



# Office of Greenways & Trails

## Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

### Segment 26

#### Timucuan Trails/Ft. Clinch

#### **Emergency Contact Numbers:**

**911**

Duval County Sheriff's Office: 904-630-0500

Nassau County Sheriff's Office: 904-225-5174

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

**Begin:** Sister's Creek Marina

**End:** Fort Clinch State Park

**Estimated Distance:** 29-30 miles

**Duration:** 2-4 days

**Special Considerations:** Paddlers need to be watchful of tides and currents, especially near river mouths. The Intracoastal Waterway can be busy with recreational boaters on weekends and holidays. This guide will focus on interior routes as the Atlantic side is considered dangerous and recommended for expert paddlers only.

#### **Introduction**

History and natural beauty combine in this exceptional segment just north of Jacksonville. In this segment of the paddling trail, five rivers either merge together or flow into the Atlantic Ocean: the St. Johns, Nassau, Amelia, St. Mary's and Fort George. The [St. Johns River Blueway](#) is a 300-mile designated paddling trail and an [American Heritage River](#), one of only 14 in the country. Winding creeks through unspoiled marshlands help to evoke a feeling of original Florida. Kayakers also have easy access to historic sites such as [Kingsley Plantation](#), the [Ribault Club](#), old [Fernandina](#), and [Fort Clinch](#).

Paddlers have a choice of taking interior creeks and the Intercoastal Waterway (ICW), or the Atlantic shore. Those familiar with the area agree that only **expert** paddlers should attempt the Atlantic shore due to strong currents and wave action, and the fact that jetties along the mouth of the St. John's River extend almost two miles into the Atlantic. The interior route suggested here is considered safer, with more opportunities for camping and visiting points of interest.

A unique partnership of city/county, state, federal, and non-profit land managers is responsible for the waterways, lands and facilities that are included in this segment of the paddling trail. Known as the [Timucuan Trail State and National Parks](#), the partnership includes the National Park Service, the State of Florida, the City of Jacksonville, and the Nature Conservancy. This coalition has come together to develop the [Florida Sea Islands Paddling Trail](#), a network of 10 saltwater trails and 2 freshwater-brackish creek trails through public lands.

This segment covers the Nassau River-St. Johns River Marshes and [Fort Clinch State Park Aquatic Preserves](#), which altogether encompass approximately 66,000 acres of open waters, marshlands, tidal creeks and rivers, and tree islands. The preserves overlap the boundaries of the Timucuan Preserve and some of the state parks. They act as buffers to help filter pollutants and protect upland areas from storm surge, and they are home for numerous aquatic species and resident and migratory birds.

The segment also traverses part of the [Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve](#). Managed by the National Park Service, it is named for a Native American tribe that once inhabited the area. The 46,000-acre preserve covers encompasses wetlands, upland forests, and historic sites. Paddling trails for day trips are available in the preserve.

Five state parks are also part of the route: [Fort George Island](#), [Little Talbot Island](#), [Big Talbot Island](#), [Amelia Island](#) and [Fort Clinch](#). Besides paddling, numerous opportunities for hiking, swimming, biking, fishing and other activities are available. For primitive campsites, users are required to keep these sites clean and follow all regulations in order for them to remain open for paddlers. Most of these sites will be "pack-it-in, pack-it-out" only, with campers following [Leave No Trace](#) principles.

## **1. Sister's Creek Marina to Little Talbot Island State Park; 7-8 miles**

The marina is located on the west side of Sister's Creek just off Heckscher Drive (State Road 105), a short distance from the St. John's River. Please note that the marina is closed to the public during the Greater Jacksonville Kingfish Tournament in July and one week before. Restrooms and a picnic area are available.

From the marina, paddle north up Sister's Creek, which is also the Intracoastal Waterway, so be wary of motorized craft. An incoming tide will be helpful. After about four miles, take an eastward turn at the Ft. George River. Less than a mile on your right you will spot the white wood buildings of the [Kingsley Plantation](#), open seven days a week from 9 AM to 5 PM. You can land at a small beach about a hundred yards past the dock and visit this historic site free of charge. The plantation is located on Fort George Island and much of this 1,000-acre island was used to grow crops, especially cotton, during the plantation period (1763-1865). During your visit, you can view the planter's residence, kitchen and barn, and the half moon arc of slave quarters.

