

# Enduring everglades

exploring Florida's South... naturally by Alex Eberspaecher photos by Judy Eberspaecher



At approximately two metres it wasn't a very large alligator, in fact there was one that was quite a bit longer just on the other side of the pond, but this one looked quite ferocious and was more alert than all the others as it looked directly into the camera that was barely an alligator's length from Judy. I wondered who would blink first.

I also wondered what alligators eat, because this was about number 500 she had photographed and we never saw a single one devour anything – just stalking.

The setting was surreal at best. The black water, the old cypress knees that slowly were taking over the mangrove swamp, would have been the ideal setting for a fairy tale. The unbelievable beautiful and brightly coloured orchids that adorned nearly every tree and of course the ever-present Spanish Moss completed an absurd setting that was, as an old Seminole native told me earlier, the mysterious home of the Swamp Angel.

Distinctive on their own, there are two Floridas. The one we were exploring, the natural part with all its glory, mystique and tranquillity, has so much serenity that even the alligators sleep most of the time. Then there are scores of attractive and natural beaches by the ocean, without alligators, to the south and definitely out on the Keys. But there is also the other Florida, the well known, with its Disney World and Universal Studios, the circus around Cape Canaveral on launch day and an ever expanding world of exclusive retirement subdivisions that are only interrupted by modern shopping centres amidst a never-ending flow of road traffic.

This part of Florida we didn't care to visit but we did spend a few glorious and adventurous days at Billie's Swamp Safari near Alligator Alley in the northern part of the Everglades.

Lore has it that the Swamp Angels and the Seminole Indians managed to live side by side and until this day, the two have managed to keep the developers out of the Big Cypress Swamp, today's home of the Seminoles. To visit the area, the reservation and Billie's Safari, drive along Alligator Alley, actually I 75 on your map until you reach exit 49, which is about half way between Fort Lauderdale and Naples. Turn north for about 30 km and you are smack in the middle of the Big Cypress Indian Reservation. Now 30 km is not far, but it probably will be the slowest drive you've had since parking on the QEW in rush hour. Not because of the traffic, there is only a car every few minutes, but because of the Alligators sunning themselves on the bank of the canal that runs along the side of the road. If you should be interested in bird watching as well, it will take even longer. On the reservation, you find a full service resort with RV and tent sites along with a few cabins. Not far from there, Billie's is highly recommended if you would like to take a Swamp Buggy ride through some of the most amazing countryside you will ever experience. While the buggy will take you slowly through some wooded and often swampy areas, a ride on one of the Airboats (operated by the Seminole Indians) will give you quite a thrill, especially if you fly around a corner through the high grasses and manage to avoid a collision with an alligator by mere inches.

Off and alongside Alligator Alley but still in Big Cypress, most likely you will see very little wildlife and even fewer Alligators. For that you should take Route 41 that also runs east and west but south of I-75 from Miami to Naples. While much of R 41 is still in the Big Cypress, you also drive through the Everglades National Park. As you make your way along 41, look for signs pointing to Pinecrest and the loop of route 94 that will take you further into the swamp for about 30 kilometres, before rejoining 41. It is here during the serene next 30 km that most likely you will observe the greatest concentration of wildlife, from Otters to Alligators and exotic birds to an incredible assortment of flowering plants that have invaded just about every tree that lines the heavily wooded road and more so the small man-made canal that runs alongside.

The most southerly part of Florida with the exception of the Keys is set aside for the Everglades National Park. Ironically, it is in this area that the US Corps of Engineers – the federally funded and directed department responsible for the environment – has done its greatest damage. They are draining the great wetlands of Southern Florida by building canals and dams to create more dry land: first for farming and now for subdivisions. The waters draining naturally from Lake Okeechobee into the Everglades have virtually dried up. There is a move underway to reverse some of the damage, but the intensive agricultural practices of whatever is left of the fertile farms (created by diverting the waters in the first place) uses just about every drop of the



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Keep your eyes open for hidden gems. Into the swamp for some close-up views. Scarlet Ibis. Colour is everywhere. Yellow Crowned Heron, Sanibel Island. **OPPOSITE PAGE** An airboat is a fast and exciting way to see creatures at Big Cypress.

precious natural resource. The canals are full by day, but they are completely drained out at night to irrigate the fields and invigorate the Everglades. If using water for irrigation may be an accepted practice in agriculture, preservation of it is not always so. It may be necessary to irrigate the citrus fruit plantations and sugar cane fields, but it seems inefficient to shoot streams of water high into the sky so that over half is evaporated in the Florida heat before it hits the soil.

While calling it a swamp may be somewhat a misnomer now, as most of the Everglades is now high and dry, there are still a few oasis left that have small pools of water teeming with life. Today's Everglades has a mere 10% of its former bird population left, but even so it is fascinating for a visitor from the north to see the many different species of large water birds that compete with the gators for the fish that still abound in the fresh waters of Southern Florida. The grasses are high and the few bushy or wooded areas are rather thick, creating a few last hidden places for the small local deer and the occasional Florida Panther. Driving southwest into the Park from Homestead, the last city before the Everglades National Park, it is highly recommended to explore all of the short dead end roads that branch off the lone road that passes into the park. They terminate usually at a pond that may be either a paradise for birders or an unusual wooded area that houses rare butterflies and orchids, the few kilometres driven are certainly worthwhile.

Eventually we come to the end of what was once one of the greatest tourist attractions of Florida, the most southerly spot of the Everglades – the Ghost town of Flamingo. It was not always so. Almost three years ago, Hurricane Wilma roared through the region reducing the parks centre, the restaurants, a large motel and a few other buildings to a pile of rubble. At about the same time and after 8 billion dollars of work by the Corps of Engineers in a failed attempt to rectify the previous damage, all federal funding is on hold for parks maintenance. Still, there is usually one parks officer at the point, but leaning against the window that still is boarded up with plywood, he told me that no money can be expected to maintain the park for the next few years, at least, in his words, until the war is over.

The Everglades National Park made my list of places to visit in our lifetime. However, from the past mismanagement of the water resources, the encroachment of development, and the alarming consumption rate of Southern Florida's agricultural land, the great natural wonder, the paradise of nature, may not exist much longer.

Probably, there will be alligators and Swamp Angels after we have gone; both have learned to adapt, especially the latter, the ones the Seminole Indians call Swamp Angels. We call them Mosquitoes and we only can hope that the Seminole translation of Ah-Tha-Thi-Ki is only partially correct. Tah-Thi a place to learn is fine with me, but not Thi-Ki a place to remember because seeing and experiencing is much better than remembering. 00001111

## if you drive

Florida is a good two days drive from Southern Ontario. The Interstate highway system is safe and generally in good repair. Plan for three days if heading for the southern part or wish to visit along the route.

Information about the Everglades can be found at [www.nps.gov/ever](http://www.nps.gov/ever) - Billie Swamp Safari is on [www.seminoletribe.com/safari](http://www.seminoletribe.com/safari) and a list of camping sites is on [www.floridacamping.com](http://www.floridacamping.com).

Although our story is on Florida Naturally, you may wish to look at some more permanent arrangements. For instance some condominiums in Naples that would have cost \$550,000 two years ago, with a waiting list, now stand empty and go for \$199,000. There's no better time to invest than now.

