

Destination: Florida

The St. Marks Trail—a Florida First

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DOUG ALDERSON



An average bicyclist could have moved faster than the first train on the Tallahassee-St. Marks Railroad. That's because the cotton-filled cars were drawn by mules in 1836. But soon a locomotive was brought in, quickening the pace, and in 1865, during the Civil War, the railroad transported Confederate troops to the Battle of Natural Bridge, 6 miles east of the tracks. The trains ran until 1983, making this the longest-running railroad in Florida.

Given its history, it seems only fitting that the Tallahassee-St. Marks Historic Railroad State Trail—commonly called the St. Marks Trail—is Florida's first paved rail-trail project. The 12-foot-wide path begins just south of Tallahassee on State Road 363 and ends at the charming coastal village of St. Marks, where cyclists often have a meal and a beverage before making the long climb back to Tallahassee, gaining a nose-bleeding elevation of almost 30 feet in 16 miles.

The 16-mile St. Marks Trail is managed by Florida's Division of Recreation and Parks and is part of the state park system, which won National Gold Medal Awards (the nation's highest honors for state and

local parks) in 1999, 2005 and 2013. An additional 4.5 miles north of the main trailhead at Capital Circle—Tallahassee's version of a beltway—connects to Florida State University and is maintained by the city of Tallahassee. The St. Marks is the longest completed section of the planned 120-mile Capital City to the Sea Trails.

On a recent ride along the St. Marks Trail with friend and co-worker Britney Moore, I noted the distinct character of each section of trail. The first few miles skirt part of the 500,000-acre Apalachicola National Forest. Pine trees are the norm here, but not the more common pine trees grown in rows for paper production. These are thick stands of

mature longleaf pines, increasingly rare. The native habitat in which they flourish is hilly, sandy and rich in native grasses, wildflowers and rare animals. By moving slowly, we sought glimpses of a Sherman's fox squirrel, a tree climber about twice the size of an average gray squirrel and with a black and white face that resembles that of a rhesus monkey. We also looked for larger pines with white bands. The bands mark cavity trees occupied by the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, the only native woodpecker that drills a cavity in a living tree. The Apalachicola National Forest boasts the largest concentration of these birds in the world, and breeding populations are exported from the forest to help repopulate other protected lands. Since the woodpeckers are small, about 7 inches long, we yearned for a good pair of binoculars to spot one.

To explore the Apalachicola National Forest's longleaf forests in depth, you can access the Munson Hills Off-Road Bike Trail from the main St. Marks Trail trailhead. This is a scenic and challenging course that moves up and down ancient sand dunes now transformed into forested sand hills. Hard-packed clay has been placed on the trail so bicyclists will not become bogged down in loose sand during dry periods. This trail has expanded to include the Twilight Loop for a total of 21 miles through the national forest. The St. Marks Trail also features a parallel unpaved equestrian trail.

The first section of the St. Marks Trail closely parallels State Road 363, making for traffic noise. The noise fades away around mile 2, where the trail veers west to skirt the small hamlet of Woodville. We stopped at the J. Lewis Hall Sr. park, welcoming its restrooms and water. We weren't hungry for lunch yet, but a seafood restaurant, sandwich shop and Chinese restaurant are available in Woodville, along with several convenience stores and a grocery store. It's hard to go hungry on the St. Marks Trail.

As we headed south past Woodville, the trail became rural and canopied with lush hardwood trees. We paused beneath



Beach Trader gift shop owner George McCreery offers free cold treats and friendly chatter to users of the St. Marks Trail.

a mulberry tree dripping with ripe berries. “Oh, those are sweet,” said Britney, sampling one of the pink berries. “And I love the canopy feel of the trail, especially on a hot day.” At mile 9, a good rest stop is the Wakulla Station trailhead, with water, restrooms, shaded pavilions and a Boundless Playground—a specially designed facility suitable for children of all abilities.

A couple miles south of the trailhead, we made a pleasant discovery at the log-cabin-style Wakulla United Methodist Church. The congregation has installed a drinking fountain beside the trail, accompanied by a spiritual message and an invitation to everyone to attend services, regardless of how one is dressed.

Just past U.S. Highway 98, where the trail crossing is clearly marked, we veered off the trail a hundred yards to access the Beach Trader gift shop. The owner, George McCreery, offers free ice water for trail users and free popsicles for children. “The trail is wonderful,” he said. “After cooling off here, a lot of people come back and buy some furniture and souvenirs. By the way, did you see any alligators on the trail?”

“Uh, no,” I answered.

“Well, they’re on the move now. A big one crossed in front of the store not long ago,” McCreery said. Alligators occasionally move on land during the spring mating season or if their swamps or ponds dry up, and sometimes they are simply

seeking a sunny spot in which to bask. But to Floridians, alligators aren’t new, and Britney and I aren’t phased. There has never been a report of aggressive alligators along the St. Marks Trail.

