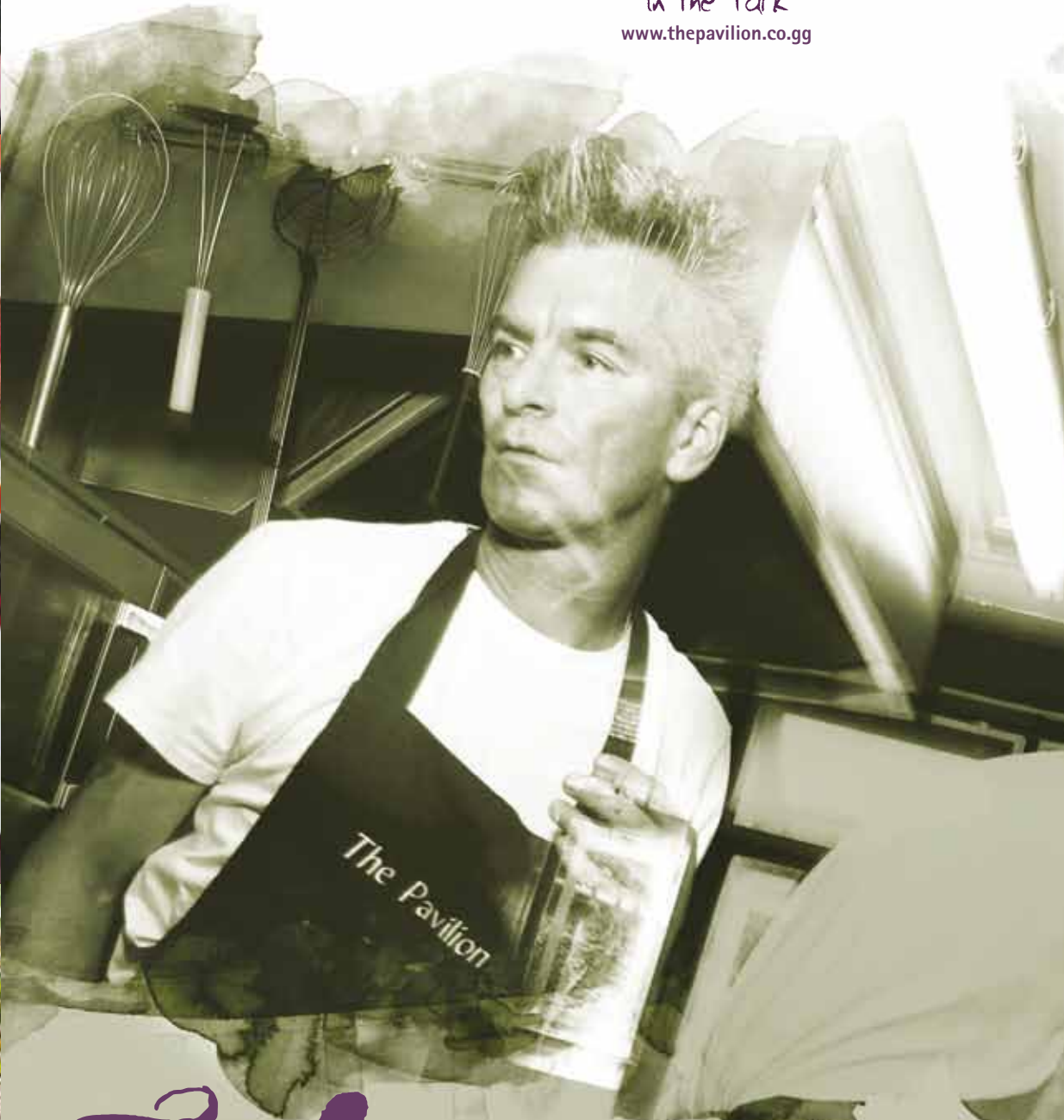


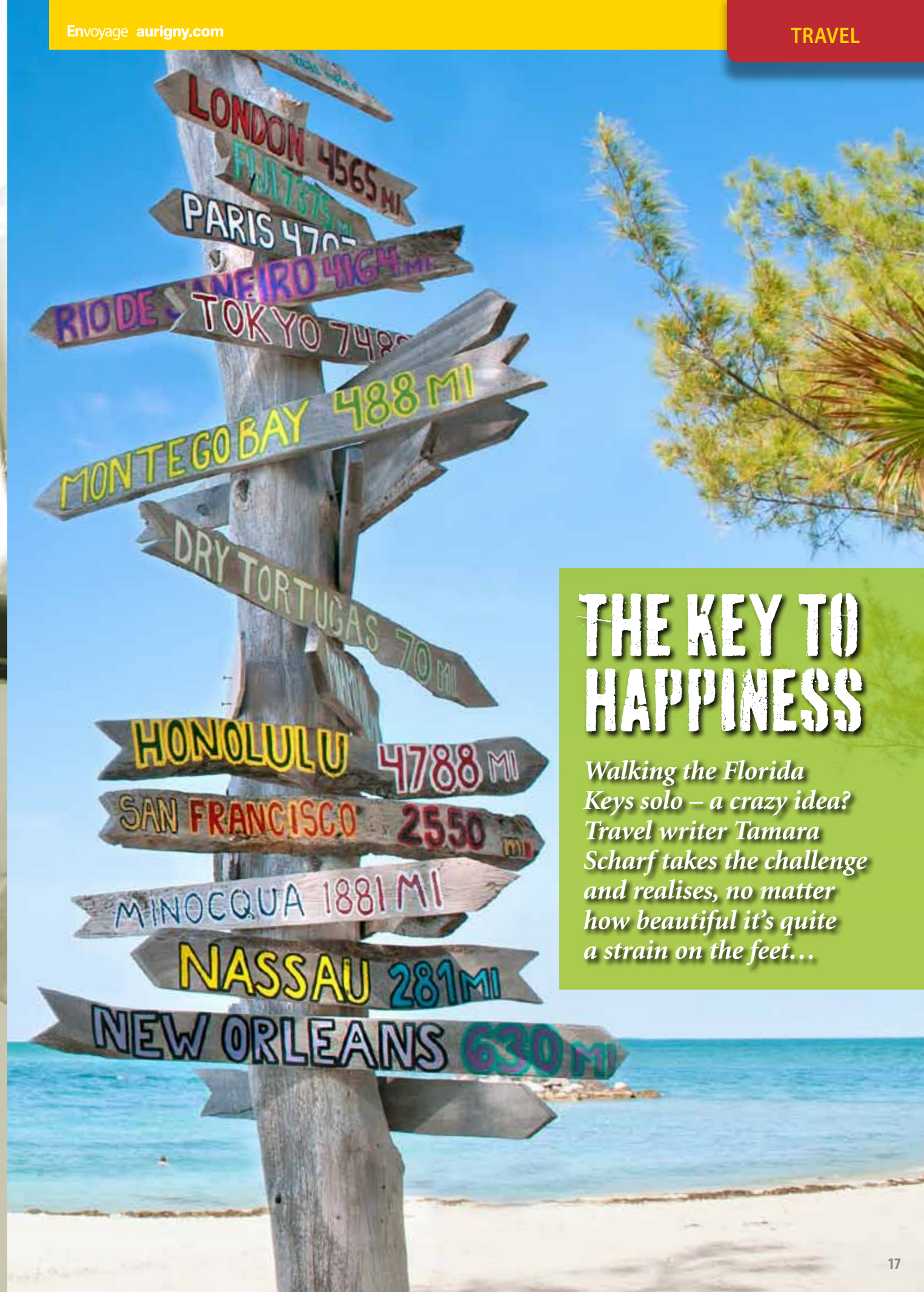
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# THE KEY TO HAPPINESS

*Walking the Florida Keys solo – a crazy idea? Travel writer Tamara Scharf takes the challenge and realises, no matter how beautiful it's quite a strain on the feet...*





*Pictured above L-R: Beautiful Islamorada Mile Marker 88; Sunset at Edgewater Lodge, Long Key; The Seven Mile Bridge (actually 6.79 mile bridge). To the right in the distance lies the old Seven Mile Bridge; Houses and boats at Summerland Key; Sugarloaf Key Tranquility.*

Away from the craziness that is Disney World, lie the tranquil Florida Keys, a string of mangrove-lined coral reef islands, connected by bridges.

