



Florida as an Ecotourism Destination

To the rest of the world, Florida has been a place to look for gold and treasure, a land of hope for better opportunities, an exotic beach escape, a swampy mosquito-ridden backwater, and even a place where voters don't know how to count ballots. Florida is seen as a place to grow oranges, see alligators, swim with dolphins, visit retired relatives, and drink tropical beverages by the pool in winter—many things you don't typically experience in other states. Florida may be all of these things, but the person who limits his or her view of Florida to just these alone is missing out on getting to know the real essence of Florida, its nature.

With its unique geography, geology, and climate, Florida and its preserved natural lands are perfect for a nature travel destination. The state's three national forests, 11 national parks, 28 national wildlife refuges, 157 state parks, and many other public lands make Florida a perfect place for nature travelers. Florida is already well-versed in traditional tourism and has the facilities and "system" set up for tourists. When a state that relies on tourism for its economy brings nature-based recreation into the mix, the state and nature travelers both can benefit.

According to Visit Florida, the state's official tourism bureau, nature tourism is the fastest-growing sector of world tourism, growing by 30 percent per year in the world. Nature tourism is strong in Florida, with other statistics from the bureau that seem to back this up: Florida state parks contributed \$249 million to local economies for the fiscal year 1997–98. Florida canoe liveries bring in \$38.5 million each year. Regional tourism development councils are spending more money to advertise their natural lands. More than half of Florida vacationers report participating in nature-based activities. All of these Visit Florida statistics point to a keen interest in nature travel and recreation.

The state of Florida is so proud of its suitability for nature travel that in 2000 it opened the Nature and Heritage Tourism Center (386-397-4461), a

kind of information warehouse for this kind of tourism. If you arrive in Florida by car going south on I-75, stop by the center in White Springs for exhibits and kiosks about your travel interests.

The Nature of Florida

Florida is blessed with a distinctive location that makes it what it is. With a peninsula that stretches from the coastal plains of the south toward the Tropic of Cancer—with the Gulf of Mexico on one side, the Atlantic Ocean on the eastern side, and the Caribbean Sea to the south—Florida encompasses a variety of natural habitats from coastal dunes to limestone caverns, desertlike scrublands to wide open prairies, saltwater grassy marshes to dense subtropical forests, pine flatwood forests to rolling sandhills. Its mild winter climate makes Florida a target for more northerly tourists and seasonal residents during this time in particular.

Winter is known as the dry season, the half of the year when tropical storms and hurricanes don't threaten the state and the summer rains have passed. Cooler temperatures and reduced humidity from roughly November through April make this time of year more pleasant, particularly for nature travelers who will be outdoors.

Northwestern Florida, also known as the panhandle or the Emerald Coast, is less developed than other parts of Florida. Coastal resorts and preplanned communities are springing up along the Gulf of Mexico, and some inland towns are growing larger. However, this is where you'll find the largest national forest (the Apalachicola) and pristine rivers.

Northern Florida, in some places considered the Original Florida because of its role in the state's history, has pine forests and beautiful coastal marshes. As far as nature goes, though, it may be best known for its hundreds of freshwater springs and underground caves.

Central Florida is dotted with lakes of all sizes, interspersed with hills and prairies. Swamps feed rivers whose water empties into Florida's coastal waters in all directions. The eastern side's Indian River Lagoon and the western side's Tampa Bay are popular recreational areas and important estuaries.

Southern Florida is dominated by wetlands—most notably the Everglades—marl prairies, and hardwood hammocks. Both coasts are heavily populated, but there are pockets of preserved lands.

Ecotourism/Nature Travel/Adventure Travel/Soft Adventure: What's the Difference?

The book title uses the word eco-trip to describe visiting a place while keeping the ecology or environment in mind. Most of the time, the book will use the term “nature travel” to describe visiting parks, forests, refuges, preserves, conservation areas, and the like to enjoy their beauty and recreational opportunities. Travel agencies, tourism brochures, and magazines use many different terms to describe the different kinds of trips people take:

Nature Travel

Nature travel is pretty much what it sounds like—traveling to be in nature. This usually means an overnight stay in or near the natural area you're visiting. But nearby residents can get as much out of a day trip to a local area as a foreign visitor can.

Adventure Travel

Appealing to people who are looking for a vacation with an edge or an element of danger, adventure travel usually includes a sport or is heavy on gear. If a traveler's goal is an adrenaline rush, he or she is probably after adventure travel. Examples include multiday mountain treks and whitewater rafting tours.

