

the Everglades can be a difficult place to love.

The heat can be stifling; the mud, copious; the mosquitoes, ravenous. Unlike the wilderness areas of the American West, the Everglades aren't equipped with punctual geysers and red-rock towers. It's also mind-bendingly vast: a 60- by 100-mile swath of flat wetland that stretches from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay. (Everglades National Park, which covers 1.5 million acres, protects just a fraction of this sprawling environment.) In some parts, the landscape is more land than water — mile after mile of open saw-grass marsh punctuated by clusters of hardwood trees. In others, it's more water than land, a webbed network of shallow waterways where fishermen congregate to hook tarpon and snook.

Humans have spent the better part of the past 200 years trying to change the Everglades, dredging, draining and filling it in. In fact, a good portion of the Everglades today isn't really Everglades. It's an only-in-Florida amalgam of frontier towns, sugar-cane fields, Indian villages and roadside stands, the latter of which provide an outstanding opportunity to watch a grown man put his head between the jaws of an exasperated alligator.

Despite the scars, the Everglades, in its finest moments, provides magnificent serenity. On a bright afternoon in September, just days after Hurricane Ike had grazed the Florida coast, I find myself off Route 29, near Copeland, hip deep in swamp and coated in mosquito repellent, making my way into a tangled cypress forest. It is low season, and I am in the company of a kindly manager of a local B&B, whom I've roped into being an impromptu guide. He has brought me to the Fakahatchee, a state preserve known for harboring almost four dozen native orchid species, including the endangered ghost orchid, a translucent, white flower with dangling tendrils that resembles origami. Though we are only a few hundred feet away from the road, civilization seems far behind. We're enveloped by a watery, green riot of ferns, strangler figs and lily pads. A subtropical soundtrack of drips and splashes accompanies each deliberate step through liquid ground. Swamp walking is a downright meditative act; it cannot be rushed.

Unfortunately, I didn't see any rare orchids. (Trying to find blooming epiphytes in the wake of a hurricane is rather impractical.) But I did discover a sense of stillness, far away from twittering BlackBerries and the ping of e-mail. It's a tranquility I find throughout my week-long trip. "The Everglades is my temple," says Ray Becerra, a garrulous nature-lover who leads wildlife excursions at Billie Swamp Safari on the Seminole reservation at Big Cypress. He's now parked in a swamp buggy amid a cluster of cabbage palms, watching a late-summer rain bounce



Clockwise from top left: Gator nuggets at Swamp Water Café; families survey wetlands from boardwalks; park ranger Tony Terry; a gator's home turf; Homestead's Royal Palm Grill is our pick for breakfast; Mary Tigertail of the Seminole nation; only about 100 panthers still exist here; folks returning from an Eco Adventures kayaking trip.



Outside, the decorative metalwork found on the front of the home carries back to the second-floor master-bedroom balcony. The juxtaposition of the balcony extending outward above the terrace with views of the foliage and the pool, "makes it feel like it is isolated in a jungle in some way," laughs Oppenheim, who collaboratively landscaped the property with Robert Parsley of Miami. "The garden and landscape is as important as the architecture because the two coalesce." He insists that one cannot exist without the other and is always asking himself, "How do we build *and* appreciate the natural environment without detracting from it?" To him, architecture and landscape are a powerful interaction; perhaps that's why he perceives the terrace of his home as another room, rather than just an outside extension.

Surprisingly, he describes the pool as a "carved-out hole in the grass." His vision was water floating in grass, a reflecting pool to mirror the minimalist architecture adjacent to it. It was done as an illusion of sorts, as if the pool doesn't have an intended demarcated edge. To Oppenheim, the design process is about beauty as well as logic. Low-level lighting illuminates everything just so. "Nighttime is especially unbelievable out here," he says. The architect with a self-described hedonistic design penchant added one final touch: a circular column containing an outdoor shower open to the sky. Smiling, he says, "I create charming spaces that feel good."

Clockwise from top left: Flowing white curtains welcome guests to Villa Ai-legra; gold chairs mimic the rippled effect of the curtains behind them; a set of atypical drawers bundled with a strap adds a touch of whimsy to the guest room. Titled *You Can't Lay Down Your Memories Chest of Drawers*, it's by Tejo Remy for Droog Design.