Leaving the Beach Trader, our fingers sticky from eating dripping popsicles, we rode another 2 miles to the San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park in the town of St. Marks. Situated at the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks rivers, this site is where Spanish, English, American, Confederate and Native American forces—along with swashbuckling pirates—fought for control of the region for several centuries. We stood on the shore of the St. Marks River and scanned the vast expanse of salt marsh, tree islands and flowing water that leads to the open Gulf, 5 miles south. It was difficult to fathom how such a peaceful spot, visited today by tourists, bicyclists, hikers and boaters, could have such a turbulent history. All roads and land trails stop here, but visitors can roam the stone ruins of a fort for free or pay a small fee for a museum tour.

By this time, lunch was in order, so we decided to honor a long-standing trail tradition: enjoying fresh seafood at the Riverside Cafe on the shores of the St. Marks River (in our case, it was yellowfin tuna, the day’s special). Owner Stanley West started his business 20 years ago with a hot dog cart; now he boasts two massive open-air dining rooms, one

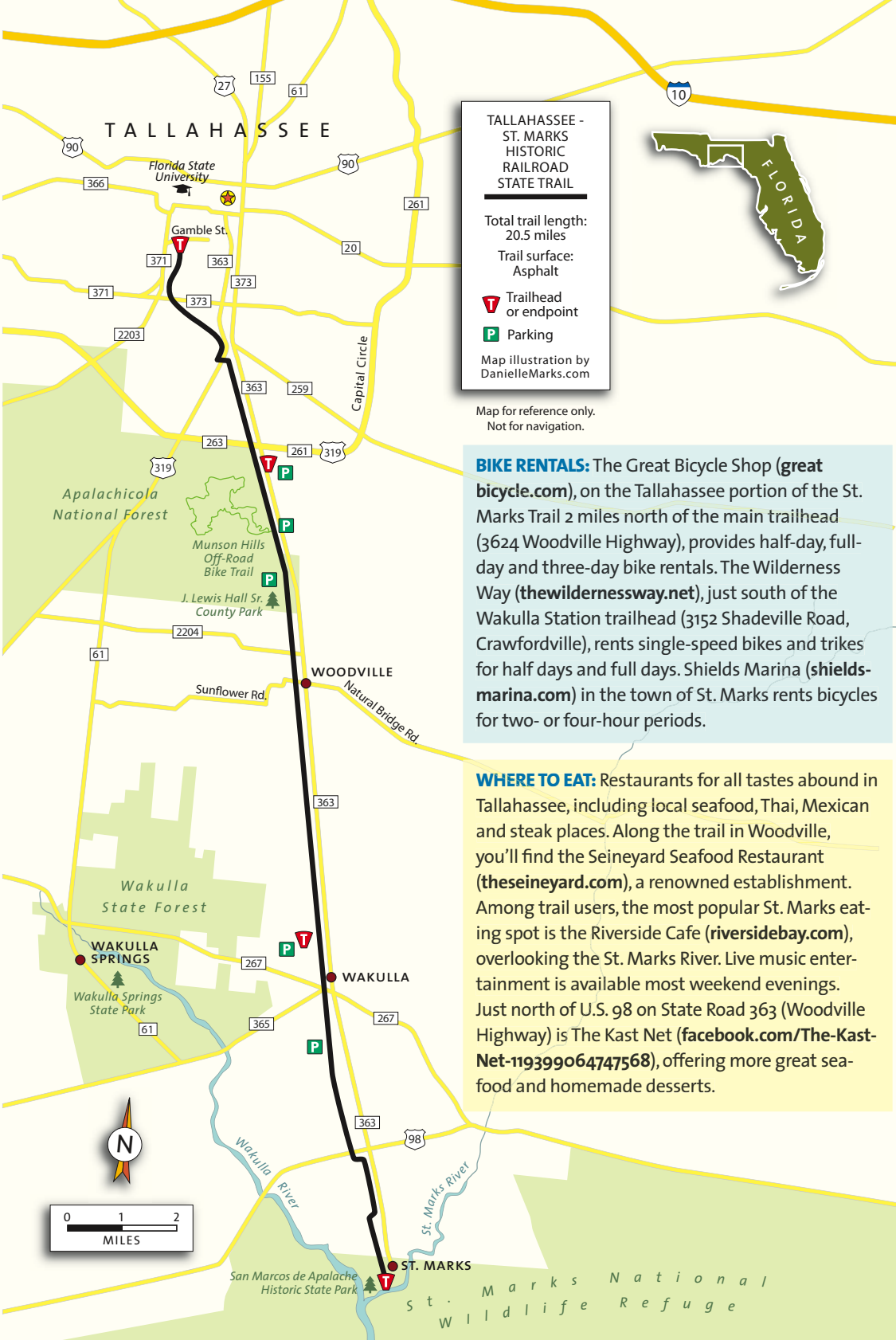


of which is a Seminole Indian pen-sided structure known as a chickee. The thousands of thatched palm fronds that make up the roof emitted a sweet aroma.

