



**Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail**  
**Segment 12**  
**Pine Island/Estero Bay**

**Emergency contact information:**

**911**

Lee County Sheriff's Office: 239-477-1000

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

**FPTA Region: F**

**Begin:** Cayo Costa State Park

**End:** Lovers Key/Bowtie Island

**Distance:** 38.3 - 41.5 miles (depending on route)

**Duration:** 2-3 days

**Special Considerations:** Note: This area was hard hit by Hurricane Ian in 2022 so businesses and natural areas might still be recovering during your visit. Double-check with any motels or state parks you plan to use to ensure they are open.

Extreme caution should be taken in paddling to and from Cayo Costa and in crossing the various passes. Due to currents and boat traffic, these open water crossings should only be attempted by experienced paddlers in favorable weather conditions along the bay side. As with most South Florida segments, boat traffic can be heavy, especially on weekends.

Advance reservations are recommended for motels and campgrounds, especially during holidays and the spring season.

## **Introduction**

Paddlers will have the option of utilizing one of two main routes as part of the Great Calusa Blueway. One route extends east from Cayo Costa and runs around Pine Island through Matlacha Pass. The other hugs the west side of Pine Island down to St. James City. Both routes are highly scenic, providing opportunities to view numerous species of wading birds and other wildlife. For the purposes of this guide, we will focus primarily on the Matlacha Pass option for long-distance paddlers because overnight accommodations are more reasonably priced and the waters are generally more sheltered once you reach Pine Island.

Early Calusa Indians built canals and temple mounds in the region. Houses were built atop some of their early shell mounds on Pine Island. Ponce de Leon is believed to have visited in the early 1500s, and he was followed by various European explorers. Cattle were king in the 1800s, with cattle being shipped through Charlotte Harbor to Cuba and other points.

Three Aquatic Preserves cover part of the segment: Matlacha Pass, Pine Island Sound, and Estero Bay. The preserves serve as valuable nursery grounds for both recreational and commercial species of fish, crabs, and shrimp, harboring over 100 species of invertebrates, 200 species of fish, and 150 species of shore and wading birds. Protected animals include five species of sea turtle, the Florida manatee, and numerous birds such as roseate spoonbills, peregrine falcons, and bald eagles.

Several scenic parks are featured in this segment. Lovers Key State Park features hiking trails, restrooms, fresh water, and picnic facilities. Camping is also available at the Koreshan State Historic Site fronting the Estero River. Mound Key Archeological State Park features hiking and large Calusa middens and, like Cayo Costa, is only accessible by boat or kayak. Estero Bay Preserve State Park features unique scrub sand ridges -- remnants of historic dune systems. For camping reservations, visit Reserve Florida State Parks or call (800) 326-3521.

### **1. Cayo Costa to Matlacha, 15.5 miles**

From Cayo Costa, paddle to Pine Island between Patricio and Useppa islands. Fascinating points of interest include the historic village of Pineland and the Randell Research Center -- site of a Calusa Indian village for more than 1500 years. The center features a self-guided trail through an extensive Calusa mound and canal complex. Open 10 a.m. to 4

p.m. daily except Christmas and Thanksgiving. A donation is requested. If you skip the research center and Pineland, you'll shave off about 3 miles from your day's total.

To reach Matlacha (pronounced Mat-lah-shay), paddle north along Pine Island's west side into Little Bokeelia Bay, through Jug Creek, and then down along the east side of Pine Island to Matlacha Pass. Matlacha offers several small motels, restaurants, outfitters, and a small store.

### **Alternate route: Cayo Costa to Picnic Island (20 miles)**

From Cayo Costa, you can stop at Cabbage Key, where there is a restaurant, lodge, and picturesque cottages. Hug the western shoreline of Pine Island, and round St James City at the south end of the island to Picnic Island. This route bypasses Matlacha and will shave one day off your paddling. Be aware of possible heavy powerboat traffic at the south end of Pine Island, and in the channel between Pine Island and Picnic Island, especially on weekends.

### **2. Matlacha to Picnic Island, 11.4 miles**

Leave Matlacha with enough fresh water for two days. From Matlacha, continue hugging Little Pine Island and Pine Island to Picnic Island. You can take a rest break at Tropical Point Park, although there are no facilities. There are no facilities either on Picnic Island; primitive camping is required. Follow Leave No Trace guidelines.

### **3. Picnic Island to Lovers Key/Bowtie Island, 15.7 miles**

From Picnic Island, you'll head toward the mainland. You can stop at the Punta Rassa Boat Ramp and replenish your fresh water supply. About 3 miles past the ramp is Bunche Beach, once the beach for African Americans during the Jim Crow days. Just across Matanzas Pass from the beach, about a mile, is the 17-acre Bowditch Point Regional Park where you can access restrooms, a snack bar, and outdoor showers.

You can follow the signs for the Great Calusa Blueway on the inside of San Carlos Island or you can shorten your day by about 1.5 miles by paddling on the inside of Estero Island. A point of interest along this route is the Mound House, a cultural museum and environmental center originally built in 1906. The center is converting an old swimming pool on the site into an underground room that is part of the large Calusa shell mound that the house was built on. The romantic-sounding Lovers Key State Park is an ideal place to end this segment. Once the possible hideout of the pirate Black Augustus, and later the site of numerous fish camps, this cluster of four scenic barrier islands was slated for development before the state of Florida and Lee County stepped in to create the state park. You can hike or bike miles of interior trails or launch your kayak at a landing along

Estero Bay. If on a long-distance paddle, you can land on either the bay side or Gulf side for a picnic, to obtain fresh water, and to use the restrooms. There is a small store and kayak rental near the boat launch.

No camping is allowed at Lovers Key, but thru paddlers can camp at Bowtie Island with a free permit. Other visitors are not allowed to camp. Permit applicants should contact Calusa Blueway Coordinator Mike Hammond: [mhammond@leegov.com](mailto:mhammond@leegov.com) or call (239) 707-7981 with as much advance notice as possible. A float plan is required that shows why camping is needed on the island. Bowtie Island is about two miles south of the Lover's Key wayside picnic area and is accessed on the southeast corner (see map). Volunteers with the Calusa Blueway and Florida Paddling Trails Association help to maintain Bowtie Island. Only CT paddlers are allowed to camp on the island.