

TRAVEL

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PRESERVATION ON THE RESERVATION



Photos by JULIE C. HOADLEY; Airboat photo from Billie Swamp Safari

Experience an undisturbed part of Florida, where bison graze, trees grapple for growing space and Seminoles and gators live together in harmony.

By PHILIP MORGAN
The Tampa Tribune

BIG CYPRESS SEMINOLE RESERVATION — With leather hat and snake-proof boots and a life spent in the swamp, Glenn Wilsey Sr., known widely as “Gatorman,” enthralled the crowd waiting to embark on the swamp buggy eco-tour at Billie Swamp Safari.

The alligator, which can go months without eating, is an ambush predator, he explains.

“He can sit there in one spot for six months. Animals get around him and get complacent,” he says. “They get a little closer. They get a little closer. Before you know it, you’re in the alligator strike zone. He strikes to the left or the right at 125 miles an hour. Bap! That quick!”

The Seminole Tribe of Florida is widely known for its glitzy Hard Rock hotels and casinos in Tampa and

Hollywood. But to get a look at what the descendants of mostly Creek Indians faced in the 1800s when they migrated to the swamp, the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation is the place to go.

You can gamble in a big tent at the reservation, but the best reasons to drive 17 miles north of Alligator Alley are the impressive Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum of Seminole history and culture and Billie Swamp Safari.

Gators are always big stars at the safari. “Gators don’t have to smile or jump up and down,” guide John Martinez says.

“You’re going to take their picture. All they got to do is lay there.”

Bob Ohnstad of Fort Worth, Texas, is a huge fan. “Gators are really cool,” he says.

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Many animals were imported to give tourists more to see.

Alligators are the big stars at Billie Swamp Safari, a 2,200-acre area open to tourists on Big Cypress Seminole Reservation. At left, visitors taking the 20-minute airboat ride will see plenty of the reptilian predators. At top, water buffaloes are among the bovine finds on the reservation, which is the home of the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

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