

TRAVEL

Alternate route comes by nature

From the Everglades to Biscayne Bay, three glorious national parks await in Florida

BY PENNY MUSCO

Outside the theme parks and beaches, there's a Florida that many tourists never see but shouldn't miss.

The southern part of the peninsula is home to a trio of national parks that offer adventures that Disney and the like can't begin to match. It's possible to hit the highlights in one memorable week for less than you'd spend with Mickey.

Everglades: Day 1

Everglades National Park abuts Miami-Dade County on the west. The drive from the urban area to the eastern park entrance quickly moves from metropolitan to rural, with lush vegetable and palm tree farms lining the roads.

A stop at the quirkily named "Robert Is Here" on the way in is a must. Pick up fresh fruit and goodies for lunch and try the Key lime milkshake.

Inside the park, Coe Visitor Center is the place to get a map, find out the day's schedule of events, and sign up for free or low-cost ranger talks, hikes and bike rides, as well as canoe and kayak trips (including a tour of an old Nike missile base, available during the winter). It's also the starting point for the only road within the park, a 38-mile meander off of which are several short, level hiking trails.

The Anhinga Trail, just beyond the visitor center, is a popular place for the bird it's named after, as well as other birds, alligators and turtles. The nearby Gumbo-Limbo Trail is entirely different: a shady walk through trees with reddish, slightly waxy bark that peels away like the skin of an onion. They're nicknamed tourist trees, an allusion

to sunburned visitors.

Further down the road is the Pahay-okee Overlook, a quarter-mile boardwalk leading to an observation tower with a panoramic view of the "River of Grass," the name given to the undulating landscape of saw grass and marsh.

As the park road winds south-west, the slight change in elevation — just a few inches — radically transforms the environment. The hardwood hammock (habitat of the elusive Florida panther) gives way to cypress groves dotted with small ponds favored by wood storks, ibises and vultures.

At the lowest point at the end of the park road is Flamingo Visitor Center, where the park's fresh water mingles with salt water from Florida Bay. It's the only spot in the world where alligators and crocodiles co-exist. An estimated 500 American crocs remain, as opposed to around 1 million gators.

The Flamingo region used to employ nearly 200 people to staff its restaurant, lodge, cottages and houseboats, but the one-two punch of hurricanes Katrina and Wilma in 2005 ravaged the area. Most structures, save the docks and a marina store, have been torn down. But Flamingo remains a lovely place to rent a kayak or canoe, watch seagulls, ospreys and pelicans, and try to spot a crocodile or the occasional manatee.

Everglades is along the migratory bird route. More than 350 bird species have been documented in the park, and many spend the winter here or use it as a stopover on their way south.

Everglades: Day 2

It's hard to imagine that alliga-

tors were once endangered after a stop at Shark Valley off Highway 41/Tamiami Trail on the park's north-eastern border, about 50 miles from the Coe Visitor Center.

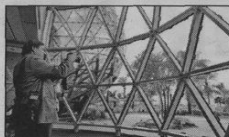
A 15-mile loop path cutting through the fresh water slough (pronounced "slew") allows walkers and bicyclists to get up close to the numerous gators. (A narrated tram tour is available for those who prefer a little more distance.)

About 40 miles further along the highway is the park's westernmost edge. Two guided boat tours leave out of the Gulf Coast Visitor Center

in Everglades City. They travel through the Ten Thousand Islands out to the Gulf of Mexico, where dolphins frolic, and into the spooky mangrove swamps hugging the coast.

Biscayne: Day 3
Biscayne National Park is less than a half-hour east from Everglades, closer to Miami. Since the park is 95 percent water, activities are focused on clear Biscayne Bay, a dolphin habitat.

A walk along a short mangrove trail outside the Dante Fascell Visitor Center can be followed by a boat

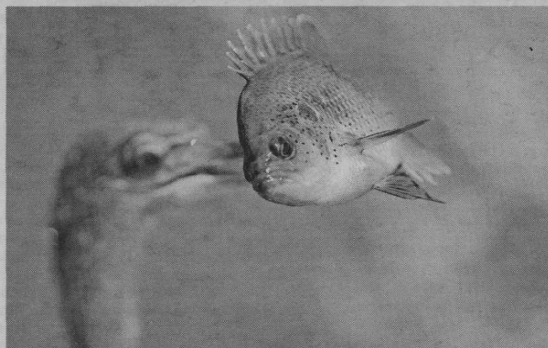


FLORIDA ISSUE

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Go to suntimes.com.



