



Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

Segment 9

Tampa Bay / Longboat Key

Emergency Contact Information:

911

Pinellas County Sheriff's Office: 727-582-6200

Manatee County Sheriff's Office: 941-747-3011

Sarasota County Sheriff's Office: 941-316-1201

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

Begin: Fort De Soto Park

End: Lido Beach

Distance: 30 miles, depending on route

Special Considerations: Crossing Tampa Bay can be hazardous and is recommended for experienced paddlers only, and only in good weather. Strong currents, large ships and wakes, sudden winds and waves can all be factors in the long passage across open water. Several options are given here, depending on weather, including taking a shuttle across the bay. South of Tampa Bay, paddlers have the choice of paddling on the Gulf side or inside the barrier islands, although motels for overnight stops are on the Gulf side. As with most South Florida segments, boat traffic can be heavy, especially on weekends.

Introduction

For thousands of years, dugout canoes glided across Tampa Bay and nearby coastal waters, guided by skilled Native American paddlers. Sometimes, these early Florida sailors used small sails to help speed them along on trade journeys and fishing trips, utilizing landmarks, currents, stars and sun position to help with navigation.

Today, huge ocean liners and tankers can be seen chugging through Tampa Bay, along with numerous motorized pleasure crafts. Perhaps today's equivalent to the ocean-going dugout is a sea kayak, equipped with a foot-guided rudder, spray skirt and sometimes a sail to make passage easier. Navigation is usually by nautical maps, compass and gps, but that same sense of adventure early native paddlers must have experienced can be captured.

Historic Tampa Bay, abundant bird life, gleaming white beaches and a Native American temple mound are highlights of this segment of the Florida Circumnavigation Saltwater Paddling Trail. The trail passes through [Boca Ciega Bay and Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserves](#). These preserves protect sea grass beds, hardbottom communities and other underwater habitats, and efforts are underway to restore sea grasses in places where pollution or boat dredging has damaged or destroyed them.

Another highlight of this segment is that paddlers can utilize alternative forms of transportation to explore areas of interest. Bicycle rentals are available at [Ft DeSoto Park](#), and a free trolley system can be utilized on Anna Maria Island.

Paddlers have several options in crossing Tampa Bay, depending upon experience level and weather. One route traverses the historic [Egmont Key State Park](#).

Along the Manatee County coast south of the bay, paddlers have the option of taking the Intracoastal Waterway or paddling the Gulf parallel to sandy beaches, depending again on weather conditions. The [Paddle Manatee](#) 75-mile network of paddling trails along the coast, bays, inlets and rivers has been developed by Manatee County.

The southern part of the trail runs parallel to [Sarasota Blueways](#) and a blueways guide for boaters has been developed by the [Sarasota Bay National Estuary Program](#). Sarasota Bay is an important estuary for fish spawning and reproduction, and the outlying barrier islands support numerous loggerhead sea turtle nests each year.

1. Fort De Soto Park to Bradenton Beach, 15 miles

It is no wonder that [Ft DeSoto Park](#) is a featured stop on the [Great Florida Birding Trail](#). Flocks of shore and migratory birds seem to pose for visitors as they feed or rest. Two hundred and ninety-six avian species have been sighted in the 1,136-acre park.

Exploring Pinellas County's Fort De Soto Park is easy. You can kayak through mangrove-lined lagoons in its interior to an outfitter that also rents bicycles (see map). By bicycling or hiking, you can tour the park's off-road trails that lead to beaches, coastal hammock forests, a small museum, and historic Fort De Soto, built to protect Tampa Bay during the Spanish-American War. The fort was named after Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto, who began his tumultuous three-year march from Tampa Bay in 1539 to find gold and subjugate the native population.

From the park, you can paddle about two miles or take a ferry to [Egmont Key State Park](#), managed in cooperation the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Coast Guard. On the island, you can tour Fort Dade, built during the Spanish-American War, stroll along century-old brick roads, and tour an operating lighthouse that was built in 1848. Look for the mounds of soft sand that mark the burrows of gopher tortoises, a protected species abundant on the island's interior.

Numerous campsites at [Fort De Soto Park](#) are easily accessible by kayak. A small seawall surrounds most of the RV campsites, so make sure you reserve one of the tent sites (sites 1 through 85). Advanced reservations are highly recommended, so call (727) 582-2267 up to six months in advance of your trip.

Primitive camping is available at no charge on Shell Key, which is just offshore from North Beach in Fort De Soto Park (see map). This island is also managed by Pinellas County. [Leave No Trace](#) should be followed on the island, meaning that all trash and human waste should be packed out.

To traverse Tampa Bay from the campground, you have several options. For one, crossing the bay is recommended for experienced paddlers only in calm weather. Strong currents, large ships and wakes, sudden winds and waves can all be factors in the long passage across open water. In calm weather, the shortest distance is to Egmont Key (two miles from the tip of Ft. De Soto Park), and then across to Anna Maria Island. Then, the day's total is about 12 miles to motels at Holmes Beach or 15 miles to motels along Bradenton Beach.

