



Office of Greenways & Trails

Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail Segment 13 Rookery Bay/Ten Thousand Islands

Emergency contact information:

911

Collier County Sheriff's Office: 239-774-4434

Everglades National Park 24-hour search and rescue: 305-247-7272

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922 or FWC or #FWC on a cell phone 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

FPTA Region: F

Begin: Lovers Key/Bowtie Island

End: Everglades City

Distance: 68 miles, although distances will vary depending on the route taken

Duration: 4 days

Special Considerations: Note: This area was hard hit by Hurricane Ian in 2022 so businesses and natural areas might still be recovering during your visit. Double-check with any motels or state parks you plan to use to ensure they are open.

Paddlers have the option of taking the Gulf side of the many islands in this area, making for easier navigation and shorter distances between campsites. However, in windy or inclement weather, paddlers should travel inside the islands through more sheltered bays and waterways.

Advanced reservations are recommended for motels, and campsites within Everglades National Park. NOAA charts and/or a Top Spot, Inc. map No. N204, compass, and a GPS

unit are highly recommended in the Ten Island Islands as stories abound about lost boaters.

Introduction

Rookery Bay and Florida's Ten Thousand Islands are steeped in history and mystery. The area is a watery maze of mangrove keys where Calusa Indians once dug canals and built land with their discarded shells. Seminole Indians and outlaws sought refuge along the sometimes bewildering, twisting waterways. Men once eked out a living by hunting alligators and crocodiles, killing egrets for their plumes, and making moonshine.

In 1896, Marco Island, called Key Marco, yielded some of the most astounding Native American artifacts ever found in Florida. Digging in the island's mangrove muck, Frank Hamilton Cushing and his Smithsonian expedition crew uncovered an incredible array of perishable objects—carved and painted wood animal heads, masks, clubs, bowls, and atlatls (spear-throwing devices). They also found nets, fish hooks, cords, ropes, floats, and shell jewelry. Cushing later wrote of these early people, "... their art is not only an art of the sea, but is an art of shells and teeth, an art for which the sea supplied nearly all the working parts of tools, the land only some of the materials worked upon."

Environmentally, more than 150 species of birds frequent these unique southwest Florida habitats. Mangrove forests predominate the landscape, the leaves of which fall and create a rich detritus that is the base of the estuarine food web. Look for the nearly impenetrable walls of prop roots created by red mangrove trees. Black and white mangroves are generally farther inland on higher ground.

Numerous fish, dolphins, and manatees frequent the channels, bays and coves of the area. Rich seagrass beds are nursery grounds for various fish, shellfish and crustaceans, and they also provide food for manatees and sea turtles. The sandy beaches, the mainland, and the barrier islands provide invaluable nest sites for endangered sea turtles. These beaches are also famous for their shelling opportunities.

Learn more about the [Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve](#) and [Everglades National Park Information](#). This segment also covers several premier Florida state parks: Lover's Key, [Delnor-Wiggins Pass](#), and [Collier-Seminole](#), although Collier-Seminole is off the main route.

There are numerous other paddling opportunities in this segment. The northern part (in Lee County) is part of the [Great Calusa Blueway](#). The rest of the segment, which lies in Collier County, will be phased in as part of the [Paradise Coast Blueway](#): These blueways offer diverse paddling trips along the coast and associated waterways.

1. Lovers Key/Bowtie Island to Vanderbilt Beach Resort, 10.5 miles

From Lover's Key, you can take a more sheltered inside passage about nine miles to Wiggins Pass, if you wish. On the Gulf side, it is about eight miles to Wiggins Pass and you can take breaks at two lovely county parks—Barefoot Beach and Bonita Beach (see map). Along the south shore of Wiggins Pass, you can enjoy Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park, partly named after Joe Wiggins, the area's first homesteader who ran an apiary and trading post. Here, you can take a break and enjoy a picnic, take a shower, or grab a snack at a beachside concession.

