

## **Kayaking the Mangroves in South Florida**

In April 2009, my husband Kevin and I returned to Sanibel, a barrier island off the southwest coast of Florida. Our last visit was 20 years ago; we hadn't planned on staying away so long, but the threat of hurricanes and the lure of more exotic places pushed Sanibel from our list of must sees. The end of a Chicago winter of record-breaking snowfall changed our minds. We had to get out now!

One of the highlights of the island is the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, a haven for fauna and flora native to southwest Florida. The refuge is on the back, non-beach side of the island. Although some travelers dismiss the park as wasteland, it's thick with mangroves and estuaries that provide the perfect nursery for birds and sea creatures. With a little patience, you might just see a roseate spoonbill or a manatee.

You can drive through the park and wonder what the fuss is about. Or, you can get in there and interact with it—hike a trail, climb its observation tower, or get in the water. After all, the park exists because of the water with over 6,400 acres of mangrove forest, seagrass beds, and grassy marshes. Such was my thinking as I signed up for a kayak tour. Kevin's health issues keep him ashore, so I was on my own. I signed up on Tuesday, so I had three days to back out if I lost my nerve.

Friday morning, I got to the Tarpon Bay Explorers check-in desk early because I'd never paddled before. I paced nervously along the bayside, as the rest of the group arrived. We assembled in a small amphitheater for introduction

and instruction. There were 20 of us of whom half were kids under 12. I was the only solo kayaker. Donna, our guide, talked about keeping the label on the paddle right side up and demonstrated the pushing motion to use when paddling. We learned that we would "raft up" to hear her nature talk at three points along the trail. To raft up, you simply grab on to another person's boat. Donna would drop an anchor so we would all stay together.

I got a single boat; it was a bit daunting. Scraaape! The launch guy



shoved me out into Tarpon Bay. The boat wasn't super responsive to my paddling but, fortunately, it wasn't tippy at all. Almost immediately I ran aground on the sandbar next to the launch site; they never warned us rookies.

One of my co-paddlers graciously pulled me out. Donna reminded us not to put our paddles into the sand because all the great sea critters such as tiny fish, seahorses, and mollusks live there. If you scrape the bottom, you can mess up their homes. The water on the edge of the bay is rarely more than 4 feet deep. A small comfort—if we did fall out of the kayak we could just stand up and get back in!





Soon we were paddling across a lovely sea meadow; the green sea grass beds looked like spinach linguini. We “rafted up” and learned all about the valuable estuary and how it provides a home to all the baby sea critters. Since the pH,

salinity, and temperature can vary widely just in a single day, sea creatures have to be prepared to move to areas that suit them best. We saw a number of egrets, several osprey, and a pelican in the trees. Donna explained how manatees look a lot like floating coconuts from the kayak.

We entered the Commodore Creek Trail, a channel cut through the mangroves. The trail is named after a commodore from the Civil War who lived in a shack on the island near the trailhead. In the water there are posts numbered from 1 to 17 to ensure you're on the right track along this 1.5 mile loop. Through twists and turns, our 12 kayaks navigated through the little channel. I managed to get crossways a few times--the

current just takes you if you don't keep paddling. I wanted photos, but there was hardly time to get the camera open before I was whisked away. Of course the whisking wasn't orderly--it just pushed my boat along



however it wanted. I heard one of my fellow paddlers mutter “you’d almost have to be trying to end up like that.” Easy to say when you’re not the sole paddler in a tandem kayak!

We saw a white ibis and several tri-colored herons hunting fish in the mangrove roots and a raccoon sneaking out of the channel. If you looked down into the water you could see pink sea stars and crown conch shells. Donna passed around a



crown conch so we could see the animal inside. The shell itself was covered with algae and didn't look as flashy as the ones you find on the beach.

Then came a moment of reckoning. We could either follow the rest of the trail or go with Donna back to Tarpon Bay. About half of us decided to continue; we were determined to see a manatee. I soon fell behind the pack, as I was the only solo paddler. The silence and beauty were astounding. But a nagging anxiety began—where was that next trail marker?

The exciting part came when we went through the narrow channel to get to Mullet Bay. I did catch up with the kayak ahead just in time to hear a woman call to me,

“There’s a snake here on the log. It’s just sunning itself, content as can be.”

Instantly, I tensed with fear. I did see the snake and the log, which jutted out into the narrow passage. It was copper-colored—was it a copperhead? My husband's childhood story of water moccasins in the swimming hole wound through my thoughts. I knew snakes could be in the mangroves; I'd already been looking for them overhead as we paddled. But, I wasn't ready for this. Maybe the snake was content, but I wasn't. I paddled furiously. Do snakes react to thrashing like sharks? This only served to get me caught in the current and for a second I was heading sideways straight for the log. With no other options, I jammed my paddle into the sea grass to stop from bouncing off the log. I hoped I hadn't destroyed any sea critters or their homes. Finally pointing in the right direction, I paddled by, holding my breath and staring at the snake. It never moved.

After that adrenaline hit, I entered Mullet Bay. I'd hoped to see a manatee, but there were only a few egrets. The rest of the group had disappeared. Irrational fears of never being seen again dominated my thoughts. I paddled furiously to catch the last boat. Each channel marker was a blessing. On the way out of Mullet Bay I noticed the incoming current kicked up a notch or two. My paddling challenge began.

Progress was slow. I did take a moment to enjoy watching an anhinga, a large black bird with white wing feathers like piano keys, drying its wings. It seemed annoyed with me flailing around



trying to take its picture. In a moment it walked off into the mangrove roots and dove back into the water. Donna told us that anhingas catch fish by spearing them underwater. Then the bird tosses the fish into the air, catches it head first, and swallows it whole. The birds practice the tossing maneuver with sticks.

Plodding on, fatigue set in. I felt like I was in front of marker 15 for an hour. Each paddle stroke moved me only 6 inches. If I didn't paddle enough, I was swept backward. I pondered what would have happened if I was a foo foo girl. But I suppose foo foos would not be in a kayak in 90 degree heat developing gorilla arms like mine!

Nearly out of the channel, I noticed a deep shadow at the bottom. Was it a manatee? A gator? Maybe it was just an old gator hole; I'll never know. But the best sight of all was a spotted eagle ray near the entrance to the trail. A picture would have been spectacular but I'm grateful for the memory.

Back on Tarpon Bay, paddling the open water was easier, though the current was still streaming in. Other paddlers passed me and I wondered what I was doing wrong. Even moms teamed with little kids passed me with ease.

The launch ramp was in sight. The launch guy called to me, "Come on little lady, you can do it." Hmm, I never really thought of myself as "little." He kept calling me that, cheering me on, still a hundred yards out. I paddled faster out of sheer embarrassment. Finally, the scrape of the kayak hitting concrete as I reached the ramp.

"Name?" he asked. I told him and he searched the list. He couldn't find me.

"I was on the 8:30 tour," I said.

"8:30? Wow."

By the end, I'd paddled 3 miles in just under three hours. Yes, I was slow. But my memories are the reward for this morning, an experience that will last a lifetime.

Copyright © 2009 Jill Spealman