

Drive-Thru Coral

Traveling the length of the Florida Keys on U.S. Route 1 is as exotic as it gets on the United States' mainland.

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Check out the slideshow at the end of this blog for more images. So it's been your lifelong ambition to see a real coral reef up close and personal, but whenever you venture into water deeper than you are tall you sink like a rock. Or maybe you live in the dead-center of the continent and the nearest ocean is a couple of thousand miles thataway (cross your arms and point your fingers to the east and west). Or, perhaps, if you did happen to find yourself right smack dab in the middle of coral country, say somewhere along Australia's east coast, with the 1,200-mile-long GBR (Great Barrier Reef) just a few clicks offshore, you'd possess neither the training nor the equipment to swim beneath the water's surface and enter the coral-reef realm.

So what to do? You've seen coral reefs and the myriad creatures that call these underwater ecosystems home, while watching many an episode of *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* or a National Geographic special on the telly, as they like to say across the pond. You've undoubtedly experienced a little slice of coral heaven in your own reef tank or in a friend's setup, but you still desire the real McCoy.

Well, I'm here to tell you that you don't need to be a competent scuba diver, and you don't need to venture into shark-infested waters or take an airplane trip halfway around the world to see a real coral reef. No, just a road map (the way us old-timers managed before GPS), a full tank of gas (a couple depending on where your coming from) and some time on your hands, and you can drive to – and traverse across the top via automobile – a real coral reef right here in the good old U.S. of A. Although one will find it covered with thousands of years' worth of sand and soil and heavily overgrown with subtropical vegetation as well as portions urbanized within the past century or so.

If you read subheads, you know I'm talking about the Florida Keys. Today's Keys are exposed portions of a fossilized coral reef, which has only become high and dry during sea level drops in the past few thousand years. Originally accessible only by boat, the main Keys – there are more than 1,700 "keys" total – became linked in 1912 with the completion of Henry Flagler's Overseas Railroad.

Unfortunately, much of the railroad was destroyed in the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane that devastated the Keys. The Florida East Coast Railway, the Overseas Railroad's owner, was unable to monetarily rescue the damaged railroad and as a result sold what remained of the railroad bed and bridges to the state of Florida for \$640,000, a steal even by yesteryear's standards.

With the demise of the railroad and the emergence of a new form of transportation – the automobile – the Overseas Highway, or U.S. Route 1, replaced the railroad and was built atop much of the old railroad bed, as well as utilized many of the undamaged or lesser damaged bridges that survived. The Overseas Highway opened to traffic in 1938 and was undoubtedly, if not the world's first, at least one of the earliest "drive-thru" coral reefs in the world.

Most of the highway's older bridges were later replaced by newer, more-modern bridges designed to handle two lanes of traffic going in either direction. Three of the original bridges – Seven Mile, Bahia Honda and Long Key – are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These bridges are no longer open to vehicle traffic and are used as fishing piers. Only a portion of the original Seven Mile Bridge is still traversed by modern traffic lanes.

From start to finish, the highway runs 127.5 miles along an island arc that is the dividing line between the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Gulf of Mexico to the west. The highway's terminus is the city of Key West, the southernmost point in the 48 contiguous states. Overseas Highway travelers intermittingly finds themselves on modern bridges that vault up and over open ocean channels between keys, bisecting juxtaposed stretches of mangroves on one side and salt marsh on the other or driving across the flat expanses of peopled and unpeopled isles, or keys, all the while supported by an ancient coral foundation.

If only Overseas Highway sojourners could strip away tons of accumulated sand and soil, shear the land of its junglelike vegetation and peel away the veneer of human trappings, coral is what they would find. In fact, that is exactly what visitors to the Florida Keys can do.

One of the best places to see what the Keys are made of is at Windley Key Fossil Reef Geological State Park. Formed of Key Largo limestone (fossilized coral, in other words) this plot of land was sold to the Florida East Coast Railroad, which used the stone to build Henry Flagler's Overseas Railroad. After the railroad was built, the quarry was used until the 1960s to produce beautiful chunks of designer stone called "keystone," some of which can be seen on the exterior of the park's small museum.

Today, visitors can walk along the 8-foot-high quarry walls to see cross-sections of the ancient coral reef only moments earlier they were motoring across. One of the old coral-cutting machines that helped to create this X-ray into coral formation is available for visitors to examine. The straight-edged cuts of the quarry machinery exposed the perfectly preserved fossil specimens of myriad coral animals, such as sea fans that don't look much different from what one sees on today's living reefs.

Visitors who have the know-how and equipment can compare these fossil corals with modern species on the world's third longest barrier reef located just offshore on the Atlantic side of the island arc known as the Florida Keys. If scuba or snorkeling isn't your thing and you don't "dive the reef," you can still have the satisfaction of knowing you "drove the reef" and you'll even have the pictures from the quarry to prove it.

Windley Key Fossil Reef Geological State Park is located on Windley Key at Mile Marker 85.5 near the town of Islamorada.

Overseas Highway Trivia U.S. National Register of Historic Places 127.5 miles long Opened in 1938 Present-day Seven Mile Bridge is 35,862 feet (that's 6.79 miles) long Seven Mile Bridge has been used in the filming of several Hollywood pictures, such as True Lies, 2 Fast 2 Furious and Licence to Kill. The Florida Keys are made up of about 1,700 islands. Key West contains 32 percent of the entire population of the Florida Keys. The Keys are the exposed portions of a fossilized coral reef.

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