Should you decide to go out through Wiggins Pass and return at Gordon Pass, try to plan exit and entry with the tides. Tidal currents are strong in both these passes.

The Vanderbilt Beach Resort is an option for overnight lodging on the beach just before the public beach. Reservations are recommended. Restaurants and a small convenience store are in the area.

2. Vanderbilt Beach Resort to Keewaydin Island, 19.5 miles

Hug the Gulf shoreline as you head south. Vanderbilt Beach Resort to Keewaydin Island is a long stretch of paddling, but you can break it up with stops at Lowdermilk Park and the Naples City Pier. At Gordon Pass, you can either take the alternate, more protected, inside passage along Keewaydin Island and avoid much of the boat traffic or you can continue along the Gulf shoreline on the outside.

The reward for all of your efforts is Keewaydin Island. Accessible only by boat, the Gulf side of this barrier island has some of the best shelling opportunities in Florida. Note that a 3.5-acre portion of the island's southern end may be closed from mid-April through mid-August for Least Tern nesting. Look for signs. Primitive camping is available on the south end of Keewaydin Island Beach when birds are not nesting, or just north of the nesting area. The western side of Sea Oat Island has good camping as well.

If heading south, Keewaydin Island marks the point where there are several primitive camping options in the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Reserve (see maps). These campsites are unimproved and can be used on a first-come, first-serve basis by paddlers and other boaters. Leave No Trace guidelines to apply.

3. Keewaydin Island to Whitehorse Key, 15.9 miles

After leaving Keewaydin Island, you have the option of staying along the outside Gulf shoreline down to Cape Romano to your campsite, then on to Whitehorse Key, or taking the shorter, more protected, alternate inside route directly to Whitehorse Key. Please note

that if you camp on Cape Romano, this route adds an extra day to your paddle and about 3 additional miles, instead of taking the alternate route straight to Whitehorse Key.

Alternate Inside Route: The inside route is the safest option in inclement weather, which will add about four miles to your day's paddle, however, it will shave a day off your overall trip by not paddling out to Cape Romano. If paddling on inland waterways, Johnson Bay is recommended as motorboats are required to travel at slow speeds. The area can be busy with boats on weekends and holidays. If paddling through Johnson Bay, you may want to land at one of the kayak-friendly Isles of Capri restaurants. Continue under the SR951 bridge and along the Big Marco River to Goodland. The town of Goodland offers a small store and restaurants. This small fishing village has struggled to keep its rural identity in the face of a booming coastal real estate market. Head south down to Gullivan Bay, and then head east along the shoreline to Whitehorse Key, which is right after Gullivan Key.

NOTE: If you are a long-distance paddler set on continuing through the Ten Thousand Islands and Florida Bay to the Keys, Marco Island offers the last opportunity to stock up at a supermarket. For this supply run, you'll need to paddle about four miles on the inside of Marco Island to the west side of the State Road 951 (SR951) Bridge and hike almost a mile down Collier Boulevard to the town center, where a supermarket, pharmacies, restaurants, and other stores can be found. There is no supermarket at the south end of Marco Island. Once the site of major clam digging operations and a clam cannery in the first half of the 1900s, Marco Island boomed in the 1960s with plush developments for those attracted to island living.

If you take the Gulf side to Cape Romano, you can take a break at Tigertail Beach, which has restrooms, a kayak rental, and a restaurant. On Goodland Bay, the Goodland Boat Park offers a small store where you can purchase water and a sandwich. Nearby Jackfish Island could be a suitable primitive campsite.

Cape Romano is an isolated point that is fully exposed to the elements, so proceed with caution. You may see the ruins of unusual dome structures in the water near your campsite. The elements are slowly claiming them. If you take the inside passage and the weather is inclement, you may want to proceed to Whitehorse Key.

Here, you will be entering the heart of the Ten Thousand Islands – sometimes referred to as “No Man's Land” – a labyrinth of water, islands, and mangroves stretching from Marco Island to Cape Sable. If you hug the outside of the islands, you'll have no problem finding your way. You can easily get lost if you travel through the inside passages. It is best to follow marked channels because this area is challenging to navigate due to depth, tides, the width of channels, and remoteness.