Another passage is along the Skyway Bridge, where larger ships are funneled into a deep channel, although strong currents can be dangerous. Rest areas at the beginning and end of the bridge are accessible to kayakers. In rough weather, it is recommended that you either wait it out, paddle several miles along the interior of the bay to avoid long stretches of open water, or

arrange a shuttle across the bay with a local outfitter. If you choose to paddle around the interior of Tampa Bay, you can utilize the [Pinellas County Blueways](#) guide for the Pinellas County portion of the bay and the [Hillsborough Blueways](#) guide for the Hillsborough County portion of the bay. Some motel options are outlined in the Hillsborough Blueways guide.

If one paddles the Skyway Bridge and proceeds to Holmes Beach, the day's total is about 21 miles. Two points of interest along this route are accessible to paddlers. At Emerson Point Park, you can visit a large Native American temple mound on the south side of the park (see map). You can easily beach your boat and walk up a palm-lined walkway to the mound. The mound was used for centuries by Tocobaga Indians and later by a settler who built a structure atop the mound. The native people likely used the mound for ceremonies and as a place where chiefs or priests lived.

Almost directly across the mouth of the Manatee River from the temple mound is the [De Soto National Memorial](#). Kayakers can land on the shore and explore the Visitors Center, try on heavy Spanish-style chain mail and armor, visit an historic Spanish camp--complete with living history interpreters--and marvel at mature gumbo limbo trees.

After crossing Tampa Bay, you have two route options at Anna Maria Island. In good weather, you can paddle around the island on the Gulf side, or you can paddle along the Intracoastal Waterway through Anna Maria Sound and Sarasota Bay. There are opportunities for bathroom breaks on both sides of the barrier islands as there are numerous public county beaches, boat launches, and private marinas. There is an option for primitive camping at scenic [Robinson Preserve](#) by reservation on Friday and Saturday nights only, call 941-742-5923. Access is limited to paddle craft only (canoe/Kayak) and there is no vehicle access to camp sites. The historic Valentine House is a visitors' center worth touring along with the Preserve's hiking trails, picnic pavilions, and observation tower. Paddlers can also find motel lodging at either Holmes Beach or Bradenton Beach on the Gulf side.

GPS points are given for Holmes Beach and the Club Bamboo South at Bradenton Beach for reference points. More information on these motels and others in this segment is available at [Manatee County lodging](#), and [Sarasota County lodging](#). Since overnight opportunities are all on the Gulf side, one option is to paddle through Anna Maria Sound on the bay side, cut through Longboat Pass, and paddle north along Coquina Beach two to three miles to the motels at Bradenton Beach. On the bay side, you can stop at or cruise past the historic fishing village of

Cortez, founded by fishermen from North Carolina in the 1880s. Being one of the last remaining fishing villages on Florida's Suncoast, Cortez is facing a number of pressures such as encroaching residential development and increased fishing regulation.

The beauty of staying on Anna Maria Island is the availability of a [free trolley](#) system that runs daily from 6 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., seven days a week. The trolley arrives at different stops about every 20 minutes and can take you to points of interest, shopping centers, restaurants, or simply on a sightseeing tour. Near Holmes Beach, it links to a bus that can take you to Bradenton and Palmetto for a small fee. Call 941-749-7116 for more information.

Accessible by trolley or kayak is a post office across the road from the historic Anna Maria Pier along the northern end of the island. The Anna Maria town post office is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturday. The zip code is 34216 in case you want to receive mail in care of general delivery.

2. Bradenton Beach to Lido Beach, 15 miles

Once again, you can take either the bay side or Gulf side for this stretch, depending on weather and preference. The bay side adds one to two miles.

On the bay side, one point of interest is the [Joan Durante Park](#), where you can beach your boat (see map) and walk down several scenic trails and boardwalks. Bird life is abundant in the lagoons and coastal hammock of this wetlands restoration project, and restrooms are available near the parking lot.

If you land at the boat ramp on the south side of Ken Thompson Park, you can visit the [Mote Marine Lab Aquarium](#), the Ann and Alfred Goldstein Marine Mammal Center, and Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary. All of these interesting attractions charge entrance fees.

There is a canoe/kayak launch on the bay side in South Lido Beach Park (see map).

On the Gulf side, there are numerous [lodging options](#) choose from just south of Lido Beach. For a shorter day, you can stay at the Turtle Crawl Inn or other motels on the southern Gulf side of Longboat Key. The Gulf side includes several scenic county beaches for pleasant stops and bathroom breaks, most of which include outdoor showers and snack bars.

If you are paddling on the bay side, you can access the Gulf-side motels by either cutting through New Pass and heading south past Lido Beach, or by cutting through Big Pass and heading north along South Lido Beach about a mile. On your journey, look for some of the approximately 100 bottlenose dolphins that reside year-round in Sarasota Bay. In spring and summer, mothers and calves can be seen in shallow waters as newborns are more protected from deep-water predators such as bull sharks. Manatees can also be seen in the bay, especially during warmer months.

Whether paddling on the Gulf or bay side, this segment provides paddlers with a variety of bird life, scenic beaches and parks, fascinating attractions, and historic sites.