



Office of Greenways & Trails

Segment 16

Biscayne Bay

Emergency contact information:

911

Monroe County Sheriff's Office: Lower Keys (305) 296-2424. Middle Keys (305) 289-2430. Upper Keys (305) 853-3266

Miami-Dade Police Department: 305-4-POLICE

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922 or *FWC

Begin: John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park

End: Oleta River State Park

Distance: 72.5 miles

Duration: 5-6 days

Special Considerations: Heavy winds and storms may prove challenging in open water areas. Weekend boat traffic can be heavy, especially in the more narrow northern section of the bay. Day two will be a highly interesting though challenging day in terms of mileage.

Introduction

Paddlers can follow in the wake of Tequesta Indians, Bahamian tree-cutters, pirates, wreckers, smugglers, fortune hunters, millionaires and several United States presidents who have utilized Biscayne Bay for their livelihood or as their playground. The numerous islands and keys reveal a surprising wildness, especially due to their close proximity to Miami, and several spoil islands have been restored and turned into tropical oases. Much of the bay is shallow, so paddlers can largely avoid boating lanes and hug the shorelines, being wary of large wakes.

Since the heart of Biscayne Bay is a wide watery expanse, paddlers should pay close attention to weather conditions. To quote from the [Biscayne National Park](#) website:

“Some days, Biscayne Bay’s shallow waters are glassy smooth, a window on another world. Other times, the wind whistles and whips, creating white waves that bite like teeth at an angry sky.”

Several routes can be taken through this segment, depending upon desire and prevalent winds. This draft will focus on one main route since campsites are currently limited to just a few sites.

Three Florida state parks are included in this segment: [John Pennekamp](#), [Bill Baggs Cape Florida](#), and [Oleta River](#). The route traverses the [Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserve](#), an area that includes extensive mangrove forests, seagrass meadows, estuarine and hard-bottom communities, and a diverse array of marine life. At least 512 fish species occur in the bay and more than 800 benthic organisms. Manatees, sea turtles and a wide variety of birds can be seen.

Paddlers will also enjoy [Biscayne National Park](#), the largest marine park in the national park system, with more than 180,000 acres of islands, mangrove shorelines and undersea life.

Regarding primitive campsites outlined in this guide, users are required to keep these sites clean and follow all regulations in order for them to remain open for paddlers. All human waste must be packed out and properly disposed according to [Leave No Trace Principles](#). A reliable GPS unit is a must to safely follow the route and find campsites. Bug repellent is essential even in winter, although biting insects are more prevalent in warm months. Temperatures can be surprisingly cold in the winter months also.

1: John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park to Garden Cove campsite, 4.5 miles

In this section, you’ll begin paddling through one of the most pristine areas in coastal South Florida. Green mangrove-lined shorelines greet paddlers along with shallow patch reefs with their colorful fish.

From the Pennekamp kayak launch site (just over the wooden bridge on your left along Largo Sound), paddle north through North Sound Creek and skirt the inside of Rattlesnake Key. The Garden Cove campsite at [Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock](#)

[Botanical State Park](#) has a composting toilet and fire ring. Paddlers wanting to camp must pack everything in and out; there is limited access to Key Largo. Arrangements must be made in advance by calling the Ranger Station at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, 305-451-1202. The site is not available to non-paddlers.

The name of Garden Cove dates back to the 1830s. A Keys ship captain, John Whalton, and his crew maintained a garden of fruits and vegetables in the area to augment their intermittent supply shipments. When Whalton and four crew members paddled ashore to tend the garden on June 26, 1837, Seminole Indians surprised them and killed Whalton and one crew member.

2: Garden Cove campsite to Elliott Key, 24.5 miles

Paddling along the shore, you'll eventually pass the Ocean Reef Club, an exclusive member's-only community that does not allow uninvited guests by sea or land.

For an ideal rest stop, follow the channel markers into Palo Alto Key and take the first tidal creek on the right. The rest stop is a short ways up the creek on the right in a tiny cove. Use your GPS unit to verify. Please do not explore the area as this is a protected hammock site. Poisonwood trees in the area are distinguishable by black splotches of poisonous sap on the smooth trunks. Most people are sensitive and can develop skin rashes.

