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Dry Tortugas National Park, Florida

May 06, 2009 10:13 - By: [Barbara Weibel](#)

by Barbara Ann Weibel at [Hole InThe Donut Travels](#)

Almost 70 miles west of Key West, seven small islands poke their sandy crowns through Gulf's turquoise waters to form the [Dry Tortugas National Park](#). These islands, which are home to exquisite coral reefs, fascinating shipwrecks, and an historic fort, may also be the most remote beaches in the United States.

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Beach at garden Key, the largest of the seven islands in the Dry Tortugas

The Dry Tortugas have been an important landmark for passing ships since they were discovered by Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León in 1513. He named the islands Las Tortugas (the turtles) for the abundant sea turtles found in the area. The word Dry was later added to indicate that no source of fresh water was available. The islands were largely forgotten and uninhabited until pirates arrived in the 1800's, which forced the government to take steps to protect the shipping lanes. Five giant forts were planned - four on tiny Key West and a fifth, Fort Jefferson, was to be constructed on Garden Key, the largest island in the Tortugas chain.

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Visitors to Garden Key can also tour of historic Fort Jefferson

Within two years, piracy had been eliminated, but the Dry Tortugas once again became an important military site during the Civil War, as it allowed the Union government to blockade shipping and cut off supply lines to Confederate Troops. Since then, the Dry Tortugas have led a gentler existence. No longer used for military purposes, the islands were designated a National Monument in 1935 and received full National Park status in 1992.

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Aerial view of Garden Key and Fort Jefferson

In addition to fascinating history, the islands offer pristine white sand beaches, crystal clear shallow waters ideal for snorkeling, nature trails, and some of the finest birdwatching in the country. Other than private boats, the only access is via two fast ferries that leave daily from [Key West](#), allowing visitors a 4.5 hour stay on Garden Key. Six primitive campsites are available, although campers are limited to one night's stay and advance reservations are required. There are no public phones, restrooms, or snack bars here. Even cell phones are useless. All waste must be hauled out and the only available water is from cisterns that catch rainwater. Though difficult to reach, Dry Tortugas National Park rewards visitors with an unforgettable experience that makes the trip well worth the effort.

Photos courtesy of National Park Service

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