ISLAMORADA, FLORIDA KEYS — The history of Cheeca Lodge & Spa began in the 1800’s, a time of ship wreckers, marauding Indians and the arrival of the earliest hardy pioneers of the Florida Keys. First to arrive was the Russell family in 1854, followed by the Parkers in 1898 and the Pinder family in 1880. Called “Conchs,” these homesteaders chose the land near Cheeca Lodge to carve out a tenacious living in the isolated beauty of the undiscovered Florida Keys by farming limes, pineapples and tomatoes.

Church life was very important to these pioneers, and in 1897 the Pinder and Russell families built a tiny one-room church, the first structure to appear on the beach where Cheeca stands now. Later, around 1924, they replaced the wooden church with a two-room coral rock school and Methodist church. A burial ground, now known as the Pioneer Cemetery, also appeared. Cheeca has preserved this Pioneer Cemetery, where members of the founding families of Islamorada are buried. You can explore it today; it is a designated historical site. The Angel with the Broken Wing watches over the grave of Etta Pinder, who died in 1914. This small homestead was the first footprint of Islamorada, which means “Island Home” in Spanish.

Civilization came to Islamorada in 1905, when Henry Morrison Flagler built his Overseas Railway, linking the Keys to Miami and beyond. With legendary storytellers like Zane Gray and Ernest Hemingway painting an alluring landscape of romance and adventure in the Keys, it didn’t take long for the country’s richest to discover this picture perfect tropical island paradise. They came to escape the colder climates of the East and to enjoy a sportsman’s paradise.

In the 1919, a small handful of 11 businessmen from the New York Cotton Exchange purchased a plot of land just south of where Cheeca stands now and built an exclusive bonefishing club called the Matecumbe Club. This covert establishment was also known as the “Millionaire’s Club” and the “Fishing Club.” One of the members was Lunsford Richardson and his brother Smith, who founded the Vick Chemical Company. The Richardsons would take a private rail car from their native Greensboro, North Carolina, all the way down to Flagler’s railroad, which took them on to the Islamorada Rail Station.

The great Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 destroyed everything in its path, including the settlement of Islamorada, the Flagler railroad and the Matecumbe Club. The agricultural industry of the island was completely wiped out,
and many Conchs turned from farming to fishing. It did not take long for the world to discover the spectacular sport fishing Islamorada had to offer. A Miami Herald article of the time reported, “Small wonder that so many sportsmen are attracted to the Keys. Here is the fishing ground of the world, where strikes are as frequent as sunny days, and specimens that would be record catches in other parts of the world are tossed disdainfully overboard to grow up.” Islamorada was on the map as a premier fishing destination.

In 1937, The Richardson family (now known for Vicks Vapor Rub and Vicks Cough Drops) purchased the land where Cheeca stands now and hired contractor Alonso Cothran to build an exclusive family residence. It was called the Smith-Richardson house. The family sold it to All Mills in 1949, who renamed it Casa Islamorado, a hotel that featured accommodations, a restaurant and a bar. This inn was the genesis of Cheeca Lodge.

The early 1940's brought electricity and fresh water. Mrs. Clara Mae Downey from Olney, Maryland, purchased Casa Islamorado and opened the Islamorada Olney Inn in 1951. She described this early bellwether of Cheeca as “different – rather comparable to the tropical estate of a gifted host.” Clara’s first guest was President Harry Truman, who cherished his time loafing around the pool and wondering amidst the resort’s 22 quaint bungalows. Over 1,000 graceful palm trees swayed in the cool ocean breezes. Another visitor was famed newsman Edward R. Murrow, who helped the Olney Inn gain an immediate reputation as a political retreat for the Washington elite.

Fast horses, high society and a healthy dose of Keys vivacity marked the reign of the Twitchell Family in the 1960's. Cynthia, better known as “Chee,” was an heiress to the A&P grocery chain and owner of a top thoroughbred racing farm. “We took my nickname, combined it with my husband Carl’s, and came up with “Cheeca,” she recalled. The Twitchells completely refurbished the property, building the main lodge, the oceanfront villas, tennis courts, golf course and Cheeca’s trademark wooden fishing pier. Chee raised miniature tarpon and her beloved seahorses in the aquariums throughout the resort. “Suzy the Seahorse” became Cheeca’s mascot and logo, gracing the resort’s menus, brochures, towels and linens.

Avid outdoorsman and Coca Cola magnate Carl Navarre purchased Cheeca Lodge in 1976, hosting his Fortune 500 friends in for sunny days of sport fishing and golf. Celebrities flocked to the hotel during the Navarre tenure, including Jack Parr, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Ted Williams and Jack Nicklaus. Famous guests were reeling in giant bonefish right off the resort’s pier. The “Sport Fishing Capital of the World” was born, seducing wealthy adventurers from around the world.

Perhaps the most famous angler to visit Islamorada is George H. W. Bush, 41st President of the United States. A passionate fisherman, he started coming to Cheeca in the early 1970’s and spent time here before his inauguration in late 1989. He has been a regular visitor to Cheeca Lodge over the years, and helped co-found the annual George Bush Cheeca Lodge Bonefish Tournament held from 1994 to 2004. That tournament drew a plethora of celebrities and wealthy businessmen who love to fish, and has raised thousands of dollars for various charities since its inception. During the 2002 tournament, Cheeca opened the doors of the George Bush Presidential Retreat, the resort’s most luxurious accommodation. This beautiful suite is a living history of Bush’s personal and political life. It is filled with priceless photos and mementos that were donated by this former leader of the Western Hemisphere.

In 2005, Cheeca underwent a $30 million renovation which greatly enhanced the resort’s accommodations and grounds. Then, on New Year’s Eve 2008, a devastating fire destroyed the main lodge. Just one year later, the main lodge was completely re-built with a fabulous open-air lobby, a spectacular oceanfront banquet room with panoramic seaside views and an exclusive indoor/outdoor lounge area for Cheeca Club members and guests.

Cheeca Lodge & Spa is owned by Northwood Investments LLC, a privately-held real estate investment advisor with over $2 billion of assets under management. It has headquarters in New York and Los Angeles. Cheeca is managed by Northwood’s management company, Northwood Hospitality.

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