“This town is not along any major highway, so it is a destination. You have to want to come here,” West said. “It used to be at the end of a railroad, and now we’re at the end of a bike trail. Trail users make up 15 to 20 percent of my business. The trail’s been good for the whole community.”

No doubt the historic St. Marks Trail is also good for the more than 140,000 people who utilize the canopied path each year for health, relaxation and access to tasty food.

Doug Alderson is the author of several award-winning outdoor books, including “Wild Florida Adventures,” “Waters Less Traveled” and “New Dawn for the Kissimmee River.” He is assistant bureau chief for the Florida Office of Greenways & Trails, the lead planning entity for non-motorized trails in the state. An avid cyclist, hiker and paddler, he lives south of Tallahassee, just 2 miles from the St. Marks Trail.



TALLAHASSEE - ST. MARKS HISTORIC RAILROAD STATE TRAIL

Total trail length:
20.5 miles

Trail surface:
Asphalt

Trailhead or endpoint

Parking

Map illustration by
DanielleMarks.com

Map for reference only.
Not for navigation.

BIKE RENTALS: The Great Bicycle Shop (greatbicycle.com), on the Tallahassee portion of the St. Marks Trail 2 miles north of the main trailhead (3624 Woodville Highway), provides half-day, full-day and three-day bike rentals. The Wilderness Way (thewildernessway.net), just south of the Wakulla Station trailhead (3152 Shadeville Road, Crawfordville), rents single-speed bikes and trikes for half days and full days. Shields Marina (shieldsmarina.com) in the town of St. Marks rents bicycles for two- or four-hour periods.

WHERE TO EAT: Restaurants for all tastes abound in Tallahassee, including local seafood, Thai, Mexican and steak places. Along the trail in Woodville, you'll find the Seineyard Seafood Restaurant (theseineyard.com), a renowned establishment. Among trail users, the most popular St. Marks eating spot is the Riverside Cafe (riversidebay.com), overlooking the St. Marks River. Live music entertainment is available most weekend evenings. Just north of U.S. 98 on State Road 363 (Woodville Highway) is The Kast Net ([facebook.com/The-Kast-Net-119399064747568](https://www.facebook.com/The-Kast-Net-119399064747568)), offering more great seafood and homemade desserts.

WHAT TO SEE: San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park (floridastateparks.org/park/San-Marcos) in St. Marks is open Thursday–Monday. A self-guided interpretive trail meanders through the grounds, and a small museum features interpretive panels, artifacts and an 18-minute video about the rich history of this strategic spot. Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park (floridastateparks.org/park/Wakulla-Springs), 5 miles west of the St. Marks Trail along state Route 267, is a must-see attraction. Jungle boats take visitors along the wild Wakulla River, where alligators, turtles and wading birds are abundant, as well as wintering manatees and ducks. Swim in the cool spring water at a designated beach (which alligators tend to avoid), and when the spring is clear, bring a mask or take a glass-bottom boat ride over one of the largest and deepest springs in the world.

WHERE TO STAY: Tallahassee has many motels, but in this university town, they can be booked and/or pricey during home football weekends, Parents' Weekend (usually late October) and college graduation weekend (end of April/early May). St. Marks offers a quaint bed and breakfast, the Sweet Magnolia Inn (sweetmagnoliainnbandb.com), which features cool jazz on Sunday afternoons. Wakulla Springs State Park, 5 miles west of the trail, is home to the 27-room historic, Mediterranean-style Lodge at Wakulla Springs (wakullaspringslodge.com), overlooking one of the largest springs in the world. There are two more motels along U.S. 98, 10 and 12 miles west of the trail, respectively—Magnuson Hotel (innatwildwood.com) and the Best Western Plus Wakulla Inn & Suites (bwwakulla.com)—and the Shell Island Fish Camp motel is located on Shell Island Road (shellislandfishcamp.com). A county campground is a little more than 2 miles east of the trail on U.S. 98 in Newport.

MORE INFO: Be sure to check out the official St. Marks Trail website, which features the trail brochure with a map and guide, along with a description of trail amenities and allowed uses: floridastateparks.org/trail/Tallahassee-St-Marks. Since the St. Marks Trail has been designated a National Recreation Trail, historical information about the trail as well as photos have been posted on the American Trail website: americantrails.org/nationalrecreationtrails. The St. Marks Trail is an important spine along the Capital City to the Sea Trails, a planned network of multi-use trails that will allow cyclists to take a wide arc from Tallahassee to the Gulf Coast and back: cczst.com/about.