The Kingsley family was unique in that Zephaniah Kingsley took an African wife and they had several children together. Mrs. Kingsley owned her own plantation and slaves. In the 1830s, when harsh restrictions were enacted regarding free and enslaved people in Florida, most of the Kingsley family and fifty newly-freed slaves moved to Haiti, a free black colony.

The next historic stopover is less than a mile on your right down the Fort George River. Paddlers can land at a convenient boat ramp at the [Fort George Island Cultural State Park](#) and tour the [Ribault Club](#), a 1920s style structure with grand rooms and unique architecture. The park itself is open daily, and the Club is open Wednesday through Sunday from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. This multi-agency visitor center is cooperatively managed by the Florida State Park Service and the National Park Service.

To camp at [Little Talbot Island State Park](#), paddle northeast from the Ribault House across the Fort George River and travel north up Simpson Creek a little over a mile. Then paddle up Myrtle Creek about a mile to the Little Talbot Island State Park campground. Sites 34, 35, 36 and 37 are near the boat ramp on your right. Time your approach to the campground with high tide. Advance reservations for these coveted

spots may be made up to 11 months in advance through [Reserve America](#) or call (800) 326-3521 (8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.) or TDD (888) 433-0287. When you arrive, please check in at the Talbot Islands State Parks ranger station on the West side of A1A before setting up camp. The ranger station may be reached at (904) 251-2320.

Another camping option is to proceed down the Fort George River a little more than two miles to the [Huguenot Memorial Park](#), inside the Ft. George Inlet. Operated by the City of Jacksonville, tent camping is inexpensive and you can paddle up to the campground. Across the St. John's River mouth to the south, you can view the large naval ships of the Mayport Naval Station. It is important to walk the half mile or so to the office and check in before setting up tents. You can make reservations by calling (904) 251-3335.

## **2. Little Talbot Island State Park to Fort Clinch State Park, 21.5 miles via Simpson Creek and Amelia River**

Paddlers have two options to get to Nassau Sound from Little Talbot campground. One option is to proceed north on Myrtle Creek, (only passable a half hour on either side of high tide) and shave off about a mile and a half. A second option is to take a highly scenic route by backtracking a half mile south on Myrtle Creek to Simpson Creek and proceeding north on Simpson Creek. This creek is passable at high or low tides. If you camped on Huguenot Park campground, proceed north on the Fort George River to Simpson Creek.

On Simpson Creek, just before the AIA Bridge on the right is an outfitter, [Kayak Amelia](#), where restrooms, snacks and rental equipment are available along with up to date information about paddling conditions.

About a mile north of the AIA Bridge, paddlers will be greeted with an unmarred view of Half Moon Bluff, where the creek is creating a sheer cliff. Look for wading birds, wood storks and a variety of other avian creatures along this scenic creek. The cliff, combined with expansive views of unspoiled salt marsh, creates an unforgettable scene.

At the mouth of the creek, proceed along the shore of Nassau Sound. To your right is Bird Island, a bird rookery off limits to humans. Please observe birds with binoculars from a distance of at least 300 feet. If you spot birds standing up and paying attention to

you, they are not performing essential functions such as resting, grooming, incubating and sheltering eggs or feeding young.

Along the shore of Big Talbot Island, you'll soon spot scenic bluffs where ocean waters are cutting into the uplands. On the map you'll see a GPS point that marks the beach end of a short trail beneath a scenic live oak canopy atop the bluff. At the end of the quarter-mile trail, you'll find a picnic area and port-o-let.

Be wary of strong currents as you cross the Nassau Sound and enter the South Amelia River, which is the Intracoastal Waterway. There is a launch site, with a small store and restrooms, at the northern end of the AIA Bridge on Amelia Island. This is part of [Amelia Island State Park](#). Contact the Little Talbot Island Ranger office if you plan to leave a vehicle overnight at this launch site; (904) 251-2320. There is no camping allowed on Amelia Island State Park.

Paddle north up the South Amelia River. Look for flocks of white pelicans in the cool months. Numerous spoil banks provide opportunities to stretch and have a picnic. At the State Road 200 (A1A) Bridge, the current is very strong. Just past the highway bridge, you'll see one of the few remaining swinging railroad bridges. A restaurant is located at the bridge site and there are several places to disembark.

North of the bridge, you'll pass the sprawling Rayonier paper mill on the eastern shore. Within a half mile you will then see the docks and marina of [Fernandina Beach](#), where you can find numerous restaurants and bed and breakfast establishments. An impressive fifty blocks of this historic town are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Stroll along the streets and check out the charming Victorian architecture.