Soft Adventure

Not quite as risky or grueling as adventure travel, a soft adventure trip is a good choice for active people like family groups. This might be a weekend of riding horseback or a guided walking tour through the country.

Ecotourism

Often used when referring to nature travel in developing countries, this term seems to have been given special reverence by those who consider themselves experts on the subject. Yet ecological tourism doesn't have to be reserved just for remote places that require a large travel budget and an interpreter. Ecotourism is nature travel with more emphasis on promoting the welfare of the destination's resources and residents.

Many people are concerned about ecotourism's impact on the environment, pointing out the irony that those who explore a region's natural areas

can end up making those areas worse for the wear. There is some validity to this concern. For example, studies have shown that wildlife can be stressed in the presence of people. More people coming into an area usually means more waste and more use of resources. Some visitors don't take care to avoid trampling vegetation. Proponents of ecotourism and nature travel typically say that the benefits—namely, education—outweigh the downsides. There is truth to this statement, too, as people tend to protect what they understand and love.

There may be no definitive answer or solution to the impact question. Learning about an area and its environment before traveling—like reading this book—can help nature travelers be aware of a region's sensitivities. Nature tour guide certification is another step that some areas are taking to “educate the educators” so they don't pass mistakes on to their guests. As more people pour into natural areas, we may see some environmentally sensitive natural areas limiting the number of visitors allowed, in an attempt to reduce traffic.

Nature Travel Tips

The best advice is often the most simple. It seems so elementary that it's often overlooked or avoided. But with travel, the best advice is to *know before you go*. Even if you like to make decisions about what to do on the spur of the moment, you're going to need to know a few basics.

The first tip for planning anything from a week-long vacation to an overnight stay is to call ahead, especially when it comes to visiting natural areas that are public lands. Many people have gotten used to navigating the Web for travel information, and it certainly has made *know before you go* a lot easier. However, many public agencies are underfunded, understaffed—and simply may not make the best use of the Internet to do all they can to inform visitors. Months may go by before a national wildlife refuge Web site is updated, for example. Some information available on the Internet is just plain wrong. So although it seems too simple, call each natural area you plan to visit before you leave.

When you call, ask about the things you most want to know. For example, are you likely to see a roseate spoonbill, and where? Is fishing allowed? Do you have to bring your own gear, or can you rent it? Are restroom facilities available? Also ask questions about the basics: When does the park open? How much is the entrance fee? Do you need a permit? How long can you stay? This book has tried to provide this information, but change is constant. Phone numbers change, companies go out of business, campgrounds close for reno-

vation, and prices increase. Calling ahead to ask questions is almost like taking out insurance against disappointment.

When you arrive at a natural area with a ranger station or visitor center near the entrance, always request a park map or guide. (If you don't want to keep it, you can always return it before you leave so someone else can use it—reduce, reuse, recycle.) If you want to explore the trails there, ask if a separate trail map is available. If you are interested in wildlife, inquire about lists of birds, reptiles, or mammals found in the park. Many natural areas provide such literature if you ask. If the natural area doesn't have a ranger station or visitor center, look for a kiosk. This may be just a two-sided board with legs where you can pick up a park guide or review information about the area on the board.

As a nature traveler, let the businesses you patronize know that you are spending money there because of the local natural lands. This will show the economic community and voters these lands are worth protecting, not only because your presence proves people are using the land, but also because nature travel can be good business. The more that nature travelers make their presence and intentions known, the more that natural lands and nature travel will continue to prosper.

Hours and Entrance Fees

National Parks

Whether they're called parks (like the Everglades), seashores (like Canaveral), or something else, National Park Service lands' hours and entrance fees vary. Some entrance fees are good for a whole week.

Frequent visitors may want to purchase one of the service's special passes to save money:

The National Parks Pass costs \$50.00 and covers the cost of admission to parks for one year. You can buy a pass from the National Park Foundation (888-GO-PARKS; www.nationalparks.org).

The Golden Age Passport is available to U.S. citizens or permanent residents who are at least sixty-two years old. The \$10.00 fee gives passholders a lifetime of entrance fees and 50 percent discounts on some activities like camping and tours. These passes must be purchased in person at a federal area entrance.