The wildlife and scenery are spectacular, whether one travels by car, bike or on foot, with the sea almost always in view.

Key West, the southernmost inhabited Key, is one of the most charming places in South Florida, packed full of the most amazing and beautiful, wooden houses and quirky history.

Planning my trip from Key Largo, I decided to walk up to 20 miles each day, alongside US1, which is the only road leading in and out of Key West. It runs 2,369 miles, from Fort Kent, Maine to Key West, Florida and it is fringed by the Atlantic on one side and the crystal-clear turquoise waters of the Gulf of Mexico on the other.

My walk started in October 2013 on a (t)rusty Greyhound Bus from Fort Lauderdale. Sounds romantic? Not quite. I had just dumped someone I was dating, at the Greyhound Station, because he reneged on spending a romantic weekend at the end of the walk (apparently, he had to feed his ex's cats).

As elegantly as is possible with a 20lb backpack strapped to my back, I threw his hat (which I was going to borrow for the walk) into his face and stomped towards the bus. A decision I was later going to regret – dumping the hat, that is.

**Day 1: Key Largo to Islamorada (18 miles)**  
I hoisted myself out of bed that morning, sans coffee, breakfast, or any other modern luxuries, facing 18 miles with a heavy backpack and a no less heavy headache. The headache, incidentally, had been incurred the night before, in Key Largo. An attractive stranger decided to join me for dinner and drinks. I figured it was a great start to the trip! Alas, my head did not concur that morning.

Three miles down the road, I noticed that I had already lost something – apart from (arguably) my marbles, I was now also missing half a

toenail. In order to avoid such a calamity in the future, I decided to stock up on plasters and bandages. Except, I had trouble finding plasters, all I saw was fishing rods – in a pharmacy? I had just realised the theme of the Keys: fishing, fishing, and more fishing.

The scenery soon made up for the loss of half-toenails. As I crossed over the bridge into Islamorada, I was blown away by the sights. Tropical crystal-clear waters, fishing boats, all kinds of birds and wonderfully cute houses, with private docking, all lined my path.

At the end of the day my legs were like lead, and for the last mile I was counting every step. That night, I succumbed to 'woe and gnashing of teeth', wondering as to what I had let myself in for: 19 miles tomorrow.

**Days 2 and 3: Islamorada to Long Key (19 miles) Long Key to Marathon (15 miles)**  
I set off early, in order to conquer a 19-miler. Hardly two miles into it, 'Kenneth' jumped out of his truck, stopped me, and said that he had now seen me for a second day on US1. Was I, perhaps, training for the Appalachian Mountain trail? I informed him that I was just walking to Key West 'for fun'. He didn't seem overly impressed, and after a handshake went on his merry way.

The Keys are a small place, with an estimated population of 80,000 so, unsurprisingly, I did meet with the same people, quite a few times. Including many who thought I was down on my luck and offered me rides.

That evening, as I limped towards my lodgings, I already heard the manageress: 'Tamara, you must be Tamara?!' Bedraggled, with a big backpack on my shoulders and hatless, I was definitely not a sane tourist or even a local.

I could only be the 'mad girl walking the Keys'. After the initial high of having survived yet another day, calamity struck when I realised there was no food to be found on Long Key. So I spent the evening watching the sunset and chomping my way through a bag of almonds. This was beginning to feel more like survival training now!

The next morning, leaving Long Key behind me, I developed a limp, much like a duck waddle. Unable to straighten out my right leg, a combination of muscle pain and infected mosquito bites, I was seriously considering giving up. However, the combination of sheer stubbornness and being in the middle of nowhere solved that dilemma for me. I had to carry on, come 'Hell or high water'.

The Keys wouldn't be the Keys without the fishermen. The first one I met on a bridge handed me a handful of plasters saying 'I think you'll need them.' 'Ominous,' I thought and thanked him profusely.

The next one, about eight miles down the road, offered me water. I thanked him and hastily waddled on.

