

cell-phone service. You , and think of how the Seminoles survived with much, much less in these treacherous swamps.

Just an hour from the big city lights, it's fun to imagine.

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The fearless ostrich sidled up for a snack from his hand.

Gator-tail cuisine

After the swamp buggy ride, we plugged our ears and went flying across the grasses in a high-speed airboat.

As we stopped in a cypress swamp, gators glided just beneath the black water. We counted at least a half dozen on either side of the boat. But less than 20 minutes later we were back on the dock, the boys less than satisfied with the abbreviated joy ride.

We booked one of the Spartan thatched-roof chickee "dorms," and headed to the Swamp Water Cafe for a traditional Seminole supper -- platters of inexpensive frog legs and gator-tail nuggets, and traditional Seminole fry bread, all washed down with giant glasses of sweet tea. (For the less adventurous, burgers, hot dogs and tuna salad were on the menu.)

The place gets very, very quiet at sunset, when most tourists head for air-conditioned high-rise hotels in nearby Naples or Fort Lauderdale. A storyteller built a small campfire in a chickee and spun tales of "shape shifters," wild animals, and the Seminoles' relationship to the earth.

With just about two dozen visitors left, the evening wound down with a final nighttime swamp buggy ride into the wilderness under a full moon.

The boys loved the thrill of the darkness, with the guide's searchlight picking up the red glint of alligator eyes and a chance to imagine what this wilderness must have looked like a century ago. By the time we returned and waved farewell to our fellow passengers, we looked around: Ours was the only car in the parking lot.

Less is more at Big Cypress, especially after dark. With no other humans in sight, we walked down the deserted dirt path to our own chickee dorm, made for sleeping up to 12, and found just one other family bunking down for the night in another chickee -- and 28 empty ones. The naturally ventilated chickees have screened sides and an old-fashioned screen door.

This, mind you, was in the middle of nowhere. Safety, we figured, must not be an issue.

There was no running water in the chickees, just clean linens, a scratchy wool blanket, a thin towel and low-amp electrical lanterns.

Knowing that gators lurked just feet from our sleeping quarters, we didn't linger long in the darkness. After a trip to the communal bathhouse, we climbed into top bunks. (We'd been warned that mice and scorpions occasionally visit the lower ones.)

We were surrounded by silence, except for the occasional splash of a gator in the swamp just yards from our screened windows. But we slept soundly, waking for a hot shower and a walk around to visit the animals. --still not a soul in sight. By the time the rooster crowed at 8 a.m., employees were coming in for the day.

Billie Swamp Safari isn't for those who want to see an undisturbed ecosystem. But you can enjoy a glimpse of this remnant of wild Florida.

After a day spent exploring, you Then settle in for the night with a light breeze, a full moon and limited