



Tribune map

BIG CYPRESS

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He and his wife, Mary, and their grown daughter Jennifer have just taken the airboat ride. They do that every time Bob and Mary come to visit Jennifer, who lives in Tamarac.

If you want to see gators, take the 20-minute airboat ride. It zips past open grassland and through overhanging trees. Here and there, prehistoric beasts swim out of the way. At one stop, big gators congregate near the bank, where wild hogs have gathered.

You see more wildlife on the hourlong buggy tour, but you may think you're in Asia, Africa or — wait — the American West? Water buffaloes lounge in a pond and stare blankly at the bus-sized swamp buggy full of gawkers. Here and there, American bison graze; nearly 150 wander the 2,200 acres of Billie Swamp Safari. You'll see red deer from Europe, African eland and even ostriches, plus scrub cattle that the Spanish conquistadors introduced to Florida.

Former tribal chief James Billie imported these animals to give tourists more to look at. Many of the native residents of the swamp — raccoons, bobcat, bears, white tail deer, opossums, armadillos — come out at dusk, dark or early morning.

Along the way, Wilsey tells about the quieter wildlife around us. He warns we're coming upon a wrestling match, albeit a dull one. A strangler fig has wrapped itself around a sabal palm, and in 20 years, it will win. He notes that the palm is the source of swamp cabbage (hearts of palm), a staple that has saved a



Billie Swamp Safari



Photo by JULIE C. HOADLEY

Guide Glenn Wilsey Sr. shows a chickee hut used for cooking during the swamp buggy tour. A bus-size buggy, top, takes visitors on an hourlong ride through Billie Swamp Safari.

lot of people from starving.

And there are the cypress trees, too often ground up for mulch nowadays but far more valuable to the early Seminoles. They carved each canoe from a single cypress trunk. "Cypress repels rather than soaks up water," Wilsey notes.

The oil of the fernlike dog fennel makes a great mosquito repellent, he says. And here's the resurrection fern — "the perfect houseplant for guys."

"It can dry up and stay dry for 40 years, and a couple of drops of water and it rises again," he says.

A chickee hut is set up at one clearing. It's the traditional

Seminole shelter, an open-sided dwelling with a roof made of cabbage palm leaves. This one is a cooking chickee, with two openings on the sides near the roof. The smoke billowed out and curled around the camp, cutting down on the bugs.

The fire was made with four logs laid at 90-degree angles, their ends touching. As the wood burned, the logs would be pushed toward the center. During the Seminole wars, a fifth log was placed in the fire when the women and children had to flee approaching soldiers. That log pointed out the direction the family went so

ROMP IN THE SWAMP

GETTING THERE: Billie Swamp Safari and the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum are on the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation, 17 miles north of Interstate 75 (Alligator Alley), in Big Cypress Nature Preserve. Take Exit 49, about halfway between Naples and Fort Lauderdale.

BILLIE SWAMP SAFARI:

- Airboat rides are available from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. every day but Dec. 25. Cost is \$15 for the 20-minute trip. Minimum age is 4 years.

- Hourlong swamp buggy eco-tour costs \$25; \$15 for ages 4 to 12.

- Overnight safaris include day and evening swamp buggy eco-tours, the alligator and snake educational show, campfire story-telling, and airboat ride and overnight lodging in an enclosed chickee hut.

- Rates for small chickee (sleeps two) is \$35 a night; \$10 for extra cot rental. The dorm, which sleeps eight to 12, is \$65 per night. Rental is from noon to noon. Linens, lanterns and blankets are provided.

- For information and reservations, call Billie Swamp Safari at 1-800-949-6101 or go to www.seminoletribe.com/safari.

AH-TAH-THI-KI MUSEUM: The museum is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Sunday; call for holiday hours. Admission is \$6; \$4 for ages 4 to 12 and 62 and older; free for 3 and younger. For information, call (863) 902-1113.

their men could come find them.

When you get back from the swamp buggy and airboat tours, you can inspect the native and non-native creatures in pens behind the gift shop. You'll see big alligators and crocodiles, a 3- or 4-foot long Nile monitor, macaws and other exotic animals. Watch a snake show and an alligator wrestler. For lunch, try gator tails and fry bread at the Swamp Water Cafe.

Those who want more of an adventure can rent a chickee hut for an overnight stay. It isn't air-conditioned. All the better to hear the night sounds in the swamp.

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