Golden Access Passports are for U.S. citizens or permanent residents who are blind or permanently disabled. Like the Golden Age Passport, this pass is for a lifetime, includes a half-price discount on some recreational fees, and must be purchased in person on site.

National Forests

Generally, national forests are open around the clock because the community uses roads that go through them. Some recreation areas may be open only during daylight hours, however.

Again because of access issues, national forests generally don't charge fees; you can drive right through them. But if you want to enter certain recreation areas or camp, you may be charged a fee, either at an entrance station or at an honor box.

National Parks Pass holders can add a \$15.00 Golden Eagle hologram to a pass for access to national forests and wildlife refuges.

Individual forests also sell annual passes for entrance to certain recreation areas; contact each forest about these passes if you are going to return several times throughout the year.

National Wildlife Refuges

Wildlife refuge hours vary from location to location. Refuge visitor centers and ranger stations keep regular hours.

Entrance fees also vary. Some refuges are free, others accept donations, and others charge for access, usually not more than \$5.00.

National Parks Pass holders can add a \$15.00 Golden Eagle hologram to a pass for access to national forests and wildlife refuges.

State Parks

State parks are open every day from 8 a.m. until sundown, unless otherwise stated. Entrance fees are usually between \$2.00 and \$5.00 per vehicle for up to eight people; each extra individual pays \$1.00. People who enter parks on foot or bicycle usually pay \$1.00.

State parks offer entrance passes like the national parks. A Real Florida Vacation Pass is good for seven days and costs \$10.00 to \$12.50. The Annual Entrance Pass for a family of up to eight people in one vehicle (\$60.00) or for an individual (\$30.00) allows admission into state parks for a year. A Special Recreational Use Pass is like the Annual Entrance Pass, but includes the cost of activities fees (not camping), for a family of up to four people (\$80.00) or individuals (\$40.00).

State Forests

State forests generally are open all hours.

Some state forests are free, and others charge an entrance fee, usually \$1.00 per person. Frequent visitors can buy an Annual Day Use Pass for \$30.00 from any forest office. Camping requires an extra fee.

Trail Tripping

If you are new to using trails for hiking, bicycling, horseback riding, or paddling, learn about any equipment and techniques you need to know before leaving the trailhead. Books on some of these subjects are listed in the Resources section of this book (appendix 1).

Before heading down the trail, find out how long the trail is and about how long it might take to complete it. Unless a natural area allows open access, stay on trails to protect habitats and to avoid getting lost. Many times, even though signs are posted to remind people to stay on a trail or to stay off dunes, park visitors ignore these warnings to the detriment of the natural landscape and habitat. By staying in designated areas, nature travelers can help preserve these areas for future generations.

If you are planning an overnight trip along a trail—or if you are exploring a wilderness area for the day—be sure to tell someone what your plans are. Even if you don't file a formal trip report with a ranger (required in some places and on certain trails), someone you know should have an idea of your plans. Leave information about the time you left, the route you're taking, and when you expect to return, as well as an emergency phone number to call if you don't come back at your expected time. This person also should be responsible enough to actually watch for your return. No one expects to encounter danger while having fun outdoors, but it's best to be prepared.

Most natural areas in Florida require horseback riders to carry proof of a negative Coggins test (which shows that a horse doesn't carry the virus causing an equine anemia).

If you enjoy using trails in different places, you should know the Florida Division of Forestry offers programs for hikers and horseback riders. The Trailwalker program awards patches to people who hike a certain number of miles on specific state forest trails. The more trails you hike, the more patches you can earn. The similar Trailtrotter program rewards equestrians who ride specific state forest trails. For information on these programs, contact the Florida Division of Forestry or any state forest office.

Camping

Not every nature traveler is a camper, and not every camper is a tent camper. Whatever way you choose to spend the night on your eco-trip is simply a matter of personal preference. Just try to honor other nature travelers' preferences.

It's always best to make a reservation for a campsite because campgrounds can fill up months ahead of time, especially during Florida's peak tourist sea-

sons. (Typically, northern Florida gets more tourists during the summer while central and southern Florida receive more visitors in the winter.) Most campgrounds (and outfitters) encourage or even require reservations. There are few things more frustrating about traveling than to drive for hours, only to arrive at a place and find there's nothing left for you. Some places take campers on a first-come, first-served basis. Others, like some county parks, take reservations only in person to aid local residents in getting campsites. A good tip is to travel with a campground directory (like *Florida Camping* by Marilyn Moore) and also a directory or two from nationwide chain hotels you like, just in case something happens (your reservation is lost, the campground closes unexpectedly because of extreme weather, you decide you don't like your campground, etc.).

