



TOUR INFORMATION FOR SOUTH FLORIDA The Keys and Dry Tortugas

These notes are designed to help you prepare for your tour. Please read carefully.

ENTERING THE UNITED STATES: United Kingdom citizens need to have a passport that has a minimum validity of 6 months remaining after the tour has finished. This is an immigration requirement for many countries, including the USA. All nationalities require a machine-readable passport if travelling to the USA under the visa waiver programme (see below).

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has made changes to the immigration requirements. Travellers seeking to travel under the Visa Waiver Program must pre-apply for authorisation using the Electronic System for Travel Authorisation (**ESTA**). **ESTA** must be completed online via their website.

Having an **ESTA** is a mandatory requirement and applications should be made online at least 72 hours before departure via their website <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov> as although the majority of responses are immediate, it can take 72 hours for approval in some cases. There is a small fee to pay as a processing charge followed by a small fee when authorisation has been granted.

For further information, or if you don't have access to the internet, please contact the Embassy of the United States in London on 020 3608 6998. Citizens of other countries should contact their nearest US Embassy for entry requirements.

Once you've applied for your ESTA please remember to print it out and take a copy of that document onto the aircraft with you.

All visitors to the USA's first port-of-entry have their index fingerprints taken by an electronic scanner at Passport Control. You will also have your photograph taken at the same time. Although the process itself only takes a few minutes the queue can be quite long if several flights arrive at the same time!

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport and air ticket with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get replacements if your originals are lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopies in a separate bag to the originals.

CURRENCY: The currency of the United States of America is the dollar (USD). Dollars can be obtained from your local bank and from exchange facilities at the airport. As the tour price includes all travel, hotel and main meal costs, you only need bring enough dollars to cover gifts, snacks, or other purchases of a purely nature.

INTRODUCTORY MEETING: There will be an introductory meeting at 18.00 on Day 1 of the tour. This informal meeting affords the leader the opportunity to introduce everyone to each other and to let you know generally what to expect on the trip - pace of the tour, daily routine, etc. We strongly recommend you arrange your flights to arrive in the late afternoon so that you can be present at the introductory meeting. After the meeting, we'll drive to a nearby restaurant for dinner, perhaps with a quick stop at a nearby park to look for Eastern Screech-Owl.

FLORIDA: The Keys and Dry Tortugas: Tour Information...2

CLIMATE: Spring temperatures are in the 70°s, 80°s and even low 90°s, but near the coast a breeze tends to moderate the effect of the heat. Nights remain mild to warm. Scattered rain showers and thunderstorms, some with brief, heavy rain, are possible, and the humidity will be high.

PACE OF TOUR AND DAILY ROUTINE: Although there are some long drives with occasional bad traffic delays around Miami, this is a low-key tour from a physical standpoint. Most walking is done along roadsides or level trails. There are no strenuous or long hikes on this tour (walks will generally be of less than a half mile in distance) and on most of the days we depart around 07:00. To accommodate the best birding locations (parrot roosts for example) and to take advantage of the late afternoon sun (as it does not get dark until 20:00) we will on several days eat dinner before returning to the hotel, which will result in a late arrival time back to the hotel.

HEALTH: **It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting.** Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

It is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations.

Birdwatching in South Florida poses no real health hazards but sun, insects, and motion sickness on boat trips are all concerns.

The intense sun at 23° latitude makes a sun hat, protective clothing and a strong sunscreen essential, and please remember that dehydration can be an issue, especially at the Tortugas. Drinking water will be available at all times

Mosquitoes and small biting flies can be abundant in some years, especially in the mangroves. Chiggers and ticks are present in small numbers. We recommend bringing protective clothing and using insect repellents with a high concentration of DEET.