As you pass Old Rhodes Key, you'll notice the bleached bones of mangroves as this area received a direct hit from Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

Porgy Key is an interesting point of interest as this is the home site of the Jones family. Of African descent, they settled the key in 1897 and raised pineapples and limes to sell in Key West. Eventually, only one member of the family remained on the island, Sir Lancelot Jones. He worked as a sponger and fishing guide, having the distinction of taking four different United States presidents bonefishing. Known fondly as "the philosopher of Porgy Key," Sir Lancelot was moved from the island at age 94 when Hurricane Andrew was bearing down. Today, visitors can view concrete foundations of his house and that of his family, and picture the life they once lived.

Across from Porgy Key is a Biscayne National Park day-use area on [Adams Key](#) where you can have a picnic and use the restrooms.

Overnight camping is on the bay side roughly halfway up [Elliott Key](#) . You can tie up your kayaks on the low docks that are generally reserved for dinghies. Regulations forbid kayakers to land on the swimming beach.

Elliott Key has restrooms, picnic tables, grills, cold showers and fresh water. A group camping site is on the ocean side about half a mile across the island. You can stretch your legs on numerous trails, exploring this scenic island. One seven-mile trail cuts lengthwise through the center of the island through a tropical hardwood hammock. Originally, this trail was a 150-foot wide swath cut by a former landowner just before the National Park Service took control of the island. Known as Spite Highway, the swatch has since grown back to become a pleasing canopied trail. A nature trail on the ocean side will enable you to view sea grape, black mangrove, bay cedar, buttonwood and other subtropical plants. Camping on both Elliott Key and [Boca Chita Key](#) is on a first-come, first-served basis for a modest fee.

3: Elliott Key to Boca Chita Key, 5 miles

This is a short day, certainly optional, to a premier campsite on Boca Chita Key, also managed by the National Park Service. The landing site is on the north side of the 32-acre island. There are picnic tables, grills and restrooms, but no fresh water. Take time to explore “the little lighthouse that isn’t,” a lighthouse built illegally from native coral rock by Mark Honeywell in the 1940s for his own personal navigation landmark. He was forced to permanently extinguish the beacon when it was deemed an uncharted hazard to navigation in the area.

4: Boca Chita Key to Teacher’s Island, 21 Miles (10 miles to Bill Baggs State Park)

Paddlers have several options to reach Teacher’s Island, which is near the mainland. The most direct route in calm weather is to head straight north and explore tiny Soldier Key, Stiltsville, followed by the Cape Florida Lighthouse at Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park, and then cut across. It is possible to stay at the State Park at the youth camp and reduce the distance by about ten miles if you make prior arrangements by calling 305-361-8779, M-F 8-4:30. The camp site is primitive with no restrooms, shelters or power.

When the park is closed (between sunset and 8:00 a.m.), campers must remain in the youth camp. No after-hours access to the park will be granted during sea turtle nesting season - May 1st through October 31st. If arriving from the beach side go to the northern end where warning flags are posted. A long boardwalk leads to restrooms and showers. To access the campsite cross the parking lot and go west 0.5 miles on Harbor Rd. You can also access the park from No Name Harbor, but you'll have to climb over a seawall. You can secure kayaks to the bike rack near the restaurant and then carry gear 0.2 mile east to youth camp.

The [Cape Florida lighthouse](#) was first built in 1825, destroyed by Seminole Indians in 1836, and rebuilt in 1846. The 95-foot lighthouse is the oldest standing structure in Miami-Dade County. Ponce de Leon was believed to have landed in this area in 1513 during the first Spanish expedition in Florida.

Depending on winds, the safest route is by way of the channel along Featherbed Bank, which is largely bordered by shoals, and then follow the mainland. Taking this route, however, will add 4-5 miles to your day.

You can take a break at the [Black Point Park & Marina](#), and look for sea cows in this high manatee use area. Heading north along the shore, you will pass a distinct Florida landscape feature, Mount Trashmore, more than six stories tall. This is where Dade County's solid waste is disposed.

Take your time to explore some of Miami's shoreline culture by stopping for restaurant breaks near [Matheson Hammock Park](#) and the Dinner Key area. The bay will gradually narrow toward the Rickenbaker Causeway. Matheson Hammock is an overnight primitive camping site on the Alternate Mainland Route from Flamingo to Miami. The park offers a secluded primitive site accessed through a small opening in the mangroves at the south end of the park (N 25.677105 W -80.259238). Call ahead at 305-665-5475 for permission to camp one night only, with group size limited to a maximum of four tents and eight kayaks. Camp behind a tall stand of Australian pines near the west end of the parking lot. There is a restroom and restaurant within walking distance and full service marina. If you have time, walk about a mile through the park to the fantastic [Fairchild Tropical Botanic Gardens](#) to enjoy the lush landscape and Butterfly Conservatory.

