

There is a Florida of pristine white-sand beaches. Where labyrinthine waterways to Caribbean pirates. Where a million glittering stars.

Where honking herons patrol that once offered shelter where the night sky is filled with stars. You can find it all in the ...

STORY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA PHOTOGRAPHY ZACH STOVALL

10,000 islands





Clockwise from far left: Pavilion Key campsite; the paddling map; breakfast of champs; horseshoe crab; pots of cowboy-style coffee; the last leg of a day's trip; a local gathering spot in Chokoloskee; a juvenile brown pelican; Chris Schuld, lead guide at Everglades Area Tours (center).



Three days. Twenty-six miles. Ten Thousand Islands.

My mission: to kayak and camp my way through the maze of low-lying mangrove islets that hugs Southwest Florida, from Marco Island to **Everglades National Park**. The trip was the latest and most involved in a series of regular pilgrimages I've made to the Everglades over the past few years. I'd signed up for the journey in a fit of optimism about my physical condition—I spend my days parked in front of a keyboard—but filled with the desire to lay eyes on a patch of Florida in the raw.

Like most people, my first encounter with the Everglades was limited to an airboat ride, where a khaki-clad guide dispensed snappy one-liners and plied the alligators with dog food. Like a carnival ride, it was seemingly over in seconds. But in exchange for the ringing in our ears (airboats are *incredibly loud*), we were rewarded with a fantastic photo op of an open-jawed gator waiting for kibble. For years, this was the sole experience by which I judged the Everglades, something I've since learned is like visiting the parking lot at Disney World and thinking you've seen all the attractions. The Everglades is unfathomably large: a network of swamps, marshes and coastal lowlands that makes up most of the southern half of the state, from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay. Everglades National Park protects just a 1.5-million-acre swath of this habitat.

During one of my jaunts around the state, I took a last-minute detour off the Tamiami Trail and ended up tooling through **Everglades City** and **Chokoloskee Island**, low-key Florida fishing towns equipped with incredible wilderness, plenty of local color and a single national chain (a Circle K that sells a staggering array of mosquito repellent). Since then, the Everglades has become something of an addiction. I've swamp-walked it. I've canoed it. I've become a connoisseur of

gator nuggets. And I've learned the simple lesson that the only way to really get to know the Everglades is to go deep and get wet.

Which is how I find myself in a kayak in the **Ten Thousand Islands**, ready to watch dolphins frolic in the moonlight and consume ungodly amounts of granola. Only the trip doesn't kick off quite like I'd imagined. (Me, in a kayak, looking Olympian.) The first leg of our journey, from Everglades City to the Gulf of Mexico—in the wake of a squall—has me wondering if it's too late to request an outboard motor. The tide is against us, we're getting battered by three-foot swells and with every stroke, the mangroves ahead appear no closer. "How far off to the next point?" somebody in our group asks. "About a mile," replies Chris Schuld, our relentlessly affable guide. Only that mile turns into two, then three and four—and I learn that this is Chris' inscrutable response to all are-we-there-yet types of questions.

We are not even close.

{ DAY ONE } the launch

Our trip begins at the offices of **Everglades Area Tours**, a long-time company on Chokoloskee Island (population 400) run by the congenial Capt. Charles Wright. Six of us have turned out for this expedition, a motley crew of working stiffs and retirees from as far away as Australia. We are led by Chris, a former Outward Bound instructor from Ohio who has a rugged woodsman's beard and a peppy camp-counselor demeanor capable of preventing a group of suburbanites from going all *Lord of the Flies* in the wild. Assisting him is Jean McElroy, one of the company's wilderness guides in training.





“It’s the land of outcasts and undesirables,” including the infamous Calico Jack...

A passing storm, complete with horizontal rain, has delayed our departure, so Chris gives us the lowdown on our planned route: a triangular path from the national park’s boat launch at Everglades City, southwest to **Picnic Key** on the Gulf of Mexico, down to the storied old pirate outpost of **Pavilion Key** and then back to Chokoloskee. There will be pit stops, of course, to search for dolphins, stingrays and teeming rookeries filled with honking baby pelicans. “They are just the cutest things—so fuzzy and totally helpless,” says Chris of the pelicans. As a demonstration, he sucks in his cheeks, puckers his lips and waddles about flapping his arms. I am sold.

By 2:30 p.m., the storm has blown through on its way to Miami, and Chris hustles us down to the boat launch. We’re off—headlong into wind and churning water. Emma, the Australian, pulls into the lead, paddling with a determination so fierce I’m worried she might end up in Cuba. Len, from Canada, is in second, looking so relaxed it would seem he’s doing nothing more strenuous than sipping a Molson. Bringing up the rear is yours truly, with a paddling form known as “white-hot panic,” fighting the tide across **Chokoloskee Bay**, which Chris tells us is “about a mile” wide.

From left: A quiet glide through the Everglades; listening to nocturnal swamp sounds by the glow of campfire.

