

Airboating is one way to get up close to the park's gators.



## 8 Ways to Do the Park Right...

From wading waist-deep through the swamp to witnessing gators under a full moon to kayaking through islets, visiting the park can be a one-of-a-kind adventure. **BY PAUL RUBIO**

Despite the sorry state of environmental protection, the Everglades is a poignant, if sometimes forgotten, natural masterwork of Florida. The third-largest national park in the contiguous United States, it's a mind-boggling, 2,400-square-mile expanse of subtropical wilderness, where Florida panthers roam and alligators rule. The delicate blend of sawgrass-strewn freshwater habitat, elevated hardwood hammocks and mangrove-rich saltwater flats teem with flora and fauna—to the tune of 750 plant species, 350 bird species and some

100 types of mammals and reptiles.

Though nearly impenetrable at its core, the park has a well-developed infrastructure, including multiple points of entry along the perimeter that open up a brave world of Everglades exploration. Unlike other major national parks, the pristine River of Grass is void of accommodations within or along its boundaries, making it challenging to visit it in style. However, proximity to Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Naples makes spending a day easy, with the comfort of upscale hotels and big-city excess a mere hour's drive away.

### BIKE WITH GATORS

The Everglades's closest access point to Miami, Shark Valley features a flat and easy 15-mile bike loop that doubles as a bustling wildlife hot spot in the **Shark River Slough**, the marshy river known as the River of Grass. Rent an old-school two-wheeler near the park entrance and prepare to stop at natural roadblocks—Shark Valley's prolific sunbathing alligators—and come upon huge wading birds. The halfway point is the Everglades lookout tower and its surrounding watering hole, great for panoramic shots of the park. A tram runs regularly for the less physically inclined or gator-intimidated ([sharkvalleytramtours.com](http://sharkvalleytramtours.com)).

**From downtown:** 40 miles west

### FLY ON AN AIRBOAT

Fan-propelled airboats transform the park's outskirts into a sawgrass speedway. The downside: All major operators cater to mass tourism, combining the

adventure with on-site wildlife "shows." But not all boats overflow with fanny-packed cruise-ship visitors. A private one-hour tour with **Coopertown Airboats** (from \$200 for up to four people; 305-226-6048; [coopertownairboats.com](http://coopertownairboats.com)), the Everglades's oldest airboat operator, offers a boat and driver for yourself, allowing more time for wildlife-spotting and adrenaline-packed riding; in the western outskirts of the park, get personalized service on a mini airboat with **Captain Mitch's Airboat Tours** (from \$400 for up to 10 people; 239-695-3377; [captainmitchs.com](http://captainmitchs.com)). (Note: Airboats are banned inside most of the park due to noise pollution and other environmental concerns.)

**From downtown:** Coopertown Airboats, 25 miles west; Captain Mitch's Airboat Tours, 80 miles west

### STROLL THE BOARDWALK

Down in the city of Homestead, the **Ernest F. Coe Visitor**

**Center** (*nps.gov*), named after the environmentalist instrumental in creating Everglades National Park, serves as park headquarters and is the sole entrance for deep-road access. Most visitors keep things light by sticking to the short-but-strenuous one-mile boardwalk of the Anhinga trail, rife with turtles, alligators and migratory birds. Even if this path seems like enough nature for the day, drive the extra 21 miles to reach another boardwalk trail—Mahogany Hammock—home to the country's largest living mahogany tree. Then round out the day taking in the sunset at the lesser-known Pahayokee Overlook.

*From downtown: 45 miles southwest*

### BAY WATCH

The park's southern coastal access point, Flamingo, serves as the gateway to Florida Bay. The rewards of this road-less-traveled are many: Private fishing skiffs access the bay's marine-rich saltwater flats; park-sponsored Florida Bay Tours explore an unspoiled world of white pelicans, dolphins and manatees; and **Back-country Tours** (239-695-3101; *evergladesnationalparkboat toursflamingo.com*) surveys the brackish waters of the state's

southern tip, the only place on the planet where crocodiles and alligators naturally coexist. Even better are the private birding and photography tours with **Everglades Birding** (*\$ from \$550 for a custom tour for up to two people; 954-319-1849; evergladesbirding.com*), led by naturalist David Hunt.

*From downtown: 85 miles southwest*

### ISLAND-HOP

In the park's western reaches, the Everglades's Ten Thousand Islands are a maze of coastal mangrove islets and narrow channels, traversed exclusively overwater. Those confident on their own can set out via canoe or kayak rented directly from the concession at the park's Gulf Coast Visitors Center at Everglades City. For more organized pursuits, outfitter **Everglades Area Tours** (*from \$150 for a four-hour boat-assisted kayak tour for up to six people; 800-860-1472; evergladesarea tours.com*), run by Captain Charles Wright, provides top-of-the-line guided kayak tours and swamp walks. Private birding and photography tours are also on offer, led by Wright and his partner, photographer Captain Bruce Hitchcock.

