

TRAVEL TRADE GAZETTE
50 DESTINATION

America The Everglades

Orlando might have SeaWorld, but to see 'gators in the wild you have to go to the Everglades. **James Litston** gets his teeth into a swamp safari

IT'S NIGHT-TIME in Florida's Everglades and I'm on safari. Countless stars are glinting in the sky, but there's no moon, and it's impenetrably dark. I can hear insects chourising in the undergrowth, and fireflies hang from all the trees like strings of green fairy lights. It's hard to believe that I'm only an hour's drive from glitzy Miami.

Michelle, our guide, switches on a powerful beam of light and scans the water's edge, looking for signs of life. An otter scampers away and several pairs of eyes wink back, shining red in the torch's glare.

"Alligators," she whispers, the light picking out more of them lurking in the shallows nearby.

I'm glad we're riding in an elevated "swamp buggy"; I don't think alligators can jump but decide that now's not the time to find out.

We Brits might love the Sunshine State for its theme parks and other man-made attractions, but here at Billie Swamp Safari the thrills have a lot more to do with Mother Nature than Mickey Mouse. The safari lies within the Seminole Indians' Big Cypress Reservation, a 50,000-acre expanse of woodland, swamp and pasture in the heart of the Everglades.

The night swamp buggy tour offers a chance to spot the area's more elusive native animals, which include black bears and the rare Florida panther. Michelle says she recently saw a panther bring down a deer right in front of the buggy, but alas



Don't try this at home: a Seminole alligator-wrestler

they're nowhere to be seen on my visit. But I'm still very content with close-up sightings of buffalo, ostrich and some African antelope. Such introduced wildlife might not satisfy purists, but they provide plenty of exciting animal encounters.

The tour is part of the overnight safari package, which also includes a daylight buggy tour and an exhilarating airboat ride.

The highlight for me, though, is the opportunity to stay overnight in a "chickee", a thatched hut similar to the Seminoles' traditional dwellings. The chickees' appeal lies in their simplicity. Each hut sits on the water's edge and contains two wood-framed, single beds covered in Indian-style blankets, a kerosene lamp – and nothing else. Netting at the windows keeps mosquitoes out but lets in the night sounds of the Everglades. I fall asleep to a soundtrack of chirping crickets and croaking bullfrogs, with the palm thatch rustling comfortingly in the breeze.

With no air-conditioning, electricity or en suite bathrooms, the chickees won't be everyone's cup of tea, but an overnight stay here adds an authentic experience to a fly-drive itinerary linking Miami with the Gulf Coast beaches.

It's also worth stopping at the nearby Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, where the Seminoles' history is brought to life. Authentic artefacts include traditional patchwork clothing and giant black-and-white photographs, while the mile-long boardwalk trail offers a welcome opportunity to stretch your legs while learning how the tribe used different plants for medicines and food.

While the museum and safari proudly showcase the Seminoles' past, the tribe's other tourism venture is very much focused on the present. I test out my satellite navigation system on the 65-mile drive east to Fort Lauderdale, where I find my bed for the night: the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino.

The complex contains 17 restaurants, a 24-hour casino, a 500-room hotel and several nightclubs. After the tranquility of Big Cypress, the constant buzz and sheer volume of people at the Seminole Hard Rock is a shock to the system.

The chirping of insects has given way to thumping music, and the twinkling fireflies replaced by disco lights. But that's what makes the land of the Seminoles such a wonderful destination. Whether you are looking for wildlife, or wild times, a visit here is sure to fit the bill.

Before I know it, I'm throwing shapes on the dance floor at Pangea club with a whole different pack of animals.

From the peaceful Everglades...



...to party time at the Hard Rock hotel

Chickee huts: not ideal for customers who require room service and a pillow menu

BOOK IT!

Billie Swamp Safari
Overnight safari package costs \$90 per adult (based on two sharing). Agents can earn 30% commission by pre-booking.
● safari@semtribe.com
● www.semtribe.com

Jetliffe has a five-night stay at the Seminole Hard Rock Cafe Hotel in Hollywood, Florida, from £688 per person based on two sharing on a room-only basis. The price includes car hire and return flights to Miami. To book this property call 0871 902 7877.
● www.jetliffe.co.uk

Car rental in Florida costs from £29 a day with Hertz. Sat-nav costs an additional \$10.95 a day when pre-booked from the UK.
● www.hertz.com

