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National Parks of Southern Florida

January 14-20, 2023

7 Days – 6 Nights

The southern tip of Florida, far from theme parks and tourist traps, provides ample opportunities to explore habitats and wildlife that are unlike anywhere else in the continental United States. Turquoise waters give way to white sandy beaches strewn with shells of all shapes and sizes. These beaches stretch for hundreds of miles along the gulf coast. Not far from the beaches lie amazing wilderness areas including swamps, forests and the lush Florida Everglades.

Today, twenty percent of the everglades remain protected by Everglades National Park and other state and federal properties in the region. This incomparable habitat provides a home for animals such as the American Alligator, Florida Manatee, American Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, Florida panther, countless shore birds and waterfowl, and many more. Florida is also home to numerous barrier islands including the world famous Florida Keys. These coastal islands not only help to protect the mainland during storms, but also are a haven for area wildlife. In the 10,000 Islands National Wildlife Refuge, sea turtles, bottlenose dolphins, manatees and other sea life enjoy the calm waters as they search for food.



Florida's diverse habitats and wildlife, combined with its tropical climate make it a great place to visit when northern weather is at its worst. This trip will explore areas from Fort Myers and Sanibel Island through the Everglades and into the Keys. Our tour will include visiting three national parks: Everglades National Park, Biscayne National Park, and Dry Tortugas National Park. There will also be stops at Corkscrew Swamp Audubon Sanctuary, 10,000 Islands National Wildlife Refuge, JN "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, and several Florida State Parks.

Itinerary*

Day 1: Fort Myers, FL

Our tour begins in Fort Myers, Florida where we will collect the group at the airport** and set out in search of our first glimpse of unique Florida wildlife at nearby **Manatee Park**. This park sits along the Orange river and is where some manatee migrate when the waters of the Gulf of Mexico creep below 68° Fahrenheit. You will have the chance to get up close and personal with these amazing creatures as we take a short kayak trip on the river.



Our next stop will be at the **JN "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge** on Sanibel Island for more wildlife viewing. The park was established in 1945 and includes some of the best bird habitat around. We will cruise the wildlife drive and stretch our legs on the trails until dinner. Our first night in Florida will be on this island which is well known for its seashell covered beaches. You may want to catch the sunset after we check into the hotel for the night. (L, D)***

Day 2: Corkscrew Swamp and 10,000 Islands NWR

After breakfast, we will drive to the 13,000 acre **Corkscrew Swamp Audubon Sanctuary** in search of some of Florida's endangered species including the Wood Stork and Florida Sandhill Crane. We will also be on the lookout for other wildlife such as Limpkin, Roseate Spoonbill, Snowy Egret, Tricolored Heron, American Alligator, Gopher Tortoise, and the Florida Black Bear while we explore the famous boardwalk and rich habitats of the park. Another amazing site here will be the grove of virgin Bald Cypress which is the largest community of its kind in the world at approximately 700 acres.

By afternoon we will be heading south beyond Naples to the edge of the everglades and the **Ten Thousands Islands National Wildlife Refuge**. We will take a sunset cruise and wildlife adventure taking us through canals, the refuge, and out into the open water of the Gulf of Mexico. This cruise will be a great time to watch for manatees, alligators, sea turtles, dolphins, and a variety of birds as they get their last meals before nightfall. (B, L, D)



Day 3: Everglades National Park

On our way to the Shark Valley Visitor Center in **Everglades National Park**, we will stop to take in the sights and look for wildlife. The site is the third largest national park in the lower 48 states at a size of 2,357 square miles. Keep your binoculars and camera handy, we will be taking a 2-hour, naturalist led tram tour around the 15-mile loop for an in depth look at what makes this world renowned wetland such a special place (B, L, D)

* This itinerary is tentative and is subject to change based on weather conditions, timing, availability of services, traffic, or other factors outside the control of trip leaders.

** Transportation to Fort Myers International Airport and from Key West International Airport is not included in the trip fee. Travelers are welcome to coordinate their flights to accompany the trip leaders from Gerald R Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, MI.

