

OUTDOORS

Friendly Adventures

Southwest Florida's good nature helps reduce stress



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CALUSA NATURE CENTER AND PLANETARIUM

At the Calusa Nature Center, visitors can experience a taste of the Everglades and see some of the area's creatures, such as this yellow tiger swallowtail butterfly.

It seems that every tourist destination is promising an ecotourism experience, but Charlotte, Lee, and Collier counties have long recognized the demand for activities that bring visitors in touch with nature—a demand that has grown in the past two years, according to some experts.

Dr. Walter Klages, of Research Data Services, Inc., reports that the desire to reduce stress has contributed to a resurgence in tourism in Southwest Florida since the September 11, 2001, attacks. The

By **William Ernest Waites**

number of Lee County tourists in August was more than 103,182, up from a little more than 96,755 in August 2001.

The islands and inland areas of Southwest Florida provide almost endless opportunities to immerse oneself in natural surroundings, whether solo on a peaceful paddle through mangrove trails, or with friends and family on a nature cruise or shelling trip.

Great Calusa Blueway

An emerging ecotourism gem that recently opened is the Great Calusa

Blueway, a network of canoe and kayak trails. Starting at the Imperial River in Bonita Springs, the trails thread along the shoreline of Estero Bay to Bunche Beach. Paddlers experience mangrove-embraced waterways where marine and bird life dominate.

As serene and seductive as it is to glide softly under boughs of mangrove green and skies of blue, the Great Calusa Blueway is not without its creature comforts. Bryan Chitwood, former managing editor of *Canoe & Kayak Magazine*, writes about his Blueway experience with as



Adventures in Paradise encourages its young visitors on the Sealife Encounter to get up-close and personal with life in Pine Island Sound.

much enthusiasm for his stop at a Lover's Key resort as communing with the world of gators and great egrets. (Read his full account on the Blueway's Web site, www.greatcalusablueway.com.)

One of the unique features of the Blueway is Mound Key, an island that rises thirty-two feet above the bay. The center of the now-extinct Calusa Indian civilization, the massive shell mound, thought to be the site from which Calusa leaders ruled, was built by generations of native inhabitants.

The Great Calusa Blueway is scheduled for extension this year to Pine Island and north to Boca Grande, where it will connect to Charlotte County's fifty-three Blueway trails covering two hundred miles of Charlotte Harbor and its tributaries. At the same time, it will be extended to Sanibel Island, where it will access the local granddaddy of ecotourism experiences, J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

"Ding" Darling Refuge

Refuge concessionaires at Tarpon Bay offer hourly, half-day, and full-day canoe and kayak rentals to ply placid mangrove tunnels in the refuge. Those who prefer to eco-commune from terra firma can also experience the nature of the refuge, where more than two hundred species of resident and migrating birds can be seen. A five-mile drive winds past wetlands and bay. You can drive it in your pri-

vate automobile, take a tram (the preferred way to minimize human impact), or bicycle. *1 Wildlife Drive, Sanibel, 239/472-1100, <http://dingdarling.fws.gov> or www.dingdarlingsociety.org.*

Shell Museum

While on Sanibel, it's appropriate to talk about shelling as an ecological experience. This pastime has evolved from a hobby of collecting pretty "gifts from the sea" to a study of how shells live and contribute to our environment. Situated on the gulf in an unusual east-to-west orientation, Sanibel is in a unique position to capture shells that roll northward out of the surf onto its beaches. It's what makes Sanibel "Shelling Central" for many.

Another reason for that label is The Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum. It's the country's most comprehensive museum devoted exclusively to shells of the world, and closes the circle on shell ecology by describing many of the region's shells and explaining the role they play in sustaining life along the island coast. *3075 Sanibel-Captiva Road, Sanibel, 239/395-2233 or toll-free at 888/679-6450, www.shellmuseum.org.*

Cruising Pine Island Sound

Not all sea life is shells, though, as families find out everyday on a two-hour Sealife Cruise run out of Port Sanibel at Punta Rassa by Adventures in Paradise, Inc.



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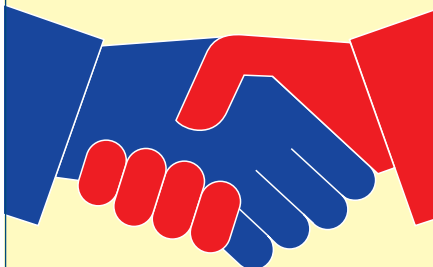


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PHOTO COURTESY OF BABCOCK WILDERNESS ADVENTURES

The endangered Florida panther can be seen on Babcock Wilderness Adventures.