After an eternity (20 minutes), we make it to Indian Key Pass, a narrow boating channel surrounded by vegetation that offers us protection from the wind. We have officially entered the Ten Thousand

Islands, which are less islands and more clusters of red and black mangrove trees whose stilt-like roots reach skywards out of submerged oyster beds. Most of these are uninhabitable, bereft of fresh water or even a square inch of dry land—but a few are ringed with slim, white-sand beaches that can accommodate picnicking day-trippers and overnight camping. It is the largest expanse of mangrove forest in North America, home to almost 200 species of birds (including bald eagles), roughly 200 species of fish (such as the mullet that regularly hurtle out of the water) and 10 percent of the state’s manatee population.

It’s also the site of some colorful Florida history. During the 18th century, the islands served as a hideout for pirates, including the infamous Calico Jack, known for his calico wardrobe and the fact that he was an equal-opportunity employer (his band of buccaneers included women). A century later, the area attracted resilient pioneers who lived off the land, but it also drew plenty of renegades, the most notorious being Edgar Watson, a shadowy figure who, as the story goes, left a body count just about everywhere he went. (His death in 1910, at the hands of various Chokoloskee residents, was fictionalized by Peter Matthiessen in the award-winning novel *Killing Mister Watson*.) Nowadays, you’re far more liable to run into a pack of outdoorsy types in kayaks than any outlaws, but the Ten Thousand Islands still channels a mind-yer-own-business kind of wilderness vibe. “It’s the land of outcasts and undesirables,” Chris says with a wink. “I may be one of them.”

We arrive at Picnic Key after nightfall and set up camp on the beach under the light of our headlamps. We are wet and exhausted. I debate if it’d be OK to ditch the tent and face-plant right on the beach. Chris emerges at that moment, with a large bag of peanut M&M’s, a candy I despise. “Want a handful of happiness?” he asks jovially. To my surprise, yes, I do. After inhaling seawater all afternoon, they are the sweetest candies I’ve ever tasted.

MILES PADDLED **Seven**
PERSONAL HYGIENE LEVEL **Salty dog**
STATE OF MIND **Wiped**

{ DAY TWO } open water

The next day, I emerge (stiffly) from our tent to the sound of water lapping on the shore and sea gulls cackling in the distance. Picnic Key is a C-shaped island, covered in sea-grape trees, prickly nickerbean shrubs and black mangroves (so named for their coal-colored roots), with a shell-strewn beach crisscrossed by morning-glory vines. Before us lies a peaceful bay—beyond that, the Gulf of Mexico. A squadron of brown pelicans floats over the water, as if suspended on invisible threads. Chris is whipping up breakfast: a vat of “cowboy coffee” (grounds and water boiled together), bagels, cream cheese and a pile of gooey cinnamon rolls. My fellow travelers slowly materialize: Lloyd, from Plant

City, Florida; Ron, from New Jersey; and Zach, the football-loving prom-king-turned-photographer. Others wander in as the smell of coffee wafts down the beach.

By 10:30 a.m., we’re on the water. This time, however, it is blessedly calm. Today our destination is Pavilion Key, about a dozen miles away; it’s a solitary finger of land on the southern edge of the Ten Thousand Islands. At this point the details of the environment come into focus. The Everglades is not a static place. Any shift—a sliver of sunshine or a slight breeze—can change how everything looks. At times the water is green—at others, dark blue. When the air is still, the surface is slick, like Jell-O; when it’s windy, it takes on the texture of crepe paper. For much of the day it’s overcast, with a sky the color of cotton and an ocean that looks like liquid steel—an austere beautiful environment that wouldn’t be out of place in *Moby Dick*. This is the perfect climate for paddling: no sun to burn us or wind to stir up waves. “It’s the kind of weather I loooove!” exclaims Chris, in a state of nature-induced delirium. Zach looks somewhat less pleased. He is lugging a stack of priceless cameras in a dripping wet kayak and has yet to snap a single magazine-worthy, blue-sky shot. “This,” he says with a nervous laugh, “is the kind of weather that gives me anxiety.”

Mother Nature: 1. Photographer: 0.

Along the way, we make pit stops to check out wildlife and carbo-load on granola. We spy snowy egrets, with their punk-rock hairdos, lingering in the mangroves around **Jewel Key**. (The species almost

A tent and sandy-beach bed are the closest you'll come to creature comforts in the Ten Thousand Islands.

went extinct at the turn of the 20th century when hunters shot entire nesting sites in pursuit of the frilly plumes used to adorn ladies hats.) At **Rabbit Key**—best known as the spot where the good folk of Chokoloskee disposed of the remains of Edgar Watson—we devour a stack of well-endowed turkey-avocado wraps while serenaded by a gaggle of royal terns and oystercatchers. From a distance, it seems as if these fragments of land are all exactly alike—mangroves and more mangroves—but they are not. “Each island is diverse in what it offers,” says Chris. “One might be popular with pelicans—another, with horse-shoe crabs. Each has its own unique ecology.”

