

# GATOR COUNTRY

Even if swamp walks aren't your thing, in the Everglades you can dip a toe or spend a week. For the best weather, visit between December and March. Here's a roundup of options for every type of traveler:

## the day-tripper

To see nature without giving up poolside mojitos, stay in Naples or Miami and you'll be less than two hours away.

### DO

**Everglades National Park, Shark Valley Visitor Center** (305.221.8766, nps.gov/ever): About 25 miles west of the turnpike on the Tamiami Trail is this access point to the park, with paved trails, tram rides, an observation tower and bikes for rent.

**Clyde Butcher Gallery** (239.695.2428, clydebutcher

.com): View black-and-white photos that pay homage to the region's landscape at this renowned local photographer's gallery in Ochopee.

Down the road, find **Skunk Ape Research Headquarters** (239.695.2275, skunkape.info), chock-full of Skunky merchandise and some highly entertaining local characters.

**Billie Swamp Safari** (800.949.6101, semtribe.com/safari): Airboat rides, swamp buggy tours and informative critter shows at the Seminoles'

Big Cypress reservation make the Everglades accessible, especially to those with children.

On the way out of the reservation, don't miss the **Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum**, (863.902.1113, ahtathiki.com) which contains displays of Seminole history and culture and an elevated boardwalk out back that loops through a lovely stretch of cypress forest.

### EAT

Dip into what we think are the finest gator nuggets at the Safari's **Swamp Water Café**.

## the overnigher

Swamp walks, canoe paddles and afternoon hikes on coastal trails round out a longer stay in Everglades National Park:

To access the park from *Homestead*:

### STAY

**Redland Hotel** (305.246.1904, redlandhotel.com): This spotless and well-maintained, frontier-style inn dates to 1904 and has a cozy library that's perfect for evening gatherings.

### EAT

**Royal Palm Grill & Deli** (305.246.5701, royalpalmgrill.com): An always-jam-packed pharmacy lunch counter that serves piping-hot country breakfasts (think biscuits and gravy and towers of fluffy pancakes) — perfect fuel for a long day of hiking.

### DO

**Everglades National Park, Ernest Coe Visitor Center** (305.242.7700, nps.gov/ever): A 38-mile road leads

from the park's main entrance to Flamingo, where you'll find campground facilities, boat tours, a marina, and hiking and canoeing trails. Other marked trails branch off from the main road. A good combination are the conjoined Aningha and Gumbo Limbo trails, which offer an easy way to enjoy both land and marine environments (and the sight of snoozing alligators).

To access the park from *Everglades City*:

### STAY

**The Ivey House B&B** (239.695.3299, iveyhouse.com): Immaculate rooms, a friendly staff full of great tips for navigating the area and a screened-in pool (no bugs!) make this the ideal home base.

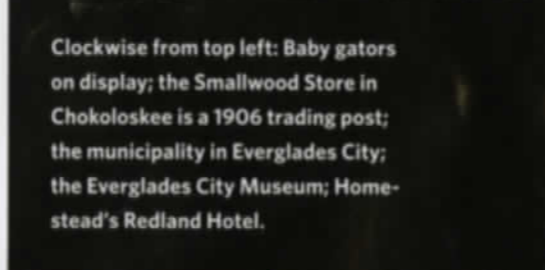
### EAT

**Camellia Street Grill** (239.695.2003): Adjacent to the docks where local crabbers bring in the day's catch, this quaint, waterfront

eatery is renowned for fresh seafood and a lip-smacking fish sandwich. For cocktails, hit the lakeside **Seafood Depot** (239.695.0075) where locals gather on the screened-in deck for hearty chitchat and live music every Saturday afternoon.

### DO

Get ready to get in the water. Everglades City is the place to be if you want to do a morning canoe trip on a local river or the Ten Thousand Islands. One of the town's leading outfitters, **Everglades Rentals & Eco-Adventures** (evergladesadventures.com), can organize all manner of excursions, including land-based outings such as swamp walks in the Fakahatchee, plus they're conveniently situated inside the Ivey House. If you're looking to reel in tarpon, snook or redfish, book a trip with Gary Thompson (239.695.4102), a renowned local guide whose father and grandfather have taken U.S. presidents fishing.



Clockwise from top left: Baby gators on display; the Smallwood Store in Chokoloskee is a 1906 trading post; the municipality in Everglades City; the Everglades City Museum; Homestead's Redland Hotel.



Ultimately, Everglades culture is one that combines an I-can-wrestle-gators swagger with a sincere admiration of the great outdoors — an ethos inherited from the hardy pioneers who settled this forbidding area in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the even harder Seminoles, who spent much of the 1800s successfully outwitting the U.S. Army in its swamps.

Butch Wilson is from Clewiston, the sugar-company town in the shadow of Lake Okeechobee, where the Everglades begin. He is the sixth generation of his family to live in Florida and the third generation to live within sight of Okeechobee. He grew up bass fishing and frog hunting and worked for U.S. Sugar for 32 years. He is now curator of the Clewiston Museum, a regional history gallery attached to the local chamber of commerce. The untamed nature of the landscape is something that remains close to Wilson's heart. "That world came right up to us; you didn't have to go far to be in the Everglades — the saw grass was in your backyard," he recalls.

Gary Thompson, a third-generation charter fisherman from Everglades City, says the landscape is something he never grows tired of admiring during his regular excursions around the Ten Thousand Islands. "How many people can say they've watched a gator build a nest? And then watched that gator lay its eggs? And then watched the baby gators pulled out by the mama? Well, I've seen it a dozen times. There's nothing else like it."

For the area's inhabitants — whether their families have been here for 10 years or 500 — it's not just a general appreciation of the outdoors; it's an infatuation with the Everglades themselves. Mary Tigertail, who works at Billie Swamp Safari, loves the Everglades best during the summer when the downpours are torrential and the water is high around the clusters of cypress trees. This reminds her of her youth when her family lived in chickees and bathed in the bracing water of an outdoor hand pump. "It's peace and quiet," she says of life on the Big Cypress reservation. "If you respect [the gators and snakes], they don't mess with you." She adds with a chuckle: "Besides, no alligator is ever going to rob you. In the city, though, you never know."

Ranger Tony Terry has barely left the area in his 16 years here. "I got into the park service for *this* park," he says proudly. As part of the job, he has chased down poachers of endangered species and detained fishermen smuggling drugs. He once helped relocate a gator that decided to take regular naps in campground bathrooms, much to the dismay of visitors. For Terry, the job is an opportunity to help look after an environment he holds in high esteem. On his days off, he doesn't leave the Everglades; he goes in deeper. "I get into my canoe and go fishing."

And that's where he finds himself, in the 'glades, where mangrove islets hover just above a watery horizon. "This place has survived so much," he says thoughtfully as he observes a crocodile bobbing gently under the ranger station's dock. "It's survived [developer] Henry Flagler; it's survived road-building; it's survived the recent real-estate boom. The Everglades has a lot to say." Listen closely. You may find that you can't help but love it too.

To help preserve the "River of Grass," join the Friends of the Everglades (everglades.org), the Save Our Everglades Trust (saveourevergladestrust.org) or the South Florida National Parks Trust (southfloridaparks.org).