

Paddling the Everglades

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--Published in the Chicago Tribune and the Providence Journal--

Everglades National Park, FL - My mother-in-law had one question about our upcoming paddling trip in Everglades National Park: "Is it safe?"

My husband Mark and I didn't understand her concern. Sure, there is no potable water. Alligators and rats are plentiful. Open water waves capsize small crafts. Hurricanes rip through the area. Cell phones often fail. And did I mention I was five months pregnant with her first grandchild?

The Everglades, however, has the lure of 1.5 million acres of solitude, with backcountry campsites accessible only by boat. Bird lovers can view some of the 400 species in the park. Those sick of snow will appreciate the sawgrass marshland, mangrove forests, and inland and coastal waters.

It would be our last big adventure before the baby came.

The Everglades is the largest remaining subtropical wilderness in the U.S. Part of the 50-mile wide, 120-mile long shallow flow from Lake Okeechobee in central Florida to the Florida Bay, the Everglades starts as fresh water at the lake and eventually becomes brackish as it reaches the bay.

For many Everglades paddlers, the ultimate experience is traversing the Wilderness Waterway, a 99-mile stretch from Everglades City, near Naples on the west coast, to Flamingo City at the southern tip. As we didn't have a full week, we planned a five-day, four-night loop from Everglades City, the less touristy of the two choices.

Everglades City is a quiet town with a National Park Service office, several seafood restaurants, small motels and basic stores.

Because backcountry permits and the limited number of campsite reservations cannot be obtained over the phone, through the mail or more than 24 hours in advance, paddlers should visit the park office the day before planning to be on the water. We went straight there, paid our \$10 backcountry fee and made campsite reservations.

Most of the 48 scattered campsites hold only one to four parties (though a few hold up to 15). The sites nearest the park entrance fill quickly, requiring flexibility as to the route and timing of the trip. While this first come-first serve system is stressful for paddlers pressed for time, it prevents large groups or tours from reserving all the spots in advance. Avoiding the most popular times (weekends, the Christmas holiday and January) may

make planning easier. We went in early December and had no problem getting reservations, though several of the popular campsites had filled earlier in the day.

That night before paddling we stayed at the Ivey House, a bed and breakfast affiliated with North American Canoe Tours (NACT). The Ivey House/NACT is the only lodging/outfitter organization in the area. More like an overpriced youth hostel, it combines simple private rooms with shared same-sex bathrooms.

NACT owners Dave and Sandee Harraden, who help plan paddling routes, also hold the “float plan,” which has each night’s camping destination and the date paddlers are expected back. They assume responsibility for calling the park service for a search and rescue mission if paddlers don’t show up on the appointed day. We knew they’d be diligent because we had their boat.

At 9 the next morning we pushed off. The first few hours matched my expectations. We paddled through dense, dark, narrow mangroves, with numerous spiders and mosquitoes. The sun was blocked by the foliage, and we peered anxiously around for alligators, though saw none.

But the rest of the paddling trip was more typical for what we were to see of the Everglades – sunny, wider waterways, rarely more than six feet deep except at the coast. The scenery was surprisingly uniform. From a distance, islands of exposed-rooted mangroves seem to run together. Navigating was a nerve-wracking adventure. We constantly consulted both map and compass to determine our location and to look for natural markers, since there are few manmade identifiers.

Inland, we happily paddled for hours without seeing or hearing anyone. In the deeper areas, boats full of fishermen disturbed the peace with their roaring motors and wakes, reminding us that we weren’t far from civilization. Paddling through open water in the Gulf, these boats were commonplace, and even welcome as they attracted dolphins that played in their wake. At night, the boats were quiet and we could hear and see the dolphins near our campsite as they chased fish and each other.

Although from a distance the landscape appears static, up close one can see tiny crabs running around the mangrove roots, snakes popping out of the water and eagles in trees calling for their mates. When the afternoon tide goes out, loons and hundreds of ducks populate the reeds. Alligators swim noiselessly across the bay, their heads and back scales barely above the water. Raccoons paced the water’s edge in search of food. Along the coast, pelicans dove gracelessly for meals, and small birds on the moonlit sand nosh on treats from the rising tide. Given the noises made at night by the wildlife, we didn’t sleep soundly.

Our previous canoe experiences were limited to lakes at summer camp. Yet for relative novices, the paddling was not difficult. We were told that experienced canoe paddlers can cover eight to 12 miles per day in six to seven hours (kayakers can go further). Not

knowing if I was up to the challenge, we planned two longer days of 10-12 miles, and three shorter days of four to eight miles. We paddled much faster than we expected, allowing extra time to explore the area by water, and more often to enjoy our non-paddling time reading and observing wildlife. At night we had sore shoulders. With little upper body strength, mine were fatigued during the day too, but nothing a massage from Mark couldn't heal.

The greater challenge was learning how to relieve oneself while not tipping the canoe. Since there were few sandbars and mangrove landing sites, rest stops *on* the boat were mandatory. For a pregnant woman drinking her quota of water, this was a special concern. Luckily we perfected our balance, discovering the canoe-as-toilet-seat technique (which explains the multitude of mosquito bites in a certain area). Mark learned how to stand in the canoe while holding onto a mangrove branch. Given the seclusion, we rarely worried about indecent exposure.

The other challenge was to find the proper campsite before dark. Given the mangroves' density, with little or no dry or solid ground on the islands, camping away from designated sites is physically impossible. The few ground camping sites were created by Miccosukee Indians and early settlers, who built up small areas with shells and soil to use as living places. Several beach sites on the coast provide enough sand for camping. As we learned the hard way, campers must avoid sandbars that are underwater at high tide. Our favorite sites were chickees, raised 10' x 12' wooden platforms over the water, named after Indian dwellings. Unlike ground and beach sites, mosquitoes were less abundant in the chickees, and we didn't have to brush sand or dirt from our belongings when we left. Most camp sites, including chickees, have portable toilets.

My mother-in-law was relieved to receive our call that we arrived back safely at Everglades City. Her comfort was short-lived, when we told her we had such a good time that we planned on repeating the trip when her future grandchild was old enough to swim.