



KIM SCHNEIDER, ANN ARBOR NEWS BUREAU

Airboat rides are a popular and safe way to explore alligator-infested waters and see a wealth of birds. This airboat operates at the eastern gateway to Everglades National Park, about 20 minutes from Fort Lauderdale.

FLORIDA FROM E1

Quick trip to the Bahamas easy from Fort Lauderdale

(about \$50-\$125, depending on ride length). Info: www.water-taxi.com/FortLauderdale or www.gondolaman.com

Nostalgia and bargains

While Fort Lauderdale is more known for haute couture these days than bargains, there still is Florida's Swap Shop, an odd but entertaining conglomeration of 14 outdoor drive-in movie screens and hundreds of indoor and outdoor flea market stalls. You could spend a full day and evening at the massive complex at 3291 W. Sunrise Blvd., a sometime concert venue that has played host to groups such as Three Dog Night and KC and the Sunshine Band. Or just pop into one of south Florida's busiest and most cost-effective attractions to pick up a sundress, some flip flops or a beach volleyball at bargain rates. Info: www.floridaswapshop.com.

Gators and nature

The gateway to Everglades National Park is a 20-minute drive from Fort Lauderdale, making for an easy - and unforgettable - outing. Just pick your preferred means of exploring the "river of



COURTESY, FORT LAUDERDALE CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

Beach beauty abounds along Fort Lauderdale's coastline.

grass." There are the airboat tours memorialized by the TV series "Gentle Ben" (Everglades Holiday Park), the swamp buggy (Billie Swamp Safari); or tall platforms that allow you to walk among the wildlife but out of reach of ever-present alligator jaws.

At the Holiday Park, airboats (\$21.50 adults, \$11.50 children) careen through the tall grass on tours led by true characters, such as our guide - a man who claims to live and swim among the gators. The natural drama of a baby alligator stalking some

unsuspecting birds as it hid under the leaves was a trip highlight as tour-goers shouted "look out little bird!" And one gator did chase us away from a gigantic mate lounging on shore.

Post-trip, you can watch alligator wrestling, a survival necessity for the Seminole Indians, who run the Billie Swamp Safari and offer extras that include an optional (\$45 a night) stay in a native Chickee hut, complete with traditional stories told over the campfire, and dining options such as gator nuggets and fry bread

with honey. Info: www.seminoletribe.com/safari, 800-949-6101; www.evergladesholiday-park.com, 800-226-2244.

International waters

When you wake up and decide you want to spend the day in the Bahamas, Fort Lauderdale is a good place to be. Hop on Discovery Cruise Line (www.discoverycruise-line.com, 800-259-1579) at 7:45 a.m., explore the Bahamas for about four hours and return to Florida around 10 p.m. If you can plan ahead a bit, Imperial Majesty's budget ship, The Regal Empress, offers a better bargain. For about \$129 for adults, \$99 for children - plus port and fuel fees - you get two nights aboard the cruise ship and a full day in the Bahamas. There, you choose from optional snorkeling or all-inclusive beach visits. Or you can go it alone and take a cab to the beach or rent one of the ever-present scooters. Info: www.imperialmajesty.com, 800-511-5737.

For general travel information, contact the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-227-8669, or www.sunny.org.