In the spring, Fernandina hosts the Isle of [Eight Flags Shrimp Festival](#), which celebrates the town's shrimp industry and the fact that eight flags have flown over Amelia Island—more than any other spot in the United States. Since the 1500s, the flags have been French, Spanish, English, Patriots, Green Cross of Florida, Mexican, Confederate and U.S.

You have the option of camping under live oaks at a primitive site on Little Tiger Island, which is managed by [Fort Clinch State Park](#), or you can camp at the park itself. The safest way to reach Little Tiger Island is to cross the Amelia River at the county boat ramp and hug the sandy western shore until reaching Tiger Creek. Proceed west about a quarter mile up Tiger Creek and the Little Tiger Island campsite will be on your right (see map for GPS point). No reservations are necessary for camping at Little Tiger Island at this time. Campers should adhere to Leave No Trace principles. Fort Clinch is directly east of Tiger Island, but do not attempt to cross this wide expanse of water unless conditions are calm.

You can camp at one of two campgrounds at Fort Clinch State Park. However, water access is highly restricted in the park. The park will allow for kayaks to land at the River Campground about a half mile before the fort, but you may have to carry your kayaks to your campsite. Sites 29, 30, 39, 40, 41 and 43 are near the water. Reservations are recommended. If you are registered at the campground without a vehicle and seeking to launch the next day, the park will ask you to wade and pull your boat along the shore about 1,000 feet south to the county-operated [North End Boat Ramp](#) and Nature Center. This is due to strong currents and liability concerns.

The historic red-brick fort is worth checking out. Reenactors provide an 1860s feel to the place on the first weekend of each month. Look for shark's teeth along the beaches, or hike interior trails that traverse scenic maritime hammocks.

If you are beginning or ending your journey on the circumnavigational trail, it is best to utilize the county-operated North End Boat Ramp along the state park's southern boundary. This is accessible by following North 14th Street to its terminus from Atlantic Avenue. The state park has no official kayak launch. From the ramp, you can paddle north less than half a mile to view the historic Fort Clinch and see the state of Georgia across the channel, ensuring you are at the trail's terminus. Hug the shore to avoid swift currents.

If you want to keep paddling north, you can now follow the [Georgia Saltwater Paddle Trail](#) all the way up the eastern seaboard to Chesapeake Bay. It is part of a National Park Service/multi-state effort that created a [Southeast Coast Saltwater Paddling Trail](#).

Access points:

Directions to Sister's Creek Marina (City of Jacksonville):

From Interstate 95 (south of I-295), take the Heckscher Drive/State Road 105 exit (#358A) and drive east (signs may indicate that you are northbound, but it is east) for approximately 12 miles. Sister's Creek Marina will be on the north side of the road just before you cross the Intracoastal Waterway/Sister's Creek drawbridge.

Directions to Little Talbot Island State Park:

From Sister's Creek Marina, continue east/north on Heckscher Drive/State Road 105 for an additional 6 miles. The state park entrance station is on the east side of the road. (Note: At the point where the automobile ferry crosses the St. Johns River, the highway designation changes to State Road A1A). Continue north on S.R. A1A over the Fort George River Bridge. After crossing the bridge, drive another 2 miles north on S.R. A1A to the Little Talbot Island State Park entrance on the east side of the road (right). Proceed to the Ranger Station for camping information and instructions on how to access the launch site. A fee of \$4 to use the launch is charged to non-campers.

From I-95, take the Heckscher Drive/State Road 105 exit (Exit 358A - Old Exit 124A) and then travel east for 18 miles. Heckscher Drive becomes State Road A1A once you pass the St Johns River Ferry Terminal. Continue North on S.R. A1A over the Fort George River Bridge. After crossing the bridge, drive another 2 miles North on S.R. A1A to the Little Talbot Island State Park entrance on the east side of the road (right).

Directions to access site at Ft. Clinch State Park: Fort Clinch State Park is north of the City of Fernandina Beach on State Road A1A (Atlantic Avenue). Take I-95 to the Fernandina Beach/Callahan exit (Milepost Exit 373 - Old Exit 129), and stay to the right. You will then be traveling east on A1A. (This road becomes 8th Street within the town limits of Fernandina.) Stay on this road, (A1A), for 16 miles until you come to the intersection of 8th Street and Atlantic Avenue. Turn right on Atlantic Avenue and go about two miles; Fort Clinch State Park will be on the left. A fee is charged for entrance to the park.