


 EXPLORER

Florida's Horsey Heritage

Ramble back along the Florida time line at J.B. Starkey's

Above: Relaxing after a trail ride at J.B. Starkey's Flatwoods Adventures.

Right: A tour guide demonstrates the effect of a Cracker cow hunter's whip.

by Chelle Koster Walton

Lily craves saw palmetto leaves. But she evidently shuns the company of other horses. As a result we often were left trailing the haphazard file of horses making its way through pasture and scrub land to the Cracker barbecue awaiting us. That was fine with me. Lily's plodding pace seemed appropriate for this reversion in time, back to the days of longhorn steers and thundering cattle drives.

Florida's ranching heritage runs long and deep—from central Florida to Punta Rassa, from the 18th century clear up until today. Throughout Florida's heartland, ranching has prevailed since the days when dirt-thudding cow hunters (they abhorred the name "cowboy") got rich driving Cracker

cattle—the offspring of animals left ashore by Spanish explorers—to southern ports. Today, at J.B. Starkey's Flatwoods Adventures near New Port Richey, the tradition lives on and visitors can share the way of life through swamp buggy tours, horseback riding parties, and good old Cracker chow.

Ranching prevailed as a livelihood through two generations here. But in recent decades, economic pressures and the encroachment of surrounding development caused the Starkeys to begin looking for alternate uses for their far-as-the-eye-can-see acreage of dry prairies and pine flatlands—host to a spectrum of wild critters. They opted to pass on their Cracker traditions and knowledge of Florida's outback by growing an eco-ranch attraction with tours and other related activities.



The Starkey family once owned sixteen thousand acres of ranch land north of Tampa. A large chunk is now devoted to a state wilderness park for hikers, horseback riders, cyclists, and campers. The remaining 3,400 acres have been turned into a heritage and eco-attraction by J.B. Starkey, owner and second-generation rancher, where visitors can tour around saw palmetto flatlands as they learn about how cow hunters once herded cattle through these lands.

Participants are guaranteed the sight of contained alligators and hands-on experiences with ranching methods and Florida vegetation. Besides the working

PHOTOS BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON

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ranch's mixed Cracker breed of cattle, visitors often see white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, sandhill cranes, gopher tortoises, herons, and gators in the wild.

After our trail ride and before we sat down to our Cracker feed, we did the extensive tour aboard the open-air swamp buggy, actually a scalped and canopied school bus. The two-hour excursion makes stops to see, smell, and taste the plants and animals that the cattlemen of old raised, ate, and used. The tour guide aboard tells how dog fennel keeps away mosquitoes, how the "boots" from a cabbage palm tree got their name from the ranchers' habit of using them to pull off their footwear at the end of a long day, how cattlemen dipped their stock to kill parasites and prevent disease, and why Bahia grass was planted so the cows would stop eating saw palmettos and thusly improve the quality of their meat.

The guides are knowledgeable about all aspects of local history and environment. Our guide, Carol, identified turkey oaks, long leaf and slash pine, a wild persimmon, a wood stork, and the boxes the ranchers have placed on fence posts for Eastern bluebird nesting.

At the edge of the swamp, the buggy stopped and we filed along the 450-foot

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Above: Look at the camera and say, um, moo? **Top right:** A wood stork perched on a snag in Starkey's backwoods. **Bottom right:** Swamp buggy tours bounce along in converted school buses.



boardwalk into the standstill magic that is a cypress dome. Along the way, we learned about the benefits of duckweed, that slimy-looking plant that covers wetland surfaces, and about pond cypress, a species smaller than bald cypress and one that better tolerates the extremes of wet and dry seasons. It was getting toward sunset, so our spotting yielded well at the dome: baby alligators, a green heron, and wild orchids included.

The swamp buggy working ranch tour resembles the one you get at Babcock Wilderness Adventures here closer to home. "We attended a workshop in Arcadia [in 1998], which offered alternative uses for the land," Starkey explained. "The eco-tour appealed to me in line with what we've been doing for years with friends. We went on the Babcock tour. That was my starting point."

Starkey's stands out from Babcock and other similar attractions that have popped

up in its wake around Florida, with its horseback riding tours and full moon weekend parties.

Trail rides take place five times daily every Wednesday through Sunday, for any level of rider age 7 years or older. Children ages 3 to 6 can ride tandem with an adult for an additional \$10. One-hour rides cost \$25. Two-hour rides, available Wednesday through Friday, cost \$50, or \$60 with narration (Thursday and Friday only). The range buggy tours cost \$10 for children, \$16.75 for seniors, and \$17.75 for adults, plus tax. Kids can also enjoy 15-minute pony rides for \$5 and the petting zoo for \$3.

For the ultimate Cracker experience, plan your visit for the monthly "Moonlight Festival" (\$30 for adults, \$25 for seniors, \$10 for children ages 3 to 15; additional charge for a one-hour

horse trail ride). The evening begins at 5 p.m. and includes hayrides, pony rides, a bonfire, a sing-a-long, and the same down-home all-you-can-eat feed we relished. The hearty servings of barbecued chicken, pork, and beef with all the fixings were mighty tasty. But for me the campfire-side roasted marshmallows and s'mores were the highlight. It may not be truly authentic Cracker fare, but as far as dessert goes, it certainly tops the hard sweet potato cakes that we learned the cow hunters carried with them on the trail.

Even Lily, the saw palmetto gourmand, would have to agree with that. 🌴

Chelle Koster Walton is travel editor for Times of the Islands and author of several Florida and Caribbean guidebooks including The Sarasota, Sanibel Island & Naples Book and The Adventure Guide to Tampa Bay and Florida's West Coast.

If You Go

J.B. Starkey's Flatwoods Adventures
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just west of Gunn Highway