It is possible to paddle along the increasingly developed coastline about 11 miles to Teacher's Island. If staying on the traditional Segment 16 route it is recommended that you skirt around Virginia Key on the Atlantic coastal (east) side and slide between Fisher Island and the Port of Miami, avoiding the Intracoastal Waterway. Be wary of large ships as you cross Government Cut. A large offshore zone on the northwest side of Virginia Key is a restricted area.

A great rest stop and point of interest is the 82.5-acre [Virginia Key Beach Park](#), located on the east side of the key along the recommended route. Kayakers need to land on the northeast corner of the park beach (see map). At the park, you can access restrooms, fresh water, picnic pavilions and an interpretive trail. In 1945, Virginia Key Beach was established as Dade County's only public beach and recreation facility for "the exclusive use of Negroes." It is now on the National Register of Historic Places and a popular off-road cycling destination. The key also features several native plant communities that are scarce in Dade County, and it harbors the state endangered Biscayne prickly ash.

Another point of interest is the Flagler Monument Island just offshore from Miami Beach on the bay side. This is a tiny island that harbors a 60-foot obelisk dedicated to Henry Morrison Flagler, builder of the Florida East Coast Railroad. Carl Fisher, the major developer of Miami Beach, built the monument in 1919. Allegorical statues representing pioneering, education, industry and prosperity are located on each side of the monument's base.

Teacher's Island, just past the Venetian Causeway near the mainland, is the first of several spoil islands that Dade County has restored into tropical paradises with native vegetation. Most are nearly surrounded by riprap (large rocks) to stem erosion, but small beaches or docks on each island offer handy landing spots. With the exception of Bird Key, which is a bird rookery and off limits, each island has a picnic area, and some have nature trails and shelters. No long-term camping is permitted, but the islands make great stopovers for circumnavigation paddlers as long as No Trace Principles are utilized. Nearby parks on the mainland, such as [Morningside Park](#) near Morningside Island, offer public restrooms. Bear in mind that on most weekends, the islands are very popular with boaters.

In exploring the islands, try to identify native species that have been planted on these once barren isles of sand. Species may include bay cedar, sabal and coconut palm, sea lavender, sea grape, sea oats, gumbo limbo, Jamaica dogwood and mahogany.

5: Teacher's Island to Oleta River State Park, 10.5 miles

The bay gradually narrows as you head north until you'll see the huge area of mature mangrove forests, framed by large buildings. This is [Oleta River State Park](#), resembling a coastal Central Park in an urban setting. Exceeding a thousand acres, this is the largest urban park in the state. The upland areas were built from spoil material from dredging and are now best known for premier mountain biking. Wet areas mostly consist of mangroves, though it is interesting to note that sawgrass once dominated these sites. A 1926 hurricane opened a channel across from the park, allowing more salinity into the northern bay, enabling salt-tolerant mangroves to take hold. Dredging now keeps the Baker's Haulover Inlet open.

Paddlers can enjoy the park by landing at a designated spot along a tidal creek near the beach. It is against park regulations to land a craft on the beach as it may pose hazardous for bathers swimming underwater. Visitors need to pay a day-use fee in the iron ranger near the landing spot, or they can hike to the entrance station. You can enjoy the luxuries of one of the park's cabins for a fee. Advanced [reservations](#) are recommended, especially on weekends.

A primitive campsite for paddlers is a short ways up the Oleta River, on the north side. It is along the second inlet on the right past the state park bridge. This was a marina several decades ago, but the site has been restored. You'll need to utilize Leave No Trace principles and hike a short distance to the entrance station to pay a small camping fee. Across the road from the park headquarters are restaurants and a movie theater. A supermarket is one block east. Along the river just north of the campsite, at the bridge, is the park's visitor services provider—[Blue Moon Outdoor Center](#) and [Blue Marlin Fish House](#). Kayak rentals are available.

As you enjoy Oleta River State Park, it is difficult to imagine that millions of people live within a 20-mile radius. Like many parts of this segment, Oleta is a natural oasis in an urban setting.