



Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

Segment One

Pensacola/Fort Pickens



Emergency contact information:

911

Escambia County Sheriff's Office: 850-436-9630

Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office: 850-983-1100

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

FPTA Region: A

Begin: Big Lagoon State Park

End: Navarre Beach Camping Resort

Distance: 37 miles

Duration: 3 days

Special Considerations: This guide will favor the route inside the barrier islands since it is more sheltered and opportunities for camping and/or motel stays are spaced at reasonable distances apart.

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

Introduction

People of the Pensacola area can best be described as resilient. During the hurricane season of 2004-2005, they suffered through four named storms, the main one being Hurricane Ivan. Houses, buildings, roads, and bridges were damaged or destroyed. The rolling dunes and tree-covered hamlets of the Gulf Islands National Seashore barrier islands were flattened, leaving a barren-looking landscape of snow-white sand.

It is not the first-time strong storms have battered the area. The first recorded hurricane occurred in 1559 when a killer storm struck only days after 2,000 Spanish soldiers and settlers sailed into Pensacola Bay to establish a permanent colony. All but two of the colonists' eleven ships were spared, crippling hopes for further exploration and resupply. The town was soon abandoned. St. Augustine, settled six years later, became the oldest European city on American soil.

On November 3, 1752, a hurricane and tidal wave hit Santa Rosa Island and destroyed all buildings of a Spanish settlement except for a storehouse and hospital. From 1877 through 2005, more than 45 hurricanes struck within 60 miles of the area, and yet Pensacola has persevered and continues to prosper.

The circumnavigation trail begins at Big Lagoon State Park. Almost 700 acres, the park offers hiking trails and a top-notch campground. You can also view outstanding examples of upland coastal forests. For camping reservations, visit Reserve Florida State Parks or call (800) 326-3521. There is also a paddler's only primitive campsite near the kayak launch site that can be reserved for one-night-only through the park: (850) 492-1595.

The trail traverses the Fort Pickens Aquatic Preserve, 34,000 acres of seagrass beds, salt marshes, and the undeveloped portions of eastern Perdido Key and western Santa Rosa Island. The preserve provides valuable habitat for wildlife, birds, and marine life, including several threatened and endangered species.

The kayaking trail in this segment touches upon the Gulf Islands National Seashore in several places, mostly on the barrier islands. Some units, such as around Fort Pickens, have been closed in the past due to hurricane damage. Check here for the latest information, or call (850) 934-2600.

1. Big Lagoon State Park to Eastern End of Perdido Key, 6 miles

The scenic Big Lagoon State Park is an appropriate beginning for the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail. Make sure to climb the wildlife viewing tower to get a bird's eye view of the expansive marshes, forests, tidal creeks, and waterways in the area. You can launch at the park's kayak launch near the viewing tower, where there is also a primitive campsite near the launch for trail users, along with the CT Logbook. To reserve the site (one night only), call the park at (850) 492-1595. There is a nominal fee. If you are a long-distance paddler, please sign the logbook as this is destined to become a historical account of the trail.

Paddling east from the launch, the lagoon is wide enough to hug the shallow shoreline and will allow you to largely avoid the Intracoastal Waterway, where boat traffic can be heavy.

Primitive camping is allowed on the eastern end of Perdido Key in the Gulf Islands National Seashore, beginning a half-mile east of the end of Johnson Beach Road facing Big Lagoon (see map). You are asked to avoid the dunes and vegetated areas, and you must pack out what you pack in. Fires are allowed on the beach below the extreme high tide. If you are a long-distance paddler, this short day can be a great way to break into the rigors of the trip.

After dark, from your camp on Perdido Key, you should be able to spot the Pensacola Lighthouse on the mainland. Established in 1859, it is one of the oldest lighthouses along the Gulf Coast still in operation.

2. Eastern End of Perdido Key to Big Sabine Point, 17 miles

Take care in entering Pensacola Bay as this is an open water body and winds can create difficult paddling conditions. Also, be wary of currents and large ships as you cross the channel between Perdido Key and Santa Rosa Island. It is at this juncture that you will pass between Fort Barrancas on the mainland and Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island. Both forts underwent several stages during the 1800s and early 1900s before being deactivated when aircraft and missile defense systems made the need to protect vital ports with coastal fortifications obsolete.

If you like to explore the history, you can land near Fort Pickens and walk around, although the actual fort may be closed due to hurricane damage. Check the Gulf Islands National Seashore website before embarking, or ask the rangers at Perdido Key. You cannot land at Fort Barrancas as this is part of a military security zone operated by the Navy.

Fort Pickens was the center of fighting early in the Civil War because it remained in Union hands. A Confederate takeover attempt in October of 1861 failed. What followed was a two-day bombardment in which both sides cumulatively fired several thousand shells. The noise and reverberations were so great that thousands of dead fish floated to the surface in Pensacola Bay and windows shattered in Pensacola, seven miles away. Fort McRee, which once stood across the inlet, was severely damaged. In 1862, Confederates abandoned the bay, and Union forces took control of Pensacola harbor for the remainder of the war.

Leaving Fort Pickens, hug the shore along Santa Rosa Island as you paddle east. For several miles, you can land and take rest breaks on these undeveloped shores that are part of the national seashore.

Two motels are available near the Bob Sikes Bridge on Santa Rosa Island after about 11 miles. The Surf and Sand Hotel is on the west side (see map). It has a small beach for landing. To make reservations call (850) 934-5400. The Paradise Inn is about a quarter-mile east of the bridge. There is a small seawall that you will have to hoist your boat over. Call (850) 932-2319 for reservations. By staying at either of these motels, you can easily stroll to Gulf beaches for a swim. Several restaurants and shops are in the area.

The scenic and easily accessible Big Sabine Point primitive campsite has benches, but no facilities. If desired, you can walk a half-mile south across the soft sand to a restroom and outdoor showers along the beach. No fires are allowed at the campsite.

The kayak campsite was an Eagle Scout project of Patrick Sheldon that had support from Escambia County, the Sea Scouts, and Friends of Ship 411 of the Pensacola Yacht Club. It shows how a community can come together to support the trail.

3. Big Sabine Point to Navarre Beach Camping Resort, 14 miles

You have the option of paddling along Santa Rosa Island or the mainland as you head east through the Santa Rosa Sound. Much of the land along the island is undeveloped and part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore. Along the mainland, you can land at two small boat landings for rest breaks, but these offer no facilities. A wayside park and visitor's center with facilities is on the northwest side of the Navarre Beach Bridge. Just past the bridge on the mainland is the Best Western Navarre. You can land in the sand just before the large rocks and pull up your kayak for a short walk to the grocery store and restaurants. Call (850) 939-9400 for reservations.

For camping, you can set up a tent or rent a cabin at the Navarre Beach Camping Resort, (850) 203-9850, almost two miles past the bridge on the mainland. You will need to carry your kayaks over a small sea wall. The campground has full facilities, including a laundromat, heated pool, computer room, and game room.