While not carriers of disease, chiggers are perhaps the biggest nuisance in the New World tropics. Nearly invisible, and inhabiting grassy and weedy edges in warm, humid climates where other hosts such as livestock or wild animals are common, they bite unseen and unfelt, drop off after having their fill of epidermis in just a few hours, and then a day later leave a spot that itches intensely for about three days or more. Insect repellent will provide adequate protection. Many brands use diethyltoluamide (DEET) which, while providing the best protection, can be corrosive and therefore require care when using. There are many 'natural' and less-harmful repellents available from various camping supply stores.

Motion sickness on boat trips is a potential problem, but the large size of the boat means that this is rarely an issue; there are several remedies available and you may wish to consult your doctor before selecting one.

Special medication will be unavailable on the Dry Tortugas, and may be unavailable elsewhere, so be sure to bring adequate supplies with you.

For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website www.masta-travel-health.com

ACCOMMODATION: We stay in standard accommodations throughout the course of the tour. Breakfasts will be taken in the hotel continental breakfast rooms.

FLORIDA: The Keys and Dry Tortugas: Tour Information...3

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Most of the hotels offer self-serve laundry facilities. Our hotel in Key West might be the easiest spot for laundry.

ELECTRICITY: 110/120V AC 60Hz. An international travel plug is useful and can be bought in most airport departure lounges. You may find the following website helpful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>.

FOOD: Meals (lunch and dinner) are taken in local restaurants and may include a picnic lunch or two depending upon the weather conditions. Seafood and Cuban cuisine are local specialties.

Our tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regrettably, not be accommodated. Our tours are carefully scheduled to ensure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to take supplemental food with them.

DRINKS: Bottled water or soft drinks are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition, we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some of the rooms where we stay.

INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE ACCESS: WIFI is free and available at all of our hotels. Mobile phones can be useful while on tour but keep in mind that many countries operate on a different cellular technology. Your phone may be incompatible with the local system, so please check with your local carrier. Fortunately, with the advent of smartphones, it is easy to download applications such as Skype or Google Voice, which can make calling home free or very inexpensive. Another option is to replace the data (“SIM”) card in your phone in-country. The SIM cards, including data can be very cheap. If you wish to use this option you will need to check that your smart phone has a SIM card slot.

CLOTHING: The following items are basic:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Canvas shoes (for the beaches) | Sunscreen lotion |
| Light-weight raincoat | Long-sleeved, light-weight cotton shirts |
| Light-weight sweater or windbreaker | Cotton trousers |
| Sun hat | |

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS: Please bring the following:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Notebook and pencil | Compact folding umbrella |
| Alarm clock | Motion sickness medication |
| Small rucksack/day pack | Water bottle/canteen |
| Insect repellent | Torch with spare batteries |
| Sunscreen/lip balm | Ear plugs (if you are a light sleeper) |
| Compact folding umbrella | Personal medication |

Optional: A telescope and tripod; spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage), field guide; bathing suit and snorkel, fins and mask (Dry Tortugas).

FLORIDA: The Keys and Dry Tortugas: Tour Information...4

Most of the birding on the tour will be in areas or situations where a telescope is really not needed. However, we spend portions of several days looking at wading bird rookeries, shorebirds on mudflats, and nesting seabirds on the Dry Tortugas. Although the leader will, of course, have a 'scope for the group to use, participants may wish to bring along their own.

LEADER'S EQUIPMENT: Leaders will provide the following:

Telescope	Field library
Maps	Small medical kit
Play-back equipment	Spot light

LUGGAGE: Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

If possible, please bring your luggage in soft-sided bags or cases (rather than large hard 'Samsonite'-type suitcases) as these pack more easily into our vehicles during the tour. Please note that on many tours there are no porters to carry your luggage so please ensure that **no bag is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself**. As a general rule, in addition to using your luggage labels, it is a good idea to fix identification to the *inside* of each piece of luggage.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Scenery and memory shots will be plentiful and simple to obtain but birds are difficult to photograph. Please bring all your film or memory cards with you as it may be difficult to find precisely what you need on short notice. Please understand that birdwatching tours are not the best vehicle for bird photography as we often cannot remain in one place for extended periods of time. "Digiscoping" is perfectly compatible with the tour, though it is recommended you bring your own telescope! An opportunity to try your hand at hummingbird photography is possible on two of our days.