Camping on the white sands of Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge offers a primitive Southwest Florida experience that is often an ideal complement to fishing, canoeing, kayaking, or simply connecting with nature in the Refuge. Whitehorse Key is situated between Gullivan Key and Hog Key and you can camp on these two islands as well. If you want to press on, Camp Lulu is another 5 miles and is the last primitive camping island that doesn't require a permit. The landing is on a beach on the southeast side. All the campsites east of there (Tiger and Picnic) are in the Everglades National Park and require a permit.

Camping is allowed only on the outer barrier islands of the Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge from October-April. The Refuge is closed to camping May-September due to nesting shorebirds and sea turtles. Camping does not require a permit or reservations; free spaces are available on a first-come/first-serve basis. There are no facilities on the islands, so come completely prepared. If campfires are built, only dead branches can be used. No cutting or clearing of live plants is allowed. Have water readily available to prevent fire accidents. All National Wildlife Refuge rules and regulations apply to campers at Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Please familiarize yourself with these rules and important emergency phone numbers for your safety while on the islands.

Practice "Leave No Trace" to minimize the damage to wildlife habitats.

Rookery Bay guidance for camping.

Just to the east of your campsite is Panther Key. This was where one of the area's most colorful characters once lived—Old John Gomez. Born in the 1770s, Gomez claimed to have met Napoleon, served with the pirate Jose Gaspar (Gasparilla), fought in the Second Seminole War, and operated as a blockade-runner during the Civil War. He named his home Panther Key because panthers would swim to the island and eat his goats. Old John Gomez attracted many visitors and writers to Panther Key until his death in 1900 at age 122.

While the Ten Thousand Islands contained some harmless hermits, it also harbored numerous fugitives, such as Ed Watson, who allegedly killed the outlaw Belle Starr, among other people. An early account of seven unwritten laws for the area reads like something out of the frontier West: suspect every man; ask no questions; settle your own quarrels; never steal from an Islander; stick by him, even if you do not know him; shoot quick, when your secret is in danger; cover your kill.

Today, it is unlikely you will need to follow this code when paddling through the Ten Thousand Islands. Although covering your kill is always a good idea.

4. Whitehorse Key to Everglades City, 14 miles

After Whitehorse Key, you will soon enter Everglades National Park, a vast watery wilderness of islands, sawgrass, mangroves, and forests. Its life-giving freshwater supply, unfortunately, is largely controlled by pumps, floodgates, and retention ponds outside the park, a man-made system that has been detrimental to the Everglades' natural ecological balance. Restoration of the Everglades is an ongoing effort to remedy damage inflicted during the 20th century. It is the most expensive and comprehensive environmental repair attempt in history.

Before you can camp in the national park, you must obtain a permit, at the visitor's center in Everglades City. Everglades National Park takes no advanced reservations by phone; you must arrive in person up to 24 hours in advance of your planned first night's campsite (for details, see the Trip Planning section of this guide).

Since it is 14 miles from Whitehorse Key to Everglades City, it would be best to spend the night in Everglades City. Indian Key Pass is the most direct route to Everglades City. Follow the marked channel. An incoming tide will be a big help, otherwise, you will be paddling against a strong current. There are numerous motels and cabin rentals, some of which are accessible by water. Advanced reservations are recommended. Although a little farther, the Ivey House caters to recreational water sport enthusiasts!

Everglades City is worth a visit. The Museum of the Everglades is housed in the former laundry for Barron Collier's company town along the picturesque Barron River near the famous Everglades Rod & Gun Club. The museum is a block away from the former Bank of Everglades building that opened in 1923. On the next block, right on the town circle, stands Everglades City Hall which had once been devastated by Hurricane Donna along with several other town buildings. The resilient town recovered from Donna and subsequent hurricanes.