



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

Begin: Cayo Costa State Park

End: Lovers Key/Bowtie Island

Distance: 57.5 miles

Duration: 5 days

Special Considerations: 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 inside of North

Captiva, Captiva and Sanibel islands. 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 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 state parks are featured in this segment. [Cayo Costa](#) and [Lover's Key](#) state parks feature hiking trails, restrooms, fresh water, and picnic facilities. In addition, Cayo Costa offers camping and cabins. 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. Advance reservations at [Reserve America](#) are highly recommended for overnight stays. Call 800-326-3521.

1. Cayo Costa to Jug Creek Cottages, 11 miles

Cayo Costa is only accessible by boat or kayak. The park's boat dock and kayak landings are on the interior side of the island. Pull up your boat and keep it separate from the rental boats. Another option is to take the park shuttle boat and either rent kayaks at the park or bring your kayak on the shuttle boat.

Even if you have a camping reservation at Cayo Costa, you must check in at the office near the dock. Until 5 p.m., a shuttle can take you and your gear (not your kayak) to the campground and cabins about a mile away on the beach side.

If you happen to land on the Gulf side near the campground, you must register at the park office (on the bay side) before setting up. You can carry your boat to your campsite or cabin. Periodic shuttles can give you a lift to the office, or you can hike.

From Cayo Costa, paddle to Pine Island between Patricio and Useppa islands. Fascinating points-of-interest includes 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.

Jug Creek Cottages are part of the Cayo Costa State Park land base. The cottages, built in the 1940s, help to give visitors the feeling of a slower, earlier time. The cottages are available for single night rentals except on weekends and holidays, when there is a two-night minimum. Call 239-283-0015 for reservations.

Alternate route: From Cayo Costa, you can stop at [Cabbage Key](#), where there is a restaurant, lodge and picturesque cottages. Hug the inside of Captiva and Sanibel islands and stay at the Castaway Cottages near Blind Pass after about 17 miles (239-472-1252). As you near Blind Pass, look for a marked channel

through the mangroves to Castaway Cottages. A general store with groceries is next door. It is about 12 miles from Castaway Cottages to Picnic Island. This route will enable you to view the famed [J. N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge](#), home to almost 300 species of birds. The islands are also known for their strict ordinances regarding building heights, signs and landscaping; there are no big box stores and very few chain restaurants.

2. Jug Creek Cottages to Matlacha, 9.5 miles

To reach Matlacha (pronounced Mat-lah-shay), paddle along Pine Island and enter Matlacha Pass. Matlacha offers several small [motels](#), restaurants, outfitters and a small store. A GPS point is given for one motel as a reference point.

3. Matlacha to Picnic Island, 12 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.

4. Picnic Island to Koreshan State Park, 17.5 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.

[Koreshan State Park](#) is almost 4 miles up the Estero River from the river mouth. After a mile or so, the extreme tidal influence wanes and the current is fairly slack, making for easy paddling. Along the way, you can land at the Estero River Scrub, part of [Estero Bay Preserve State Park](#), and hike through 1,260 acres of mostly dry scrub habitat ridges. These remnant dune systems are home to gopher tortoises and other unique animals.

At Koreshan State Park, you can land and secure your kayak at the boat ramp next to the rental canoes. It is about 300 feet to the campground via the nature trail along the river. You must first register at the entrance station, which is less than a half mile along the paved entrance road from the ramp. Advanced reservations are highly recommended; the campground frequently fills up.

The park encompasses the Koreshan Unity Settlement site where about 200 religious utopian followers of Dr. Cyrus R. Teed first settled in 1880. The Koreshans believed that the universe existed within a giant hollow sphere. Not surprisingly, their beliefs were often at odds with the surrounding society. The Koreshans built their own stores, schools, sawmill, cement works, hostelry, boat works and printing house. Dr. Teed died in 1908, and in 1961, the four remaining members of the community donated the land and settlement to the state. You can hike to the historic settlement on the park nature trail along the river.

5. Koreshan State Park to Lovers Key/Bowtie Island, 7.5 miles.

After leaving the Estero River, it is less than a mile to [Mound Key Archeological State Park](#). Kayak landings are at trail heads on the northwest and southeast portions of the island. Interpretive trails lead one through the island and to shell middens that rise up to 32 feet.

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 in the park, but if you wish to primitive camp in the area, Bowtie Island is available on a first-come-first-served basis free-of-charge. Managed by the [Florida Paddling Trails Association](#), the island is about two miles south of the Lover's Key wayside picnic area and is accessed on the southeast corner (see map).