

## WILD

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killed or captured and relocated, but a group of about 500 managed to hide deep in the Everglades, and some never left.

Today the tribe has land at several reservations in southern Florida, including Big Cypress, the largest.

The reservation is located in the Big Cypress Swamp and the northern reaches of the Everglades, which once was essentially a vast, shallow river flowing over saw grass and other low vegetation from Lake Okeechobee to the southern tip of Florida.

Today, much of the Everglades has been drained. But some of the old Everglades can still be seen at Big Cypress National Preserve, Everglades National Park and on the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation. In Florida, alligators might well be as common as white-tail deer are around Ohio, but I'm still thrilled by the sight of 10-foot-long sharp-toothed refugees from the Jurassic Age.

The park isn't exactly a wilderness, but I actually felt better about my explorations knowing that my swamp buggy and airboat were traveling well-worn, not pristine, paths through the Big Cypress Swamp.

For most visitors, the tours through vast saw grass marshes and hardwood hammocks are plenty wild; they are beautiful but comfortable, at least for those who remember their insect repellent — and who keep their hands inside the buggy or boat.

The safari operation offers a variety of tour options. But because the place is a good 40 miles from any sizable town, most visitors will want to opt for at least the day safari package, which includes an airboat tour, swamp buggy tour and a reptile show.

My visit started with a walk around the welcome area, which includes a large gift shop, restaurant, amphitheater, picnic shelter and the swamp buggy and airboat docks. Visitors also can see a number of animal exhibits, including alligators and crocodiles, snakes, tortoises and tropical birds.

My first adventure was an airboat ride over a long, circular grass and water channel. My driver was Rylan Kirkland, a young American Indian.

"After a while, some people take this all for granted," he said, motioning toward the wet saw grass stretching to the horizon.

The vista reminded me of the remnant prairie lands of the Darby Plains, except the clusters of trees poking up here and there on the utterly flat landscape were palms, not oaks.

"There's miles of this stuff between here and Fort Lauderdale," Kirkland said. "But I never get tired of it. And I never get tired of the alligators."

Good thing, too. From the airboat — a craft that floats lightly atop the grass and water while pushed from behind by a giant fan — we saw dozens and dozens of the creatures. Some floated silently, heads barely above water, like logs with empty eyes. Others swam in churning packs. We also noted many native birds such



STEVE STEPHENS | DISPATCH PHOTOS

An airboat is docked at the swamp, which stretches to the horizon at Big Cypress.



During a tour, don't be surprised to see any sort of critter around the next bend.



A wild hawk watches visitors to the swamp.

as herons, coots and anhingas, many turtles and a water snake or two.

The experience is something like floating through the middle of a cageless tropical zoo. The tour takes 45 minutes, more or less, depending on the curiosity of the passengers and talkativeness of the guide.

Besides the indigenous animals, the creatures to be seen include a lot of decidedly non-Floridian species, including ostriches, water buffaloes and bison.

At one point in the tour, we stopped as Kirkland took out a pail of critter chow and threw it into the shallow water along the shore. It might sound crazy, or even surreal, but there I watched as the park's razorback hogs and alligators came together in relative harmony to partake jointly of the grub.

The gators in the park are kept fed well enough that the other creatures face no real threat, Kirkland explained.

Maybe. But I wouldn't have wanted to fall out of the boat to test the theory amid a pack of 12-foot-long reptiles.

Next I boarded one of the park's swamp buggies, custom-built crafts that sit 4 feet off the ground on huge tires, keeping the guests high and dry.

The buggy carts visitors through swamps, meadows and other exotic (at least to me) habitats such as cypress domes, where circular stands of cypress trees grow with the largest in the middle and the smaller around the edges.

Experienced guides tell about the plants and animals along the route, as well as how the Seminole people who once occupied the land interacted with their environment.

Depending on the guide, guests might even hear personal reminiscences about growing up in the area and about the changes that even this seemingly wild part of Florida has undergone in recent decades.

Despite efforts to save the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp, the wetlands are still drying up at an alarming rate, several guides said.

My day package also included a "Snake Education Show." (I think the title meant that I would be educated, not the snakes.) Kids, especially, will be thrilled watching herpetologists handle deadly native and exotic snakes, including rattlesnakes and coral snakes.

