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## Florida Keys to Stage Conch Republic's 'Birthday Party' April 19-28

**KEY WEST, Fla.** — Fans and friends of the Conch Republic can celebrate the offbeat “nation’s” 42nd birthday April 19-28 in Key West, experiencing more than 20 colorful activities ranging from a pirate bash and quirky races to a “sea-to-sea” parade.

The Conch Republic Independence Celebration commemorates the Florida Keys’ symbolic secession from the United States — an act inspired by the 1982 establishment of a U.S. Border Patrol blockade at the top of the island chain that virtually stopped traffic on the only road connecting the Keys to mainland Florida.

In protest, local officials staged the secession and rechristened the Keys as the independent Conch Republic. They then declared “war” on the mother country, carried it out by pelting a U.S. Naval officer with stale Cuban bread, immediately surrendered and requested \$1 billion in foreign aid.

Today the republic, whose motto is We Seceded Where Others Failed, is recognized around the world as the Keys’ irreverent alter ego. Both the republic and the festival it inspired honor the island chain’s freewheeling character and self-reliant characters.

Activities begin Friday, April 19, with an opening ceremony and the raising of the colors at Key West’s landmark Mallory Square. A gala kick-off party is to follow at the Schooner Wharf Bar, 202 William St. in the Key West Historic Seaport.

The weekend’s highlights include the outrageous 40th annual Conch Republic Drag Race. Slated for 2 p.m. Saturday, April 20, in the 700 block of Duval Street, the race is to feature fetchingly garbed drag queens sprinting down the pavement in startlingly high heels.

The secession itself is to be commemorated at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 23, at the Truman Waterfront Park Pier, next to the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Ingham. Hosted by Conch Republic Military Forces, the ceremony is to include live music and a cash bar.

Subsequent events include the so-called “World’s Looooongest Parade” along Duval Street from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, a pirate ball and costume contest, the wacky “Blue Ribbon Bed Races” with decorated beds, and a re-enactment of the Great Sea Battle of the Conch Republic. During the latter, sea dogs and wenches on tall ships and other vessels combat “evil federal forces” and the republic always wins.

The Conch Republic calendar also features the Hot Havana Nights dance party under the stars, sailing excursions and other adventures in the clear waters surrounding Key West,

participatory beach and island cleanups, a naval parade in Key West Harbor and other fun-filled gatherings.

The festival concludes Sunday, April 28, after a lively artisan market, an open-air jazz performance and a sailing race that recalls the Florida Keys' seafaring heritage.

Festival information and complete schedule: [conchrepublic.com](http://conchrepublic.com)

Key West visitor information: [fla-keys.com/keywest](http://fla-keys.com/keywest) or 1-800-LAST-KEY

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