



# 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 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922

**Begin:** Lovers Key/Bowtie Island

**End:** Everglades City

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

**Special Considerations:** 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. In windy or inclement weather, however, paddlers should travel inside the islands through more sheltered bays and waterways.

Advanced reservations are recommended for motels, and for campsites within Everglades National Park. NOAA charts and/or a Top Spot map, along with 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.

Historic landmarks still remain such as Chokoloskee's [Smallwood Store](#) where the proprietor once traded with dugout-paddling Seminole Indians. The Indians swapped pelts and silver money for tools, guns and staples. Today, kayakers can land at the cracker-style landmark and peruse the museum and gift shop.

In 1896, Marco Island, then 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, fishhooks, cord, 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 a variety of fish, shellfish and crustaceans, and they also provide food for manatees and sea turtles. The area's sandy beaches, mostly along the mainland and 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 Lighthouse Inn or Vanderbilt Beach Resort, 10.5 miles**

Lover's Key... this romantic sounding state park is an ideal place to begin this segment. Once the possible hideout of pirate Black Augustus, and later the site of numerous fish camps, this cluster of four scenic barrier islands was slated for development before the state of Florida and Lee County stepped into the create the state park. You can hike or bike miles of interior trails or launch your kayak at a landing along Estero Bay. If on a long-distance paddle, you can land on either the bay side or Gulf side for a picnic, obtain fresh water, and use the restrooms. There is a small store and kayak rental near the boat launch. No camping is allowed in the park.

If you wish to primitive camp in the area, Bowtie Island is available on a first-come, first-served basis free-of-charge. Managed by the [Florida Paddling Trails Association](#), the island is about two miles south of the Lover's Key wayside picnic area (see map).

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.

If you're planning to stay at the [Lighthouse Inn](#), you'll need to keep on the inside channel for more than two miles to reach the motel. The motel docks are high so a high tide would make it easier to disembark and pull your boat onto the dock. Reservations are recommended, so call (239) 463-9392 or book online. The motel is adjacent to a restaurant and it is a short walk to Vanderbilt Beach. If you have wheels for your kayak, you can portage to Vanderbilt Beach (about 900 feet). Otherwise, you'll need to add about 5 miles to your next day's paddle.

Another option for overnight lodging, directly on the beach, is the [Vanderbilt Beach Resort](#), just before the public beach. This option will be more expensive but you will not have to portage or paddle extra distance. Again, reservations are recommended, so call (800) 243-9076. Restaurants and a small convenience store are in the area.

## **2. Lighthouse Inn or Vanderbilt Beach Resort to Keewaydin Island, 19.5 miles (add 5 miles if staying at Lighthouse Inn and not portaging to Vanderbilt Beach)**

Hug the Gulf shoreline as you head south. This is a long stretch of paddling, but you can break it up with stops at county parks and at the Naples City Pier. At Gordon Pass, you can take the inside passage along Keewaydin Island (also referred to as Keewaydin Island) and avoid much of the boat traffic, but this will add more than a mile to your day.

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 southern end of the island may be closed from mid-April through mid-August for Least Tern nesting. Look for signs. Primitive camping is available on the southern end of Keewaydin Island when birds are not nesting. If closed for nesting, there is good camping just north of the nesting area. The west side of Sea Oat Island is also a good camping option.

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 apply.

### **3. Keewaydin Island to Cape Romano, 11.5 miles**

The mileage listed is for the Gulf side. However, you may need to take the inside channel in inclement weather, which will add about four miles. 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 restaurants along the Isle of Capri.

**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 3.5 miles on the inside of Marco Island to the Highway 951 Bridge. You can land at a small beach and hike almost a mile down Collier Boulevard to the town center, where there is a large supermarket and other stores and restaurants. 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 Tiger Tail Beach, which has restrooms, a kayak rental and a restaurant. Along the bay side, you can stop at a marina and restaurant along the Highway 92 Bridge. 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.

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.

#### **4. Cape Romano to Whitehorse Key, 7.5 miles**

Here, you will be entering the heart of the [Ten Thousand Islands](#). 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.

Whitehorse Key is situated between Gullivan Key and Hog Key and you can camp on these two islands as well.

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.

About a century later, it is unlikely you will need to follow this code when paddling through the Ten Thousand Islands.

### **5. 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 fresh water 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. A multi-billion dollar restoration plan may fix some of the problems.

Before you can camp in the national park, you must obtain a permit at the visitor's center in Everglades City (see map). Indian Key Pass is the most direct route to Everglades City. Follow the marked channel. An incoming tide will be a big help.

Everglades National Park takes no advance reservations by phone; you must arrive in person up to 24 hours in advance of your planned first night's campsite. Since it is 14 miles from Whitehorse Key to Everglades City, it would be best to spend the night in Everglades City. There are numerous motels and cabin rentals, some of which are accessible by water. Advanced reservations are recommended. The [Museum of the Everglades](#) in downtown Everglades City is worth a visit, open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

From Everglades City, you'll have your choice of taking the 99-mile [Wilderness Waterway](#) to Flamingo, or the Gulf route. Weather may be a deciding factor.

Campsites range from chickees that have been built on pilings in rivers and bays, ground sites that have been cleared within the mangrove forests, and beach sites. Campfires are only allowed at the beach sites (below high-tide line). The ground sites tend to have more insects, but be prepared for insects anywhere in this region at any time of year.

For local information visit or call the [Gulf Coast Visitor Center](#) at Everglades City, (239) 695-3311. The lobby at the [Flamingo Visitor Center](#) can be accessed 24 hours for backcountry site self-registration during the summer season. Call 239-695-2945. **IMPORTANT:** The segment from Everglades City to Flamingo is the longest stretch along the circumnavigational trail without a fresh water supply. At Everglades City, you'll need to obtain a gallon of water per day per person for seven to eight days. That is a lot of weight and bulk. Some groups contract with a boat guide in Everglades City or Flamingo to resupply them with water en-route.

Raccoons are the biggest threat to your food and water. Raccoons have been known to chew through thin plastic water jugs. When camping, secure your food and water in your kayak compartments and flip your boat upside down if necessary. Campers have unintentionally contributed to larger raccoon numbers near campsites. In turn, hungry raccoons destroy an estimated 90 percent of sea turtle nests in the park.