A kid-friendly pontoon boat, under the experienced command of soft-spoken Capt. Rob Modys, takes eager minds to the shallows of Pine Island Sound. Beaching on Picnic Island, the boat unloads youngsters and adults to forage the bottom with nets and gather samples of sea life from the sea grasses. Naturalist Mike Boersman, a self-taught naturalist who has been doing this for more than fifteen years, helps the scavengers deposit their catches in an on-board aquarium. He then lifts out the individual creatures and encourages the kids to hold them. The squeals of delight heard across the water when the children pull up their catches sound again as slimy creatures are slipped into waiting hands.

Boersman imparts ecology lessons as he insists that each child wet his or her hands in the seawater before holding a creature. "Dry hands remove the slime from the creature and make it more vulnerable when it is returned to the sea," he points out. "In fact, when catch-and-release fishers hold a fish with a towel to remove the hook, they are doing potential damage to the fish."

Among the passengers on one trip were Mike and Shannon Sinclair and Duncan and Colleen Mills, parents of five children between them. "We came to the area because friends back home in Texas raved about it as a great family vacation place," Shannon reported. "In fact, we took the Sealife Cruise because we wanted something different for the kids to do."

Duncan continued, "We weren't looking for a nature tour, but we are pleased that we

discovered it. The kids are having a good time." 14341 Port Comfort Road, Ft. Myers, 239/472-8443 or 239/437-1660, www.adventureinparadiseinc.com.

A similar opportunity to get in touch with nature can be had with Sanibel's Tarpon Bay Explorers. In addition to canoe and kayak rentals mentioned earlier, it conducts naturalist-guided tours of Tarpon Bay, followed by a visit to touch tanks containing animals previously taken from bay waters. 900 Tarpon Bay Road, Sanibel, 239/472-8900, www.tarponbayexplorers.com.

A Peek at the Everglades

Of course, no discussion of ecotourism would be complete without mention of one of the true natural wonders of the world, the Everglades.

This vast "river of grass" covers hundreds of square miles from Lake Okeechobee to the Ten Thousand Islands on the southern tip of Florida. Although much of it is deep inland, Michael Simonik, executive director of the Calusa Nature Center and Planetarium, explains that the Western Everglades includes the area of Lee County where the nature center is situated.

"We have easily accessible exhibits that explain the nature of the Everglades and trails that wander the local pine flat woods and cypress swamp. And we are actually inside the Ft. Myers city limits," Simonik points out. "We also are just down the road from Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve, another ecotourism site that is operated by the county government. Of course, they

don't have our butterfly aviary," he says with a smile, referring to the recently opened nature center facility. "It is yet another way to engage nature in a soft and gentle way." 3450 Ortiz Avenue, Ft. Myers, 239/275-3435, www.CalusaNature.com.

Wilderness and Ranch Life

While the wilder side of the Everglades can be found deeper inland, a mini-version of that experience can be had at Babcock Wilderness Adventures in eastern Charlotte and Lee counties. The operation offers swamp-buggy rides on the ranch, which consists of 90,000 acres of working cattle ranch undisturbed acres of the Telegraph Cypress Swamp.

"The property actually straddles the county line, with equal cooperation from both Lee and Charlotte counties. We have everything the Everglades has but without the salt marsh mosquitoes that can make a visit to the interior Everglades uncomfortable," says biologist Steve Tutco, Babcock's director of tourism. He promises visitors can even come eyeball-to-eyeball with the elusive Florida panthers that are housed on the property. The small population that still exists in the wild is subject to intensive protection efforts. 8000 State Road 31, Punta Gorda, toll-free at 800/500-5583, www.babcockwilderness.com.

Manatee Park

Another endangered species, the manatee, can be spotted from canoes and kayaks, or from boats moving at idle speed to avoid colliding with the giant mammals. From land, however, one of the best places to see manatees is in the winter season at Manatee Park along the Orange River. As the water temperatures decline in the gulf and bays, the huge beasts gather near the warm outflow from the Florida Power & Light plant near the park. 10901 State Road 80, Ft. Myers, 239/694-3537, check regional parks at www.leeparks.org.

All this is but a sampling of the eco-tourism experiences that await visitors to the coast of Southwest Florida. If you seek an encounter with nature that is pleasant and nonthreatening, that leaves you wiser and more appreciative of the world we live in, and that sends you home refreshed and stress-free, this is bound to be the place. 🌿

Freelance writer William Ernest Waites enjoys Southwest Florida's good nature from his Ft. Myers home.



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