

Trailing nature with a paddle

GREAT ESCAPES

Liz Anderson

You may never be a serious birder and long-distance canoeing may be a bit beyond you, but don't fret, you can still answer the call of the Wild Kingdom on the Great Calusa Blueway Paddling Trail.

One of Western Florida's hidden treasures, the Great Calusa Blueway is not only one of the state's best areas for birding, but it's also one of the few areas that still feels uninhabited — at least by humans. Things that fly, crawl and swim, on the other hand, you'll find in stunning abundance.

Fish, oysters, crabs and shrimp thrive in the calm waters, so do playful Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. You'll also find plenty of the slow-moving gentle giants of the south, the West Indian Manatee. If you're so inclined, you can even slip into the water for a quick swim with them. Friendly and harmless, manatees ask nothing from a human swimming companion but the occasional massage of their mossy hides.

Just a few hours drive from the man-made attractions of Orlando is an all-natural bird and animal adventure for amateurs. Just rent a kayak earlier in your trip and are feeling a tad over-commercialized!

take a quick paddle over to the shore and float. The birds will arrive in no time.

Fragrant mangroves

The sheltered waterway is filled with snowy white ibis and elegant, long-legged herons delicately parsing the marsh grasses with their slender beaks, looking for their favourite sushi. Above the fragrant mangroves that line the

shore, pelicans cruise lazily through the air, competing with roseate spoonbills, bald eagles and osprey for the banquet below.

Look carefully at the shore and you might just see a gopher tortoise stick his miniature dinosaur head out of a sandy burrow to see what's up. Stare hard into the tree-tops and the bandit-mask of a happy raccoon might stare back at you. Chances are, he too will be enjoying a freshly caught supper of fish.

Charted first by the Calusa Indians more than 2,000 years ago, and now the project of Lee County Parks and Recreation, the Great Calusa Blueway is both funded and protected by tourist dollars. That in itself is a great ecological comfort if you've just made a major investment in Mickey earlier in your trip and are feeling a tad over-commercialized!

The Blueways twin regions are exquisite, and in combination encompass two distinct areas on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico: The Estero Bay region, and Pine Island Sound

and Matlacha Pass. Together they provide a view of Florida's natural assets that's quite unique.

Perhaps what's most inviting about this kayaking and canoeing area is the ease with which any wannabe-naturalist, of any ability, can manage to get around. Even those who have never held a paddle can handle the calm, mostly shallow waters, safe from rocks and free of white water. This is canoeing for cowards!

Another advantage of the Blueway is the great selection of parks and beaches that provide perfect spots for picnicking, swimming and even overnight camping, so be sure to toss your tent and sleeping bags into the car when you pack for the big ride down Interstate 95.

The Blueway is a part of the great sunshine state that few tourists have yet to discover, and it's as lovely during the months of May and June as it is during the winter.

Looking for a break from Mickey Mania? Listen hard. The Blueway could be calling your name.





LIZ ANDERSON PHOTO

Kayaking on the Great Calusa Blueway Paddling Trail offers an all-natural bird and animal adventure for visitors.