



TRAVEL BRIEFS

Key Largo A Proven Winner

By Charlie Levine

Every time I exit the Florida Turnpike just past Homestead and get on Route 1 heading south toward the Florida Keys, my breathing eases, the shoes slip off and I don't mind adhering to the 45 mph speed limit. The whole rush, rush, rush of everyday life takes a back seat, and I find myself thinking about pulling over after every bridge I cross to see if there might be tarpon or snook

underneath. That's what the Florida Keys does for me: It slows things down and feeds my need to play on the water — and I'm not alone.

Thousands of anglers flock to the Keys each year to enjoy some fishing and relaxation. According to the International Game Fish Association, the Keys are home to more world-record catches than any other destination. And while there are plenty of spots to hang

your hat in the Keys, many anglers overlook Key Largo and keep heading south, watching the mile markers tick down toward zero. Islamorada, Marathon and Key West certainly offer a ton of fishing opportunity, but when you cruise right by Key Largo, you miss out on a great stretch of reef and a good time.

The locals, of course, know full well that the fishing in Key Largo stands up to any of the other islands in the chain. So when one well-known local, former football coach Jimmy Johnson, invited me out fishing to show me firsthand why he loves these waters, not even a Cowboys lineman could keep me away. Johnson has called the Keys home since the mid-1990s, and whenever the weather and his schedule permits, you'll find him offshore fishing on his 39-foot Sea Vee *Three Rings* (so named for the collegiate championship ring he won coaching at the University of Miami and his two Super

Bowl rings with the Dallas Cowboys).

From the minute I stepped aboard *Three Rings*, I could tell that Johnson is the real deal. He set up his boat for one thing — fishing. The boat is tricked out with a small tower and full controls, outriggers, more rod holders than I can remember, a complete electronics suite and plenty of fish boxes. And rather than sporting quad outboards as most of these center consoles do, Johnson's 39-footer is powered by twin 480 hp



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Making the most of his life after football, Jimmy Johnson spends the majority of his time fishing in the Florida Keys.

Cummins inboard diesels. It's fast and fuel efficient, which is perfect for running over to Cay Sal Bank in the Bahamas, one of Johnson's favorite wahoo spots.

"I'm not big on live-baiting or bottomfishing," Johnson says. "I like to cruise and look around. When we find something that we like — maybe a weed line or some birds working — then we start fishing."

That was the plan when we departed his home dock just as the sun was starting to come up. It being late July, we hoped we might find some dolphin, but the bite had been slow the past few weeks. Johnson's work as a broadcaster on Fox's NFL Sunday program keeps him busy most of the winter when the sailfish bite is best off the Keys, but he doesn't seem to mind. "Wahoo fishing is my favorite," he readily admits.

After arriving at the Hump, we set out a spread of ballyhoo-and-lure combos, and a few small



Jimmy Johnson's Fisherman's Cove in Key Largo offers it all.


feathers for the blackfin tuna that were busting bait in the area. Not five minutes after starting our troll, a wahoo the size of my leg sky-rocketed behind the boat, coming a good three feet out of the water. Luckily, the fish came tight on one of the setups rigged on a wire leader. Before I could even scream out, "Did you see that?" Johnson was on the rod. The wahoo took off on a blistering first run, and Johnson let the wahoo take a good stretch of line before

settling in on the fish. He muscled the fish to the boat in about 15 minutes, and we were all shocked at the wahoo's size. At 62 pounds, it was by far the biggest wahoo I've seen in the Keys — the perfect kick-start to our day.

"That's how you start the morning!" Johnson exclaimed as the high-fives came out. Johnson certainly knows how to keep his team motivated, and spirits were high on *Three Rings*. However, it doesn't

take long to see that the Keys have definitely mel-
lowed this man who traded a life of stress and public scrutiny for a life of flip-flops and fishing.

"To me, it's all about making the most of the Q.T.L.," Johnson says, "the quality time left. I love to fish, I love to dive and I love warm weather. That's why I love it here in the Keys."

After scoring our big 'hoo, Johnson put out a short rod rigged with braided line and a 24-ounce trolling weight. He placed a ballyhoo on the rig and set it down. Just after boating a small blackfin that Phil Perko caught off one of the feathers and a peanut dolphin, the deep rod began smoking off line. Rich Cipriano got to the reel first and hauled in a fat, 50-pound bull dolphin. A nice cow was swimming with it, but she faded off before we could present a bait. It was the perfect ending to another perfect day in the Florida Keys. 

Getting There

Whether you come by car or boat, Key Largo is the easiest of all the Keys to get to. Just 60 miles south of Miami, it's a quick drive and you'll find plenty of accommodations to choose from. I stayed at Jimmy Johnson's Fisherman's Cove, a unique private residence club located on the bay at mile marker 104. Fisherman's Cove features six luxurious three-bedroom residences with all the amenities, including a resort pool with cabanas, rooftop owner's terrace and use of the resort's two center-console boats. The residences are offered for sale in one-eighth ownerships, so you can enjoy the use of a multimillion-dollar home for a fraction of the cost. You can also book them by the night. Downstairs, the Big Chill (www.jjsbigchill.com; 305-453-9066) is quickly becoming one of the hottest spots in the Keys to cool down, with its outside tiki bars, oceanside dining and a sport's bar with Johnson's Lombardi trophies and Super Bowl rings on display. It's a great mix of easy Keys living, good food and a fun atmosphere. For more information on Fisherman's Cove, visit www.fishermanscovekeylargo.com, or call 877-374-2683.

Slated for February 4-6, 2010, Jimmy Johnson's Billfish Bowl will take place smack dab between the NFL Pro Bowl and the Super Bowl, which are both being held in Miami. The tournament will bring together some of Johnson's football buddies and expert sailfishing crews for a one-of-a-kind competition. For more info, visit www.jjbillfishbowl.com.

The Ocean Reef Club, located on the northern side of Key Largo, is another great spot to park your boat or stay for the winter. For more information, visit www.oceanreef.com or call 800-843-2730.

