followed by Italy (Feb. 12), France (March 19) and Spain (April 23). The intimate classes feature welcoming coffee and scones followed by Adams teaching her tricks of the trade. After the hands-on cooking class, guests can enjoy a three-course lunch with wine pairings and depart with printed recipe cards to re-create the experience at home. No passport required! 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Space is limited so reservations are required. \$150 per person. 617-451-1234, www.eventbrite.com/e/trade-secrets-cooking-classes-with-chef-jody-adams-tickets-29398551860



MAINE CRAFT BEER FEST

The second annual Bar Harbor Winter Beer Fest kicks off at the Atlantic Brewing Company's 10-acre farm (Jan. 14; 11 a.m.-4 p.m.). In addition to the brew company's own creations, the festival will feature seven craft brewers from Maine including Geaghan Brothers, Orono, Dirigo, and more. The event will also include food vendors, games (keg stacking relay, anyone?), photo booth, live music from local bands, and an author talk by Josh

Christie, a Maine beer expert. Much of the festival will take place outside but warming stations are certain to keep you toasty warm. \$20 ticket includes keepsake tasting glass and unlimited samples of the craft brews; \$10 for designated drivers. Children under 10 are free. A shuttle service will run from The Village Green in downtown Bar Harbor to the brewery with a stop at the Atlantic Oceanside Hotel. First snow date is Jan. 15, second snow date is Jan. 21. www.barharborinfo.com/Events/Bar-Harbor-Winter-Beer-Fest.aspx

THERE

SOAR ABOVE THE CLOUD FOREST IN ECUADOR

Travelers who would rather float through trees than trek beneath them can do so aboard the new Dragonfly cable ride at Mashpi Lodge, an award-winning eco-lodge surrounded by 3,200 acres of Andean cloud forest in Ecuador. After a 10-minute walk from the lodge, up to four guests and a guide can experience the beauty of nature along the 1.2-mile open-air journey above the Mashpi Rainforest Biodiversity Reserve, spotting birds and animals in the tree branches, passing above rivers and waterfalls, slipping in and out of misty clouds, and taking in stunning views of greenery all around. A round-trip experience lasts approximately two hours; a station at the half-way point is available for embarkation

and disembarkation. Rates for two from \$1,170 per night, includes shared transfer from/to Quito; all meals and soft drinks; activities within the reserve with bilingual guides; use of rubber boots and rain ponchos; Wi-Fi. www.mashpilodge.com

BARVARIAN TOUR WITH NOVELIST JENNA BLUM

Have you ever read a novel and wanted to chat with the author, or visit the destinations described in the story? Adventures by the Book offers opportunities for readers to do just that. A new tour, Bavarian Adventure by the Book (below), features bestselling author Jenna Blum leading guests through locations that inspired her New York Times bestseller, "Those Who Save Us." Tour historic cities in Germany and Austria, including visits to historic sights such as Neuschwanstein Castle, Dachau Concentration Camp, and the birthplace of Mozart, as well as lesser-known spots such as a little bakery featured in the book. In-

cludes 10-nights lodging in seven cities, all land transportation, local guides, daily breakfast, dinner concert in Salzburg, signed copy of "Those Who Save Us," and more. April 30-May 11. Limited to 20 guests. \$4,495 per person double occupancy; \$875 single supplement. 619-300-2532, adventuresbythebook.com/bavarianadventure

EVERYWHERE

SMALL SPEAKERS WITH BIG SOUND Soundcast, the high-performance wireless audio company, has debuted a small-yet-rugged take-anywhere travel speaker with stunning sound capacity. The VG1 features dual aluminum drivers and weighted rear-firing passive radiators that provide rich audio with real bass response for immersive sound. Streams your favorite music or music service from your mobile device via Bluetooth hi-def AAC and aptX codecs. Or plug in any audio



source via 3.5mm mini jack. Includes rechargeable internal battery with up to 15 hours of play time and external AC power supply. Shock resistant and waterproof. Perfect for hiking, camping, the beach, or any on-the-road destination. \$149. www.gosoundcast.com/collections/wireless-speakers/products/vg1

TRAVEL PILLOW FOR KIDS

Traveling long distances can be tough on your child's sleep schedule. The Sneek travel pillow (above) by BumbleBum helps kiddos sleep in comfort — on a plane, bus, or in a car — by providing head and neck support with microbead-filled pillow pods. Pillow attaches to the headrest with a Velcro strap that allows the head to rest without jerking about. Features a stash pocket to store small items, like an mp3 player or your child's favorite toy. \$14.99. 800-969-6586, www.bumblebum.co/us/product/sneck/

