

"They say tour guides only last two or three years, but I guess they forgot to tell me," jokes Andrew Necolettos. He has worked as a guide at Billie Swamp Safari since 1995 and has no intention of changing jobs. The only thing he doesn't like about being a guide and airboat driver is the damp, boiling hot weather in which he has to work all summer long.

He has a point. It's not even 11 a.m. but the mercury has already risen over the 90-degree mark and the still, sticky August air is smothering. The sky is hazy with heat, the stagnant water underneath the dock smells of rotten eggs, and all I can hear is the distant sound of an airboat and several complaints about the heat in various languages.

Despite the muggy weather, there's a part of me that's giddy with excitement. The last time I was on airboat, I was 9 years old and I had never seen a gator or a crocodile before. Born and raised in a city of more than 3 million people, the most exotic reptiles I had experienced were a few lizards our cat killed in the backyard. I have been a Florida resident for almost seven years, but I still get excited when it comes to gators and crocodiles.

At 11 on the dot, Necolettos makes a few of us board an airboat and suggests we wear the complimentary earplugs that come with the ticket. Once our ears are protected we start our tour, the muffler-less engine screaming behind us. After the muggy heat we have suffered at the dock, the breeze that comes from moving through the swamp is a welcome change. Soon enough, we veer in the shade of the trees in a pretty wooded area and Necolettos turns the engine off. He points at some bubbles surfacing in between the water lilies, and a second later a pair of beady, dark eyes emerge from the swamp.

"It's the beginning of mating season," says Necolettos. "This is a male gator checking us out, marking his territory. The other will follow."

And he's right. As we snap pictures and admire the aquatic plants around us in the next five minutes, three, then four and five other gators, males and females, slowly make their way to our boat and start circling it in a sharkish fashion that is slightly unnerving. Necolettos tries to divert our attention to the moss and the mistletoe growing off many tree trunks, but we can't stop staring at the gators. An 800-pound killing machine always trumps water plants.

Swamp buggy tours

Even more interesting than the airboat tour, the Swamp Buggy tour turned out to be the highlight of our day at Billie Swamp Safari. Swamp buggies look like pontoon boats mounted on oversized tires. As goofy as they might look, they come in handy when it comes to driving into the deepest parts of the swamp. When I read the sign discouraging pregnant women and people with back problems from participating to the tour, I think it's the usual exaggeration. However, two minutes into our ride I realize that this tour is not for sissies.

Kathy Mickelsen, our driver/tour guide, isn't joking when she recommends we all keep our limbs inside the buggy. Dangle your arm over the rail and you will get smacked, scratched and hit by tree branches and overgrown weeds of all kinds. We brace ourselves as our guide begins to follow the paths in and out of the swamp, slightly reducing our speed before entering the water, but otherwise traveling at a brisk pace, the tree branches and the wind making a few baseball caps fly away.

While the airboat tour is ideal to catch a glimpse of gators, the buggy ride is perfect to spot the many species of terrestrial animals residing in the park. From skinny ostriches to 2,000-pound Asian water buffaloes, Billie Swamp Safari hosts an incredible variety of mammals, all free to roam within the 2,200-acre reserve.

While native panthers are hard to come by during the day, most of the wild hogs, kettle and deer seem to be unfazed by our large vehicle's arrival and they keep eating and lounging in the shade as we go by. As much as everyone on the tour hopes to see the elusive Florida panther, we have to settle for a slightly less exciting encounter: a female raccoon. Perched on a tree, feasting on its berries, the critter looks at us with mild curiosity for a while before returning to her chore.

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Wish you were here: Among the wildlife at Billie Swamp Safari

By CHIARA ASSI

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NAPLES — Whether you are coming from Naples and going east or coming from Fort Lauderdale and going west, it's hard to miss the signs for Billie Swamp Safari.

The first time I visited my parents in Southwest Florida, my plane landed in Miami. One of my most vivid memories of that trip is the brutal heat that engulfed me as I stepped out of the airport. After a few weeks of cool California weather, I was unprepared for temperatures in the 90s and humidity pushing the 85-percent mark.

I also was unprepared for the long stretch of straight, boring highway between the two coasts. The year was 1997, traffic on Interstate 75 was non-existent, and the only sign of civilization between Fort Lauderdale and Naples was a place called Billie Swamp Safari off Exit 49.

History

For years, members of the Seminole Tribe had seen tourists en route from Miami to Naples stopping by the preserve, curious about Native American culture and wild animals. It wasn't until February 1993, however, that the tribe officially opened Billie Swamp Safari, a park where people could learn more about their way of life and, most of all, about Florida's fauna and flora.

"Word got around and we got more and more visitors each year," says park director Ed Woods, who has worked at Billie Swamp Safari since its opening. Nowadays, the park sees more than 300,000 visitors a year and has won several awards as one of the best attractions to visit while in Florida.

Many say that what makes the park special is the attention given to the environment and to the animals. What started as a sanctuary for animals native to the area quickly turned into a park that welcomed species from all around the world. A large number of animals have been surrendered to the park from private owners and businesses that couldn't take care of exotic animals anymore. Many others were found wounded or sick, nursed back to health by the park's volunteers and then added to the ever-growing animal population. The most famous of these rescued animals is Mouse, a young deer everyone has grown to know and love.

"His mother was killed by a panther in front of two swamp buggies full of tourists," Woods said. "Later that day, we found the baby (deer) and named him Mouse because of his big ears. He has grown up now and usually hangs out with the goats by the gift shop."

Billie Swamp Safari is not done expanding, says Woods. In the next few years they are planning on creating a completely self-sufficient lodging area that will be, at the same time, state-of-the-art and eco-friendly. For now, the most adventurous types can stay overnight at the nearby Big Cypress RV Resort, which offers both air-conditioned cabins and tent sites along with laundry facilities, a pool, miniature golf and more.

Regardless of what you want to do at Billie Swamp Safari, it's a good idea to show up at the campgrounds early to enjoy the park before the summer afternoon showers. I show up on a hot Friday morning at 10 and am surprised to see the parking lot is already packed.

Airboat rides