**Days 4 and 5: Marathon to Pine Key (20 miles) Pine Key to Sugarloaf Key (14 miles)**  
The 'new' Seven Mile Bridge is an amazing piece of engineering. Alas, when it was built in 1979–82, nobody anticipated that anyone in their right mind might be tempted to walk it. There is no pavement and only about five foot of space, if that, between traffic and water.

Walking it was not as bad as I had feared, but I did observe some trucks swerve towards me, only to pull the steering wheel over at the last moment. Apparently, it is not uncommon for drivers to steer towards an object in view, which is somewhat unnerving, when you happen to be that object.

The rewards of walking the bridge, however, were not only the magnificent views, but also a pod of dolphins, a sea turtle, and many different species of birds. The most exhilarating 6.79 miles, I have ever walked.

There is, of course, the old Seven Mile Bridge, constructed between 1909–1912, running alongside the new bridge. Being pedestrianised, this is certainly a great place to stroll on, for the views and to gain access to the historic site of Pigeon Key, but it doesn't lead all the way through to the other side, due to disrepair and openings left for boat traffic.

That evening I arrived on Pine Key, home of the deer refuge and the famous Key Deer, which is a protected species. I was lucky to see two of the lovely, tame, small creatures after another tough day.

Next day and 14 miles later, I arrived in Sugarloaf Key, a tranquil, small paradise, where only the sound of small boat engines interrupts the evening silence.

**Day 6: Sugarloaf Key to Key West (17 miles)**  
From Sugarloaf Key, it was only a 'hop, skip and jump' to Key West – a mere 17 miles.

Just as well, as the blisters on my feet had started to expose raw skin. I was in a lot of pain that last day and practically limped all 17 miles. In the end, I decided to throw all fashion sense to the wind, and wear my trekking sandals with socks, for added cushioning. I had to chuckle to myself, thinking that, as a German, the 'socks in sandals' combination should come natural to me. No?

As I pushed my (now socked) feet into the sandals, and rummaged in my bag on the side of the road, a car stopped and a couple

of rough-looking guys shouted, 'are you OK miss, do you need help?' to which I replied, 'No no, thank you!'

As I carried on limping along this pretty isolated stretch close to the Key West Naval Station, I thought: 'Yes, I am indeed OK. However, had I accepted help from those two, I might not be!'

I almost gave up three miles before mile marker zero, when I stumbled into a fast food establishment, in all my socked, sandalled and perspiring glory. I managed to order a cold drink before collapsing into a corner, sobbing. I couldn't give up now!

So, after a quick inspection and re-bandaging of sore feet, I carried on limping along the longest three miles ever walked in the history of womankind.

I made it to mile marker zero, by the skin of my teeth – see right.

If you want to know more about my walk, as well as the Florida Keys and their history, follow me on Twitter/Facebook: 'Sun, Sea and Scharf Shots' and @ScharfChick. ■

**A hat is imperative, no matter how tempted you might be to throw it into anybody's face along the way!**

**Some useful tips for those attempting to walk The Keys:**

The best time to walk are the winter months, which are also the high 'tourist' season. It is simply too hot and humid between May and October/November, and the frequent afternoon showers would be a hindrance. Even in the winter months, the heat can become oppressive at times.

It does make good sense to start early, especially when walking more than 15 miles per day, to make good use of daylight. Walking alongside US1 in dusk/dawn or even darkness is dangerous due to the heavy traffic, as well as being unpleasant.

Packing lightly is important, as is taking plenty of water and sunscreen, the highest factor available. A hat is imperative, no

matter how tempted you might be to throw it into anybody's face along the way! This will be your most valuable item of clothing.

There is a lot of noisy and fast traffic, with US1 being the only road in and out of Key West. If you are not a female walking alone, I would take any opportunity to walk on the Overseas Heritage Trail, which mostly runs alongside US1. Unfortunately, some of it is surrounded by thick shrubbery and not in view of the road. As a single female, I preferred to walk alongside the traffic. The Highway Code demands that you walk into the traffic. Never walk with your back to it.

Generally speaking, I found the Keys not only safe, but very pleasant to walk during all six days. Although strenuous, it was a magical experience and I can only recommend it!

