

Big Cypress in the 1800s, refusing to surrender or be conquered.

Swamp-buggy sights

Today their descendants live here. And the museum showcases their day-to-day lifestyle with artifacts such as moccasins, leggings, rattles, silverwork, beaded sashes, medicine baskets and patchwork clothing.

Women seem to play a major role.

"Women are really the rulers of the tribe," said McHaney. "They are the bringers of life, the ones who enlarge our clans, and they have the last say-so on a lot of things." he continued. "Whether we agree or disagree, they are respected."

Out the back door, a milelong boardwalk runs through a cypress forest, displaying fun facts about the flora and fauna. For instance: How Spanish moss was used to make tea to treat for treating swelling from rheumatism and high blood pressure. And how resurrection fern was boiled and then used as a steam bath to treat depression.

We expected to see tribal dances, craftsmen and gator wrestling. But, surprisingly, Native Americans Seminoles were scarce.

An elderly woman was quilting beneath a "chickee," a pole-framed hut with palmetto-thatch roofing. And a young Seminole handled baby gators and poisonous snakes in a scheduled afternoon show.

The only gator wrestling was when a 10-foot gator was removed from underneath one of the overnight chickee huts (and the family who had just checked in with two youngsters checked right back out).

At first glance, this is a kitschy Florida roadside attraction. Goats, wild boar and a bear cub lounge in chain link pens while a rescued deer named Mouse wanders behind a wooden fence. There's also a motley collection of gators, snakes and birds of prey.

Most visitors, however, skip the history and head straight for the noisy airboats and 9-foot-high swamp buggies. With young Florida crackers at the wheel, they navigate their natural surroundings with ease.

Families from Deerfield Beach to Cape Cod, Mass., and international visitors from London to Puerto Rico crowded on the airboats and swamp buggies for a glimpse of Florida wilderness.

Our two preteens were wowed by the jostling, hourlong ride in a 6,000-pound swamp buggy: herds of water buffalo, wild hogs, wild turkey, deer, bison, raccoons in the trees and gators in the wetlands.

Donald Starks, our engaging young guide, entertained with stories of the Seminoles Native Americans and their chickee huts deep in the hardwood hammock.

"The Seminoles could build a thatched chickee hut in a day, and a canoe big enough to carry the family in a week or two," he explained. "As the Seminoles traveled through the Everglades, they shared the chickees -- it was like a ready-built hotel room along the way."

Like a backwoods Dr. Dolittle, Starks gobbled at a wild turkey, who gobbled right back, then called a herd of wild pigs that galloped over to greet him.

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Romp in the swamp

Welcome to Big Cypress Reservation, where visitors will see the expected, such as alligators and airboats, as well as the unexpected -- ostriches in a Florida swamp?

By Pam Brandon

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BIG CYPRESS RESERVATION

Our canopied swamp buggy lumbered off into Big Cypress Swamp the Everglades, with two dozen of us on the lookout for the elusive Florida panther.

Instead, a wayward ostrich named Marsha got everyone's attention as she wandered directly in front of the truck's big off-road wheels.

An ostrich in the swamps of South Florida Everglades? That's the way it is at Billie Swamp Safari, an immersion in nature -- real and contrived -- on 2,200 acres at the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Big Cypress Reservation.

The Seminoles are at home in this wilderness in the southernmost reaches of Florida, about 19 miles off Alligator Alley. Big Cypress Reservation is home to about 300 of them, Seminoles, and Billie Swamp Safari draws visitors from around the world to experience a slice of Florida that doesn't involve beaches, roller coasters or city lights.

If you want history, stop first at the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, a neat little attraction just a few miles from Billie Swamp Safari. The name means "a place to learn, a place to remember."

We met Chris McHaney, a handsome, thirtysomething native Seminole and descendant of the legendary Billy Bowlegs. Dressed in blue jeans and a tucked-in T-shirt, his hair long black hair in a neat ponytail, he represents today's generation of Seminoles.

"Florida is our homeland. I wanted to find my roots and continue the tradition and culture of being a Seminole," said McHaney, who recently returned to Florida from Oklahoma. as we wandered among the vignettes of Native American life. "And I want to help teach the next generation about our history."

A 17-minute film starts the experience, telling about the natural history of the Big Cypress Swamp and the Everglades. Hundreds of Seminoles ended up in the swamp and hammocks of the Everglades and

