



Pets in Paradise

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'Tails' of Endless Summers in Key West, FL

[Show all sections](#)

Key West

Liz Taylor slowly rises from her prone position outside the front door of the Hemingway Home. The day is well along already, a typical balmy, breezy Saturday afternoon in Key West, Fla., with the temperature edging past 90 degrees. She stretches long and hard, her six toes of each limb splayed on the wooden planks, and shakes off the sleep.

Perhaps it's the smell that awakens her – the smell of locally caught grilled rock lobster wafting over Duval Street from the annual Lobster Fair. You have to admit, it's a tempting change from her usual Science Diet and Eukanuba foods.

But it's time to go to work; Liz Taylor saunters over to one of the many water bowls at the home, drinks deeply, and spends 7 minutes grooming herself. Then she settles comfortably a few feet away. As one of the famous Hemingway cats, Liz Taylor's job is to hang around, a job she performs faithfully – along with 60 other cats that reside at the Hemingway Home and Museum.

Only 70 years ago, Key West was one of the two major cities in Florida (the other was St. Augustine). A railroad was built to connect Key West to the northeastern part of the United States. In fact, it's a farther distance from Key West to Miami than to the shores of Cuba.

Key West was a major shipping port. But along with abundant shipping came a deluge of rodents. This is the major reason so many cats live in the Keys; they were brought in to reduce the rodent population.

The cats at the Hemingway Home are locally known as the "Conch Cats" and hold famous titles such as Rita Hayworth, Ginger Rogers and Spencer Tracy. As you walk through the home and grounds, you experience the individual personalities of these cats, both past and present. The silent inscriptions on tombstones in the pet cemetery tell the tale of cats past. Of the current resident cats, their most obvious trait is their fierce indulgence in cat-napping.

Conch cats seem to have one thing in common – an appreciation for a laid-back atmosphere. And if a quarrel should arise, no problem; all of the Hemingway cats are cared for and visited by a veterinarian once every week. They are even fed Science Diet foods to keep them nutritionally balanced and fit.

It's easy to recognize a conch cat by the presence of six or seven toes on their paws (polydactylism), a feature many of these cats continue to pass down through generations. This is accomplished through supervised breeding of the cats with the polydactyl gene, while most others are spayed or neutered for population control.

The Mallory Square Dogs

Conch cats are not the only pet attraction. Every evening, year round, folks make their way down to Mallory Square, where Chico, Comet and Twinky from www.trickydogs.com perform for the crowds awaiting the world-renowned Sunset Celebration. These vaudeville theater performers are very intelligent and extremely lucky dogs, as the two were adopted from the Broward and Monroe County Animal Shelters and saved from certain euthanasia. Watch as Chico jumps through the virtual flames of death and their master and trainer entertains the youngest and oldest of tourists. These talented and trainable dogs just go to show how unwanted pets can and will make a positive difference in other people's lives.

Paradise 'Tails'



Just down from the dog show on the pier are the cats of Mallory Square, which can be seen taking catnaps on a continual basis. Those pets not in the Keys "lime-light" may still be seen on weekdays or weekends with their loving masters walking down the street or riding in baskets on mopeds or bicycles. If you look hard enough, you may even see their friends, the iguana, snake and parrot. And all too frequently, you will catch them basking in the warm sun or relaxing in the cool shade here in an endless summer paradise.

Legal Disclaimer

If your pet is showing any signs of distress or you suspect your pet is seriously ill, CONTACT YOUR VETERINARIAN immediately.

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