

THE EVERGLADES:

A Walk on the

Away from the beaches and theme parks, there's a Florida many tourists never see. Way down in the southern part of the peninsula lies a national park just waiting to wow tourists with its wildlife.

Everglades National Park, the nation's largest subtropical wilderness and third biggest national park in the lower 48 states, may seem too much to take in. Although it spans approximately 1.5 million acres with 156 miles of walking and canoe/kayak trails, a visit to the park can be broken down into a few manageable sections. Each section has its own unique features, accessible for a leisurely walk and picnic or several days of exploration.

From City to Country

The desire to protect the fragile ecosystem of the Everglades from its sprawling neighbor on the east, Miami-Dade County, led to the creation of the park in 1947 (and further expansion in 1989). The drive from the urban Miami area to the eastern park entrance quickly changes from metropolitan to rural, with many vegetable and palm tree farms lining the roads. On the way in, stop at Robert Is Here Fruit Stand and try a sweet/tart key lime milkshake.



the meandering 38-mile road, the only road within the park boundaries.

Several short, level hiking trails are available from the road. Two favorites, the Anhinga and Gumbo Limbo Trails, are in the Royal Palm area, just beyond the visitor center. As might be expected, the former is a popular place for viewing the bird it's named for, as well as other birds, alligators, and turtles. The Gumbo Limbo Trail is a shady walk through trees with reddish, slightly waxy bark that peels away like the skin of an onion. The trees are nicknamed "the tourist tree," an acknowledgement that visitors get too much sun, resulting in peeling, red skin.

Further down the park road is the Pa-hay-okee Overlook,



Photo: THINKSTOCK

Above: Undulating marshes of saw grass give the Everglades the nickname, "River of Grass."

Above inset: Boardwalk on the Anhinga Trail

Right: Ernest F. Coe Visitor Center

The Ernest F. Coe Visitor Center is the first stop just inside the park. Here you can get a map, find out the day's schedule of events, and sign up for a plethora of free or low-cost ranger talks, hikes, tours, bike rides, and canoe/kayak trips. It's also the starting point for your own exploration of



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Travel

a quarter-mile boardwalk that leads to an observation tower. The tower offers a panoramic view of the “River of Grass,” the name conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas gave the undulating landscape of saw grass and marsh.

When most people think of the Everglades, they think of swamps, yet rain is the region’s only source of water and much of that is shunted off before it reaches the park. Plants and animals compete with South Florida residents for the precious liquid, especially during

Biscayne National Park is less than a half hour from the Everglades and is worth a visit. Since the park is 95 percent water, activities center around clear blue Biscayne Bay,



a dolphin habitat. A walk along a short mangrove trail outside the Dante Fascell Visitor Center can be followed by a boat trip to living coral reefs for snorkeling or scuba diving. Also available are guided canoe and kayak trips and a three-hour excursion with a park ranger across the bay to historic Boca Chita Key and its charming, but fake, lighthouse.



Photo: THINKSTOCK

the dry winter season. December through March are the prime viewing months, as wildlife come out in search of water — and mosquitoes are scarce.

Natural Beauty

As the park road winds its way southwest, a slight change in elevation — just a few inches — signals the radical changes in the environment. The hardwood hammock, the habitat of the elusive and endangered Florida panther, gives way to cypress groves dotted with small ponds favored by wood storks, ibises, and vultures. At the lowest point, and the end of the park road, is Flamingo Visitor Center, where fresh water mingles with salt water from shallow Florida Bay. This is the home of the American crocodile and the only place in the world where

gators and crocs coexist. The latter are recognizable by their olive color, pointier snout, and lower teeth which show when their mouths are closed. It’s estimated only 500 American crocodiles remain as opposed to



Photo: THINKSTOCK

around one million alligators.

The Flamingo region used to be a popular destination, at one time employing nearly 200 people to staff its restaurant, lodge, cottages, and houseboats.

The double punch of Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma in 2005 ravaged the area. Most structures, save the docks and a marina store, have been torn down. 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.

On the way out, Mrazek Pond is a must-see for birders. Egrets, roseate spoonbills, anhingas, and herons congregate here. The Everglades is along the migratory bird route, and many winter over in the park or use it as a stopover on their way further south. Over 350 different species of birds have been documented in the park.

Gator Country

It's hard to imagine that alligators were once endangered, after a stop at Shark Valley on the park's northeastern border, about 50 miles from the Coe Visitor Center. A 15-mile



Photo: iStock

loop path cutting through the freshwater slough (pronounced "slew") allows walkers and bicyclists to get up close and

personal with the numerous gators that live there. A narrated tram tour is available for those who prefer a little more distance from the reptiles. At the trail's southern end, an observation tower with a huge spiraling ramp provides a terrific overview of the slough and its inhabitants.

About 40 miles further along is Highway 41, the park's westernmost edge. The drive there promises many more alligator and bird sightings, since the road borders the Big Cypress National Preserve. If hunger strikes, the Camellia Street Grill in Everglades City offers seafood, homegrown vegetables, Indian fry bread, and freshly made salsa. Two guided boat tours out of the Gulf Coast Visitor Center travel through the Ten Thousand Islands out to the Gulf of Mexico, where dolphins frolic, and into the silent, spooky mangrove swamps hugging the coast. **III**

Homestead and **Florida City** are the nearest cities to both parks and offer several hotels and eateries (www.floridacityfl.us/tourist_information.htm). Three places to try are Florida City's The Capri (935 N. Krome Ave.), an Italian restaurant popular with the locals, and El Toro Taco in Homestead (1 S. Krome Ave.), where the owner roams the dining room making sure each patron is happy. For a special treat, Paletaria y Neveria (346 Washington, Homestead) serves up Michoacan — Mexican ice cream in unusual flavors.



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