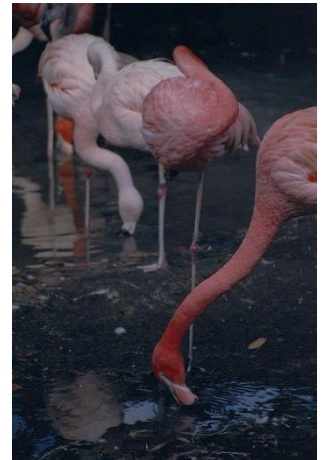
*** Meals included: B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, D=Dinner

Day 4: Everglades and Biscayne National Parks

East of Homestead, Florida is the chain of barrier islands designated as Biscayne National Park. This water lover's paradise is 95% water but provides numerous opportunities to explore the aquamarine waters, emerald islands, and vibrant coral reefs that separate the open ocean from the Biscayne Bay and the Card Sound. Biscayne NP provides a playground for boaters, kayakers, snorkelers and scuba divers, fishermen, and anyone else seeking an escape



from nearby Miami. The park is home to an amazing 500 species of reef fish, neo-tropical water birds, endangered species and more.



Our adventures in South Florida will have us not only on the water but in it too on a guided snorkeling trip. This 3 ½ hour excursion aboard a powerboat will depart from the park headquarters at Convoy Point. The captain will determine our destination for snorkeling based upon the day's weather and sea conditions. The dive site will be on a reef, shipwreck, or open water in the bay in search of sea life and evidence of human

activity in the area.

When the snorkeling is done, we will explore the southern everglades near the **Flamingo Visitor Center**. Along the way we will stop at a number of trails and overlooks to take in the vastness of the ecosystem. Stops may include: Anhinga Trail, Pa-hay-okee overlook, Mahogany Hammock, Snake Bight Trail, Christian Point Trail, and/or Coastal Prairie Trail. (B, L, D)

Day 6: Overseas Highway to Key West, FL

We will leave the "mainland" today and drive Highway 1 south along the archipelago known as the Florida Keys. These islands stretch for 120 miles out into the open water and provide a barrier between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. Originally inhabited by the Calusa and Tequesta tribes, the islands are now a hot spot for sun seekers from around the world. Our journey down the famed **Overseas Highway** may include stops such as John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, Windley Key Fossil Reef Geological State Park, The Dolphin Research Center, and/or the National Key Deer Refuge. After dinner in Key West, you will have a chance to wander the streets to take in the sights and sounds of a place that the likes of Earnest Hemmingway, John James Audubon, President Truman, Robert Frost, and Jimmy Buffet have called home.

(B, L, D)



Day 7: Dry Tortugas National Park

After breakfast, we will board the Yankee Freedom III to **Dry Tortugas National Park**. The crossing should take approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes (depending on sea conditions) on this high speed catamaran complete with inside and outside decks, heads (bathroom), full galley for snacks and drinks, and a cocktail bar (return trip only). The park sits 70 miles west of Key West and is the last blip of land extending into the Gulf of Mexico including seven land masses: Garden, Loggerhead, Bush, Long, East, Hospital and Middle Keys. Once we arrive at the park, we will tour the historic **Fort Jefferson** as a small group.

After our group exploration of the fort, there will be time in the afternoon for you to walk around the 14 acre Garden Key on your own or if you would like to snorkel, join one or both of the trip leaders in exploring nearby reefs and structures in search of marine life. Complimentary fins, mask and snorkel are provided from the Yankee Freedom III to use while in the Dry Tortugas. We will depart the island at 3:00 pm for our return trip to Key West to enjoy one last night in paradise. (B, L, D)



Day 8: Key West and Return to MI

Plan an early afternoon air departure from Key West so you have one last chance to explore the town on your own. Walk the streets, visit shops, take pictures or just relax before we return everyone to the Key West International Airport**. (B)

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Pricing: \$3,995 per person (based on double occupancy) (\$1,200 single supplement)

Payment: \$500 deposit due at the time of booking and required to hold a place on the trip; \$1,000 2nd Payment due June 1, 2022. Final balance is due by December 1, 2022. All payments may be made at one time if desired via cash or check. **Transaction fees may apply for making payments with a credit card.**

Cancellations: Full refunds will be made until July 1, 2022. After July 1, 2022, up to 50% of money received may be forfeited by the participant. No refunds will be given for cancellation after December 1, 2022. We encourage you to speak to a travel agent about trip insurance to protect yourself if unexpected situations require you to cancel your participation.

Included: 6 nights lodging; all transportation while in Florida; naturalist guides; fees/admission for park, tours, shuttles, etc; all meals as indicated in itinerary

Not included: Meals while in transit to Florida, souvenirs, snacks between meals, alcoholic beverages, additional tours and activities away from the group

Please contact trip leaders Mike Graves or Tom Funk to learn more or to make a payment: 616.393.9453 mikeg@outdoordiscovery.org or tom@outdoordiscovery.org.