For a completely natural, and very quiet, walk through a dense cypress swamp, take a stroll along the park's quarter-mile boardwalk loop.

The park also has an extensive gift shop, which includes the stan-

dard tourist fare as well as more interesting tribal crafts such as dolls and pottery.

For those who are curious, or just hungry, alligator is one of the many dishes available at the Swamp Water Cafe at the safari headquarters.

At the end of my visit, my only regret was that I hadn't reserved one of the park's chickee huts for the night. The huts, modeled after Seminole lodgings, are simple but modern camping cabins similar — except for the thatched roofs — to those found in Ohio's state parks.

Several programs are available for overnight guests, including campfire tales told by experienced Seminole storytellers and a special nighttime swamp buggy tour.

Many animals in the park, including raccoons and alligators, are even more active at night. Visiting the swamp after dark is an experience that few travelers ever get to enjoy.

I settled for a quick trip to the Seminole Ah-tah-thi-ki Museum in the nearby settlement of Big Cypress. Anyone who cares about the early history of Florida and the culture of the Seminole people will find the stop worthwhile.

The museum has its own 1.2-mile boardwalk nature trail through the surrounding cypress dome. Halfway along the loop, visitors will find a Seminole "camp" where tribe members demonstrate native crafts and ceremonies.

Inside the museum, a fascinating tribally produced film projected on five adjacent screens gives a short history of the Seminole people. The museum also contains a variety of Seminole artifacts and exhibits on the economy, home life and ceremonial life of early Seminoles.

And yes, for visitors who really need a gambling fix, the Seminoles are happy to provide an outlet at a slots casino in the town of Immokalee, about 30 miles from Big Cypress over backcountry roads.

But slot machines can be found anywhere (except Ohio, of course.) Play if you must, but first spend a day (at least) on the Big Cypress Reservation.

And say hello to the gators for me.

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## If you go

## BIG CYPRESS SEMINOLE RESERVATION

The Seminole reservation, the largest in Florida, has a number of tribal-owned attractions, including the Billie Swamp Safari and the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum of Seminole history and culture.

## GETTING THERE

Big Cypress is a long way from anywhere. Locals might point you along back roads, but the best approach for out-of-towners is from I-75, otherwise known as Alligator Alley.

Approaching from Naples on the west or Fort Lauderdale on the east, drivers should take exit 49 at Fla. 833. (The exit is about 50 miles from either coast). Follow Fla. 833 north about 15 miles to the reservation. Signs will direct you to the attractions.

## TAKING A SWAMP SAFARI

The safari park, which covers more than 2,000 acres of tribal land, offers a great introduction to the ecology of southern Florida and the history and culture of the Seminole people.

Tours give a view of native plants and animals — including a whole lot of alligators — as well as imported species such as buffalo and ostrich.

Visitors can ride elevated swamp buggies or speedy airboats. Do both if you can.

There are also animal exhibits, a boardwalk nature trail through cypress dome habitat, a reptile show and "swamp critter" show, snack-bar style restaurant, gift store and picnic area.

Guests also can opt for an overnight stay in one of the park's chickee-style gator-proof huts that sleep two, complete with linens, blankets and lanterns.

Overnight guests also can participate in special after-dark programs, including swamp tours and storytelling campfire programs. Chickee rental is \$35 a night.

Day packages — which include a swamp buggy tour, airboat tour, and reptile or "swamp critter" show — cost \$43.20, or \$30.60 for children ages 4 to 12 and \$41.40 for senior citizens 62 and older. Day tours run from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

From June through September, guests get 10 percent off admission with the presentation of a gasoline receipt.

For more information, call 1-800-949-6101 or visit [www.seminoletribe.com/safari](http://www.seminoletribe.com/safari).

## VISITING AH-TAH-THI-KI MUSEUM

This museum gives a great introduction to the history and culture of the Seminole people and, therefore, to southern Florida.

In addition to displays of Seminole artifacts and art, the museum includes a 1.2-mile outdoor nature trail with a re-created traditional Seminole camp, where tribe members demonstrate traditional skills and ceremonies.

The museum is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Admission is \$6, or \$4 for senior citizens and students. Children 5 and younger are admitted free.

For more information, call 1-877-902-1113 or visit [www.ahtahthiki.com](http://www.ahtahthiki.com).