By evening, we pull up to Pavilion, the string-bean-shaped isle where a pirate once held a young woman captive before fatally poisoning her. (Everglades history is chock-full of untimely deaths.) The clouds have cleared, revealing a bright, rising moon and a carpet of stars. A pair of dolphins splashes through the bay. Glowing jellyfish bob along the edge of the water, illuminating the ocean like a liquid Las Vegas. “Pavilion is *the jam!*” exclaims Chris with a bounce. This is our guide’s favorite expression, which he bestows on everything he likes. Boat rudders are “the jam.” His new cooking equipment is the jam. His personal stash of hot sauce: The Jam.

We set up our tents on a narrow sandbar lined with swaying dune grasses and build a small campfire on the beach. Emma produces a luscious bottle of merlot, and Chris whips up his “world-famous” burritos, stuffed with black beans, sweet potatoes and spicy pineapple salsa. We sit around the fire and attempt to take inventory of everything we’ve seen. It’s a moment of such extraordinary serenity I find it hard to believe we’re less than two hours from Miami.

MILES PADDLED **Twelve**
PERSONAL HYGIENE LEVEL **Briny**
STATE OF MIND **Groovy**

{ DAY THREE }

back to chokoloskee

I wake up feeling as if I’ve been on the losing end of a bar brawl. Muscles I didn’t know existed are hissing at me—especially the ones deep inside my arm sockets, which are preventing me from doing basic stuff, like breathing. (Note to self: My next “adventure” needs to involve room service and a spa.) Still, it’s a postcard-perfect day, and we have the full morning to lounge on Pavilion. Emma is making notes in her journal; Len is taking a dip; Ron and Lloyd are exploring the long white-sand beach; Chris and Jean are simmering cowboy coffee; and Zach, overjoyed by the glittering sunbeams, is photographing everything in sight.

During the night the tide went out, revealing a broad tidal flat. It’s a hive of animal activity. “Teachable moment!” exclaims Chris, in full camp-counselor mode. He gathers us around him to tell us about





At times the water is green—at others, dark blue. When the air is still, the surface is slick, like Jell-O; when it's windy, it takes on the texture of crepe paper.

the unusual life forms that inhabit these tide pools. He shows us the egg sacks (totally *Aliens*) of the lightning whelk, a type of oversized conch. There are sea squirts, a primitive animal that resembles a kiwi fruit and sustains itself by filtering plankton out of the water. (Bonus: They squirt when you squish 'em.) Around us, various shorebirds look for shellfish. Each type of egret, Chris tells us, has a different hunting style. Great egrets stalk their prey carefully and then strike fast; snowy egrets startle it by splashing their bright-yellow feet; and reddish egrets, "well, they're totally nuts." As a demonstration, Chris flaps his arms and kicks up his feet, as if performing an eccentric Eastern European folk dance. Several egrets within earshot pause their hunting to glance our way. Nuts, indeed.

Shortly after lunch, we disassemble camp and slip our kayaks into the water. It's a leisurely day. The sun is shining, the water is smooth as glass and nature is putting on a show. Within minutes of leaving Pavilion, a pod of frolicking bottlenose dolphins surrounds us, spending a good quarter-hour performing tricks. One swims right

underneath my kayak. Chris can barely contain his excitement: "Who needs dolphins in a tank when you can see them right here?!"

We float through mangrove tunnels and slip right past snoozing roseate spoonbills, a bright-pink bird that looks like it was designed by Dr. Seuss. Around a bend, we catch sight of ospreys guarding a massive nest; around another we see a brilliant red mangrove dotted with herons and anhingas. Most of these water-logged little islands are inhospitable to humans (at least partly because the mosquitoes are ferocious), but they provide an ideal spot for birds: The Everglades is North America's most important breeding site for wading birds—part of the reason that UNESCO declared the national park a World Heritage Site back in 1979.

By late afternoon, we float with the tide into Chokoloskee Bay. Around us, rookeries are crowded with cormorants. (Unfortunately, we don't see any babies.) At the center of the bay, several dozen white pelicans are perched on an oyster bar, croaking noisily at one another. The sun slips toward the horizon, bathing us in a brilliant orange light. As the rising tide floods the reef, the pelicans erupt into a perfect airborne formation and fly—literally—into the sunset. We bob on the water, quietly absorbing the pyrotechnics. "There's no place like this in the world," says Chris. I can't help but agree.

The Everglades, it's the jam.

MILES PADDLED **Seven**
 PERSONAL HYGIENE LEVEL **Pungent**
 STATE OF MIND **Completely elated**

GETTING THERE + [everglades](#)

- + **Everglades Area Tours** (239.695.3633, evergladesarea.tours.com; from \$359 per person) organizes two- to seven-day kayaking tours of the Everglades. This includes national-park fees, camping gear, meals and snacks. If you've never paddled but would like to try your hand, the captain also offers three-hour kayak excursions, which are ideal for families.



Nature dictates green or blue, smooth or rippled waters in the Everglades. Opposite from left: Prepping for departure; enjoying seclusion on uninhabited Pavilion Key; a shedded snakeskin prompts a lesson on wildlife in the 'Glades.