Visitors walk up the ramp of an observation tower during a tram ride stop at Everglades National Park. | DAVID ADAME-AP



A small fish hangs on the bill of an anhinga after the bird speared it while fishing in the Anhinga Trail section of Everglades National Park. | J. PAT CARTER-AP

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trip to living coral reefs for snorkeling or scuba diving. You also can take guided canoe and kayak trips, as well as a three-hour excursion to historic Boca Chita Key and its charming (but fake) lighthouse.

Dry Tortugas: Days 4-6

Three hours from Miami, at the southernmost point of the United States, sits Key West. Seventy miles further west are seven small, coral-strewn islands (called keys) which, along with the surrounding waters, make up Dry Tortugas National Park.

First discovered by Ponce de Leon in 1513, the keys provided the explorer and his crews with fresh meat from the area's green, loggerhead, leatherback and hawksbill turtles (called "tortugas" in Spanish). Soon the mariners' charts added "dry" to the name, as a warning that fresh water was non-existent.

Dry Tortugas is accessible only by seaplane, private boat or ferry from Key West, which makes it the most expensive and time-consuming of the three parks to visit. But its fascinating history and amazing bird life make it worth the trouble and expense.

Fort Jefferson, on the largest isle of Garden Key, is a hexagonal granite structure still unfinished some 150-plus years after construction started.

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During the Civil War, the fort enforced the blockade of vital southern ports and served as a military lock up for Union deserters. It was the jail that housed Dr. Samuel Mudd, convicted in President Lincoln's assassination. The death of the prison's physician during a yellow fever outbreak led Dr. Mudd to assume his duties. As a thank you, 300 soldiers petitioned President Andrew Jackson to pardon the doctor, which he did.

The massive fort isn't the only thing worth seeing. The keys lie across a principal flyway between the United States and Cuba. Frigate birds, brown boobies, roseate terns, brown pelicans and double-breasted cormorants are among the 300,000 birds that pass through the Tortugas annually on their way to and from South America. Snorkeling in the warm, clear, shallow waters surrounding the keys reveals myriad brightly colored fish and coral, and scuba divers can check out a few shipwrecks among the shoals.

One final, intriguing feature of Dry Tortugas National Park is the refugee boats. America's "wet foot, dry foot" policy — which essentially says that anyone fleeing Cuba will be turned back if caught at sea, but those who make it to U.S. soil get a chance to stay — means that many Cubans aim for Tortugas.

Penny Musco is a New Jersey-based free-lancer.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Fly into Miami or Fort Lauderdale, but don't stay there. Homestead and Florida City are ideally situated between Everglades and Biscayne national parks and offer several better-priced hotels and restaurants; floridacitytfl.us/tourist_information.htm. In addition to Robert Is Here (9200 SW 344th St., Homestead, robertishere.com), two other inexpensive eateries popular with the locals are Florida City's the Capri (935 N. Krome Ave., 305-247-1542) and El Toro Taco in Homestead (1 S. Krome Ave., 305-245-8182).

KEY WEST: The drive down U.S. 1 to Key West offers plenty of places to dine; fla-keys.com. Key West can be expensive, but the Historic Key West Inns, a chain of five inns, are clean and comfortable, centrally located and a good value (continental breakfast included). For meals, try Mangia Mangia (900 Southard St., 305-294-2469) and Pepe's, the city's oldest restaurant (806 Caroline St., 305-294-7192).

DRY TORTUGAS: Two ferries and a seaplane company schedule tours to Dry Tortugas (nps.gov/drtto for links, or call 305-242-7700). The lowest ferry rate is \$145 for adults and \$100 for kids, plus a \$5 park entrance fee, for the four-hour round trip (not counting time spent at the park). But the fare includes breakfast and lunch, a guided tour of Fort Jefferson and snorkeling equipment. Looking at it as an all-day, all-inclusive excursion, the price doesn't seem as bad. If you're feeling especially adventurous, stay overnight on Garden Key in its primitive campground (reservations necessary).