Florida state parks have consistently well-maintained campgrounds. Most state park campgrounds have a central restroom area with showers. Individual campsites usually have a picnic table and fire grill; some have water and electricity, and others do not. State park campgrounds are detailed on the ReserveAmerica Web site. ReserveAmerica is a company in charge of taking reservations for Florida state park campgrounds and most state park cabins. (It also takes reservations for many other campgrounds in the United States.) You can make a reservation online or by phone; see the Resources section of this book for contact information (appendix 1).

ReserveAmerica usually doesn't take reservations for primitive campsites. So if you really like to rough it—pack in and out everything you need, forgo facilities, and sometimes hike a few miles to get to the campsite—contact the natural area itself. Primitive campsites vary in their “primitiveness,” with some offering portable toilets close to a road, and others providing little more than a cleared space on the ground for a tent. Find out all you can about the primitive site when you call to make your reservation.

Check out books on camping in Florida listed in the Resources section of this book (appendix 1).

Wildlife Watching

Wildlife enjoy Florida's climate and variety of habitats, from the temperate to the subtropical. Wildlife watching, especially bird-watching, is such a big part of nature travel that the topic has its own tips section at the end of the book (appendix 2).

Pets

Many Florida natural areas allow pets as long as they are controlled and on a leash. Some places require proof of rabies vaccination. Other areas forbid pets. Before you arrive with your pet, call ahead to the place you want to visit to check on the pet policy.

Getting Around

Many people arrive in Florida by plane at a number of airports around the state. Most airports are magnets for rental car companies, so once you arrive, you should be able to find transportation from the airport to your destination.

Urban areas provide public transportation, but these lines may not reach natural areas. On the other hand, ferries are required or provide the best way to reach certain remote islands. Check with the county of the place you are visiting to find out bus routes and the like.

The major interstates will take you to most areas in Florida, but several spots in this book are in locations far from these well-traveled roads. I-95 runs north and south in the eastern part of Florida, ending in Miami; I-75 runs north and south through central, then western, then southern portions, turning east and also ending in Miami; I-10 crosses Florida east and west, ending in Jacksonville; I-4 cuts across the state diagonally from Tampa to Daytona Beach. In addition, there are several toll roads, most notably the Florida Turnpike (which begins at I-75 south of Ocala and ends north of the Keys) and the east/west portion of I-75 known as Alligator Alley, which spans the Everglades area between Naples and Fort Lauderdale.

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) can provide maps, locations of rest areas, toll amounts, and other useful information. FDOT also has placed signs near most natural areas to show the way to places that are off the main road or to indicate areas that are Great Florida Birding Trail sites. In both cases, these signs are brown. If you are traveling and looking for a natural area, watch for the brown signs along the road to show the way.

How to Use This Book

This is not a book that will tell you how to see the state in ten days or make use of organized commercial tours. If you want to ride in a bus full of people to a natural area where everything is arranged for you, this book is not for you.

However, if you want to get to know a specific spot in Florida and allow nature to reveal itself to you on your own schedule, this book aims to provide details that will help.

Arranged in thirty general geographic locations around the state, this book tells you about the land and habitats, what to do and see, the history, the wildlife, notable nearby attractions, and suggestions on places to stay. Each chapter takes a holistic approach to its region so you can begin planning your trip—even if you don't want to go everywhere, do everything, and see it all. Because of this arrangement into geographical clusters, not every notable natural area could be included. If, when you are traveling, you find a natural area you particularly like, ask a ranger or volunteer about other similar places to visit nearby. Most will be happy to tell you about their favorite places—many of which are likely to be in this book.

You can “shop” for a weekend getaway or a weeklong vacation by looking at the highlights for each chapter or choosing a portion of the state you want to visit. If you are interested in wildlife or particular outdoor activities, you might want to search for areas based on these interests. (Suggestions for activity-based locations are in appendix 3.)

Be sure to check the Resources section of the book for contact information of agencies, companies, and organizations that are mentioned frequently throughout the book, like the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, ReserveAmerica, and the Florida Trail Association (appendix 1).

Whether you're a resident wanting to get better acquainted with your state or a first-time visitor looking for the best introduction to Florida, hopefully you will find useful information here.