



Welcome to the Florida Keys, where marriages fade in the sun

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ISLAMORADA -- It's easy to see why bookkeeper Linda Mortimer moved to the Florida Keys 20 years ago: the impossibly blue water, the year-round sunshine, a lifestyle so laid-back that every day is like a Jimmy Buffett lyric.

What Mortimer didn't anticipate was falling in love -- and then getting divorced less than two years after taking her wedding vows.

"I discovered after we got married that my husband had been divorced four times," said Mortimer, as she finished a noontime burger while sitting at the bar at the Ocean View, a local party spot and her place of employment.

"I was his No. 5. He didn't understand why I got so upset."

Divorce is as common in the Florida Keys as fresh grouper and cold beer. Census statistics released this week show that Monroe County -- which includes the cluster of 1,700 islands floating off South Florida -- has the second-highest proportion of divorced residents. A little more than 18 percent of the people living in Monroe County are divorced, second only to Indiana's Wayne County, which had 19 percent. Nationwide, 10.7 percent of people over 15 are divorced.

Three of the top 10 counties the divorced call home are in Florida -- rural Putnam County in Northeast Florida and urban Pinellas County on the Gulf Coast are the other two. Indiana had three counties in the top 10 as well.

Newly released census figures show that while the number of unmarried people continued its 10-year climb, the ranks of married people in the United States rose by nearly 6 million last year, bucking a decade-long decline. The number of divorced people rose, but only slightly.

Residents of Wayne County, Ind., don't see why their home should be the divorce capital of America. The water tower in Richmond, Ind., the county's largest city, welcomes visitors to "A Great All-American City."

"It just doesn't make all that much sense," said Michael Jackson, an associate professor of psychology at Earlham College, a private university in Richmond. "We find it really questionable. It just sounds funny."

But divorce counselors say the economy could be partly to blame for adding more stress to marriages. Indiana has been hit hard by the collapse of the auto and manufacturing industries.

Some folks in the Florida Keys are quick to say that it's not that people are actually divorcing in droves there -- it's that divorced people come to the area to start new lives.

"The Keys are a great place to hide," said Mortimer, who is 60. When asked from what, she said: "Child support. Alimony."

A guy sitting next to Mortimer at the Ocean View bar finished his martini in a plastic cup. His chuckle nearly drowned out the Creedence Clearwater Revival song playing on the radio.

"The IRS. The CIA. Family," he said.

Others say that the party lifestyle -- and a high cost of living -- stresses families to the breaking point.

"This is a place of escape. A place of hedonistic abandon," said Dr. Fred Covan, a Key West therapist. "We have a condition here, we say people get Key Wasted. People come down here and do really, really stupid stuff."

Key West divorce lawyer Jiulio Margalli has noticed another trend among couples who are divorcing on the island paradise.

"What we have now is people getting divorced and fighting over who is going to take over the debt. Who's going to be saddled with the \$800K mortgage that neither one could pay?" he said. "It used to be that we saw people get divorced and fight over the home. Now it's, 'Oh, my God, not only are we getting divorced, our credit is going down the tubes and we're going into foreclosure.'"