

Paddling the Hillsborough

You've got to get outta town to find the wild side of Tampa's river

by Chelle Koster Walton

Thousands of bubbles pimpled the dark water's surface like a simmering wildlife stew. A couple of hours later, we'd see up to fifty 'gators warming themselves on banks and logs, Joe told us. At the moment, they were lurking on the bottom, blowing bubbles from beastly snouts. Somehow, I'd rather have seen their old gnarly profiles than having to imagine them watching us from too few feet below.

We did see one juvenile on Flint Creek, out early to grab a prime sunning log before the big guys surfaced and ran him off. Sunny spots are at a premium under the creek's moss-festooned oak and cypress dome. Once on the Hillsborough River, we spotted a couple more of the tyrannosaurish reptiles, including a quartet of babies and a

Big Bertha of a specimen some twelve feet long laid up lordly on a gentle slope of bank.

Silence enveloped us like sleep, broken only by the electric buzz of unseen insects, the soft slap of wooden paddles, and the territorial call of a red-shouldered hawk. Crinum lilies intermittently scented the air, like one of those automatic air freshener gizmos. Great blue herons and ibis observed our progress, unflappable and trusting.

Downriver twelve miles, car horns, exhaust fumes, and skyscrapers set the scene where the Hillsborough River plunges through downtown Tampa's metropolitan hub. The only ones paddling there are the University of Tampa sculling team.



(Top) Its thick canopy insulates the Hillsborough River from extraneous noise and civilization.

"When we first opened the business, people asked, 'Why would I want to canoe the Hillsborough?' They were thinking about the seawalls and encroachments and all that [downtown]," said Joe Faulk, our guide and owner of Canoe Escape. They didn't realize that fifteen minutes from downtown Tampa gets you to a sixteen-thousand-acre preserve known as



(Left to right) Birds, alligators, and other wildlife find shelter on the river. A boardwalk trail leads through the thick woods. Limestone upcroppings make for challenging rapids.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAMPA BAY & COMPANY



A paddle up the Hillsborough is a trip back in time.

Lower Hillsborough Wilderness Park.

If Tampa is the crux of civilization on Florida's Gulf Coast, it is also its boundary. Within minutes to the east, just past Interstate 75, city life fades into the Old Florida of cattle ranchers and sheer wilderness—vast acreage of the stuff. Places where eco-tourism didn't have to be reintroduced; it's just always been there. Governments have preserved much of it to safeguard water supplies and wildlife.

Out here, the fifty-four-mile Hillsborough flows pure from Crystal Springs and the Green Swamp. The area was once logged for cypress, and the industry has left remnants of its roads and bridges. The cypress trees tea-stain the waters with their tannin. Along the river, the county has developed parts of Wilderness Park into a system of recreational areas that holds picnic facilities, launches for canoe and kayak owners, riverside fishing boardwalks, and sixty miles of forest trails, including thirty-five miles of off-road biking trails. Six main parks provide river and trail access along the way—Dead River Park, Flatwoods Park, Off-Road Loop Trail, Morris Bridge Park, John B. Sargeant Park, and Trout Creek Park. A seven-mile loop of the Flatwoods trail is paved and suitable



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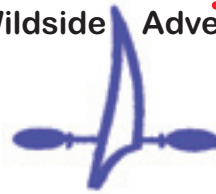
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Canoeists enjoy the tranquility of the river, just minutes from busy downtown Tampa.



A white ibis preens on a log, indifferent to the presence of humans.

for inline skating.

Sargeant Park, a mere ten miles from Busch Gardens' faux African wilderness, is my favorite park in the system. A nature boardwalk ducks under witchy-armed oak trees and stretch cypress, leading to a duckweed-slicked offshoot of the Hillsborough River. In a clearing on the bank, two fishermen cast their line as an alligator performed the dead man's float and a great blue heron played statue. It was a page right out of the book *River of the Golden Ibis*, which was set on the Hillsborough River and is a good pre-visit read.

Canoe Escape leads three-hour interpretative trips along 4.5 miles of the river in the park's developed portion. It also has charted six unguided day trips from two to six hours in duration and offers rental and shuttle service for both unguided and guided tours.

As the only outfitter on the Hillsborough River, Canoe Escape takes the privilege seriously. It leaves the river as much in its natural state as possible, trimming fallen trees only where they forbid canoe passage. Quite often you must deep-duck to make it through what looks like impassable spots. This keeps out motor boats and the party-canoeist genre, says Joe. And it keeps in the quiet and the nature, the flocks of white ibis, the mon-

archs attracted to banks of purple pickerel weed, the pileated woodpeckers that whoosh through or drum their tattoo on lightning-struck trees. Joe and staff strive to preserve the peace of the park by discouraging the beer-drinking crowd. No radios, dogs, or glass are allowed.

Upriver and adjacent to Wilderness Park, 3,383-acre Hillsborough River State Park, one of Florida's oldest state parks, wears its age gracefully. It was built during the Depression as part of the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) project, and its rustic limestone architecture blends well with its natural setting.

Here, the river frolics around limestone upcroppings, providing rapids for experienced canoeists, who can rent vessels at the park. "Wow, wild water!" exclaims a five-year-old girl excitedly from the banks, which hold a playground and oak-shaded picnic grounds that put you in mind of Tara. History buffs can tour a reconstructed Seminole War historic site, Fort Foster, plus the park has two heavily wooded campgrounds, a swimming pool, café, and biking and nature trails. Rangers lead a free guided canoe tour every Friday at two o'clock, limited to five canoes on a first-come basis.

Named through the centuries and different cultures for a Spanish saint, a Seminole word for "river where one cross-

es to eat acorns," and finally for Britain's Earl of Hillsborough, the river that runs through Tampa also pierces a land as rich with history as it is with nature.

On Canoe Escape's shuttle bus ride to the launch, a Tampa man was excitedly clueing in his visiting friend from Chicago—nature-lovers both—on what lay ahead on their adventure. "It's amazing, the wildlife, considering how close we are to the city," he said. He admitted that he plays hooky from work and the city whenever he can to enjoy the purity of life beyond. 🌿

Chelle Koster Walton's latest update version of Adventure Guide to Tampa Bay & Florida's West Coast (Hunter Publishing) has just been released.

If You Go

Canoe Escape, 813-986-2067, www.canooescape.com

Hillsborough River State Park, 813-987-6771, www.floridastateparks.org

Lower Hillsborough Wilderness Park, 352-796-7211, www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/areas/lowerhillsborough.html