There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leaders will do all they can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' birdwatching activities.

TRANSPORT: We will be traveling by 15-passenger minibus, depending on the group size. Participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles.

On our boat trip to the Dry Tortugas we will be aboard the *Yankee Freedom III*, a high-speed ocean-going catamaran specifically designed for carrying passengers safely across the 70 miles of open water from Key West to the Park. The *Yankee Freedom III* (built in 2012) is a broad and stable vessel (110' long and 30.6' wide) and certified to carry up to 250 passengers; however, to maximize the comfort of each guest they limit it to no more than 175 passengers. The *Yankee Freedom III* is the official park ferry to the Dry Tortugas and is certified by the US Coast Guard, ISO and EPA. Outdoor viewing opportunities are available from the upper decker as well as the bow. The ship has a rather large air-conditioned cabin with DVD monitors, comfortable seating, and a complete modern galley which serves a complimentary breakfast and lunch. A snack and cocktail bar will also be open during the cruise for anyone interested. The trip from Key West to the park takes 2 hours.

FLORIDA: The Keys and Dry Tortugas: Tour Information...5

SMOKING: Smoking and vaping is not allowed in the vehicles or when the group is gathered for meals, checklists etc. If you are sharing a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room. If you smoke in the field, we ask that you do so well away and downwind from the group if possible.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: Travel insurance is essential and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency, cancellation of a trip or severe delays. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour or for covering any costs resulting from a flight delay such as extra hotel accommodation.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

TIPPING: All tour-based tips are included in the tour price. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses when we have group meals together in restaurants. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Field Guides:

Dunn, Jon L. and Jonathan Alderfer. 2017. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. 7th Edition. National Geographic Society, Washington, DC. One of the top two field guides for North America, more portable than the Sibley guide. ISBN-13: 9781426218354 **Recommended.**

Sibley, David Allen. 2014. *The Sibley Guide to Birds – Second edition*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. Arguably the best North American field guide. **ISBN-13:** 978-0307957900 **Highly recommended.** This is also available in as an app for smart phones or tablets.

Regional References:

Bell, C. Ritchie and Bryan J. Taylor. 2006. *Florida Wild Flowers and Roadside Plants*. The University of North Carolina Press. **ISBN-13:** 978-0960868803

Brock, Jim. P., and Kenn Kaufman. 2006. *Butterflies of North America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. **ISBN-13:** 978-0618768264

Buckley, Bill. 2015. *South Florida Trees: A Field Guide*. Summer Wind Publications. Kindle Edition only.

Collins, Joseph T. and Roger Conant et al. 1998. *A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians – Eastern North America*. Fourth edition. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. **ISBN-13:** 978-0395904527

Kaufman, Kenn, Rick Bowers, and Nora Bowers. 2007. *Kaufman Focus Guide to Mammals of North America*, 12th Edition. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. **ISBN-13:** 978-0618951888

FLORIDA: The Keys and Dry Tortugas: Tour Information...6

Lodge, Thomas E. 2010. *The Everglades Handbook: Understanding the Ecosystem*, Third Edition. CRC Press **ISBN-13:** 978-1439802625

Page, Lawrence M. and Brooks M. Burr et al. 2011. *Peterson Field Guide to Freshwater Fishes of North America* Second Edition. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. **ISBN-13:** 978-0547242064

Paulson, Dennis. 2012. *Dragonflies and Damselflies of the East* (Princeton Field Guides). Princeton University Press. **SBN-13:** 978-0691122830

Pranty, Bill. 2005. *Birder's Guide to Florida*. ABA/Lane Birdfinding Guide Series, American Birding Association, Colorado Springs, CO. Excellent maps and directions to birding sites.

FINAL INFORMATION: Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses etc. and your air tickets will be sent to you about three weeks before the start of the tour. Other news will be communicated as necessary. If you have any questions, please contact us.