*From downtown: 85 miles west; 40 miles east of Naples*

### CAMERAS & CLYDE

Combine culture and nature at the art gallery of the celebrated photographer synonymous with the Everglades, Clyde Butcher. The walls of **Big Cypress Gallery** (*52388 Tamiami Trail, Ochopee; clydebutchersbig cypressgallery.com*) are covered with Butcher's black-and-white masterpieces snapped with his vintage large-format cameras. See his living studio, Big Cypress National Preserve, a protected area adjacent to the park and still part of the Everglades ecosystem, and step in his shoes on the Swamp Walk, a chance to shoot vistas while "slogging" (wading waist-deep through flooded terrain).

*From downtown: 55 miles west*

### AFTER DARK

During the full moons of January through April, park rangers lead much-anticipated night bike rides through Shark Valley, offering a rare look at the nocturnal behavior of the Everglades's most renowned—and notorious—creatures. Prepare to see gators, their ubiquitous glittery eyes illuminating the horizon like fireflies. Details are usually posted online the December prior. Not for the fainthearted. 305-221-8776; *nps.gov*.

### EVERGLADES LUXE

Though self-planning and a bit of roughing it comes with the territory for Everglades endeavorers, one hotel has managed to bridge the River of Grass with luxury. The three-day, two-night Miami Everglades package at the **Mandarin Oriental** commingles a day of "voluntourism" and bespoke park touring with select meals from the hotel's award-winning kitchen and nights snug in a plush bed and high-design room facing the Miami skyline. *Miami Everglades package starts at \$980; 500 Brickell Key Dr.; 305-913-8288; mandarinoriental.com.* ♦

### EVERGLADES ESSENTIALS

Bring plenty of water, some snacks—there are very limited food options within the park, even for basics—sunscreen, a light raincoat and ziplock bags for camera equipment. Park temperatures and wildlife sightings are best during the dry season, from December to April. In the wet season, double up on insect repellent, anti-itch cream and Benadryl. The mosquitoes, horseflies and no-see-ums (sand flies) return for summer vacation, starting in May, and they bite...hard.

## ...Plus, Paddling

Writer and filmmaker **BILL BELLEVILLE** traverses the park's dangerous yet peaceful waters.

**B**y canoe, we are about four days into the heart of the western Everglades via a twisting waterway route that has led us through sawgrass, mangrove forests, freshwater creeks and broad, shallow bays that were alternately serene and threatening. We are at the midway point of a nine-day, 120-mile trek: two men—photographer Timothy O'Keefe is my wingman—with 250 pounds of food, drinking water and camping gear and one 17-foot canoe.



As an environmental writer and documentary filmmaker with a passion for water-driven areas, I've long been fascinated by the Glades, which I've explored a number of times by canoe and kayak, figuring a modern version of the early dugouts used

by the Calusa Indians might better inform my quest to feel the sublime energy of the place. Our route would generally follow that of the Wilderness Waterway that winds north to south between Everglades City and Flamingo, an old fishing village now reclaimed as a ranger station at the tip of the Florida Cape. Each day we would have to find our way to a specific campsite (averaging about 13 miles); if we took a wrong turn or paddled too slowly, we would end up tethered to a mangrove branch somewhere for the night. **CONTINUED »**

## THIS IS MY MIAMI

### IRANISSA-KHAN

*Photographer*  
"If I had a free day in Miami, I would go to the Wolfsonian-FIU Museum, the Bass Museum, the Pérez Art Museum Miami and finish the day with a fabulous Miami Symphony Orchestra concert."

### MICKY WOLFSON

*Founder, Wolfsonian-FIU Museum*  
"One thing that distinguishes a local from a tourist is that native Miamians never go outside except to eat."

### DAVE BARRY

*Author*  
"In ten years I think Miami will be a spectacular city—soaring, modern buildings, teeming with life. Unfortunately, it'll also be underwater, so this will be marine life."

### MYLES CHEFETZ

*Owner, Myles Restaurant Group*  
"David Grutman is the best person to know in Miami nightlife. He's the force behind LIV and Story nightclubs."

### MITCHELL KAPLAN

*Owner, Books & Books*  
"Joe's Stone Crab seems to be written into my DNA; not too many eight-year-olds choose a birthday meal of stone crabs, as I remember doing when asked where I wanted to go for that birthday many, many years ago."

### MARIA BAIBAKOVA

*Art collector*  
"I just finished my MBA at Harvard Business School, and many of my classmates chose to move to Miami because they felt it was becoming a well-rounded and culturally informed city. Culture is making Miami a great place to live!"

### LAUREN RESKIN

*Owner, Sweet Records*  
"O Cinema in Wynwood is a great small theater that always plays the biggest indies and other interesting films."

### JUSTIN LEVINE

*Partner, The Oplum Group*  
"At the end of the night, no matter who you are or what music you like, all roads lead to Space [a downtown warehouse nightclub]."