

TOURISM

Tour goes deeper into Glades

*EVERGLADES, FROM 1BR

tour, this new low-to-the-ground Jeep goes right into the grassy plains and muddy canals — areas seldom seen by tourists on the Seminole Tribe's 2,200-acre wildlife reserve in the Big Cypress reservation near Clewiston.

Passengers get up close and personal with wild animals, including ostriches, Asian water buffalo, American bison, feral pigs, ibis and alligators.

Escorting them on the tour are seasoned swamp professionals like Wilsey.

Called Gator Man, the burly, 53-year-old Wilsey grew up along the Tamiami Trail and was the kind of kid whose idea of fun was swimming with alligators. His curiosity — some would say passion — grew as he got older.

He learned to wrestle gators and catch rattlesnakes with his bare hands, and has the battle scars on his arms and hands to prove it.

IN THE WILD

During the tour, Wilsey shows how someone can survive by eating hearts of palm, sawgrass, certain berries and dog fennel, a weedy plant which can also be used for other purposes.

"If you rub dog fennel on your skin, its oils serve as a natural mosquito repellent," explained Wilsey, rubbing the feathery herb between his palms.

It's also a good substitute for toilet paper.

The idea of an eco-tour came after many requests from tourists who wanted a private one-on-one exploration into the Everglades with an expert who could answer all their questions. It is, essentially, an Everglades seminar on wheels.

The tour — which is by appointment only — does not come cheap. It costs \$375,



PHOTOS BY JOE RIMKUS JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

SURVIVAL SKILLS: Everglades guide Glenn Wilsey demonstrates how to start a fire on a tour of the Seminole Tribe's wildlife reserve inside the Big Cypress reservation.

which can be split among four people. A group of six share a ride for \$475. Tours can be booked with either English or Spanish-language speakers.

The tour starts with a guide greeting tourists in the gift shop. The guide bears a

small critter like a baby alligator that tourists can touch

and hold.

They are escorted to the Swamp Water Cafe where they can feast on a fresh platter of Seminole Indian fare, such as fried alligator, frog's legs, catfish, hearts of palm and traditional fry bread with honey.

Next they board the Jeep, which at first goes through

the traditional route before going off-road.

Ed Woods, director of Billie Swamp Safari, says that by September they expect to have a night version of the tour.

This would enable tourists, wearing night-vision goggles, to see predators that come out at night: Florida

IF YOU GO

What: Swamp Buggy Eco-Tour.

Where: Billie Swamp Safari in the Big Cypress Seminole Indian reservation near Clewiston. Take Interstate 75 to Exit 49.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

Cost: \$375 for up to 4 people; \$425 for 5 people; \$475 for 6 people. Includes Seminole platter of alligator, frog's legs, catfish and fry bread.

Information: Call 800-949-6101.

panthers, bobcats and black bear.

"You are safer walking in the Everglades with no weapon than you are walking in any major city in the world with a weapon," said Wilsey, whose goal is to dispel Hollywood movie myths that the Everglades are damp and dangerous.

UNPREDICTABLE

What people see and experience on the trip depends purely on luck, says Cindy Malin, spokeswoman for the Eco-Tour.

In recent test runs, buggy sights ranged from a Florida panther taking down a deer to a bison giving birth, Malin said.

"But that's nature. You never know what is going to happen. It's the food chain," she said.

Some daring visitors, she said, have asked for more intense Everglades tours where they can trudge through swampy muck and get down and dirty.

Not going to happen, Malin said.

"We cannot do that due to the fact that we cannot ensure their safety," she said. "There are wild animals and poisonous snakes out there."



TAKING A DIP: Two Asian water buffalo in the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation's preserve wade into the water to cool off.



ABUNDANT WILDLIFE: A flock of ibis are among the sights on the tour, along with ostriches, water buffalo, bison, feral pigs and alligators.