

ESCAPADE



Attractions Mummies exhibition in L.A. the largest travelling exhibition of its kind F2

Theme parks Disneyland in Anaheim continues to reinvent magic at every turn F8

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THE LEE COUNTY VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

Paddlers manouvre through Matlacha Pass, Little Pine Island, on Great Calusa Blueway in southwest Florida. The waterway system is named for the Calusa people, who inhabited the region as early as 2,000 years ago.

Kayaking the Great Calusa

Boating Southwest Florida's Great Calusa Blueway, teeming with spectacular wildlife, is a pleasure for paddlers of all ages

DALE DUNLOP FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Those familiar with southwest Florida will know it is famous for more than its great beaches, fabulous fishing and excellent golf courses. The hundreds of kilometres of mangrove-lined islands, keys and coast host one of the densest profusions of wildlife anywhere in North America, including a spectacular variety of large wading birds that are a magnet for serious birders.

Until recently, many of the hidden bays, creeks, inlets and estuaries comprising the area surrounding Pine Island were known only to a few local guides. In the past, exploring them was not something easily accomplished without such an expert. That has all changed with the creation of the Great Calusa Blueway, part of the Lee County Paddling Trail system.

Developed in stages, the Blueway initially comprised marked paddling trails stretching from Bonita Springs north through the waters of Estero Bay. The second section of the trail goes from the resort island of Sanibel all the way to the northern tip of Cayo Costa and Pine Island. Combined, the two sections total approximately 160 kilometres. A third section, which opened in October 2007, added another 140 km along the Caloosahatchee River and its tributaries.

The name of the system pays tribute to the Calusa people, who inhabited

the region as early as 2,000 years ago and created some very sophisticated cities of which very little trace remains today.

On a recent visit to Florida, I decided to tackle a section of the Blueway with my wife, a reasonably experienced paddler, and two complete novices, including my 78-year-old mother-in-law. If they could paddle the Blueway, then I was sure it would be suitable for anyone.

Preparing for the trip involved logging on to the informative website www.greatcalusablueway.com and downloading a couple of maps. After consulting with local tourism officials, who were more than helpful, we decided the best place to start would be at Gulf Coast Kayak in the small village of Matlacha (pronounced mat-la-shay).

This small community is very much old Florida in that the buildings are made of wood, there are no gated communities or traffic lights, and you can actually walk from place to place without crossing four lanes of high-speed traffic.

Matlacha is a fishing community, evidenced by its marina. Some of the boats there look like they came out on the wrong end of a hurricane. They are still plying their trade, however, as shrimpers or crabbers.

Gulf Coast Kayak is a small operation run out a cabana at The Olde Fish House Marina just off the main road to Pine Island, which is the largest island along the Blueway. Unlike the better-known

islands Sanibel and Captiva, Pine Island does not have much in the way of beaches or golf courses and is thus not as populated as a tourist destination. What it does have, though, is a genuinely laid-back atmosphere and thousands of acres of undisturbed mangrove shoreline teeming with the fish and birds that are increasingly seen as assets.

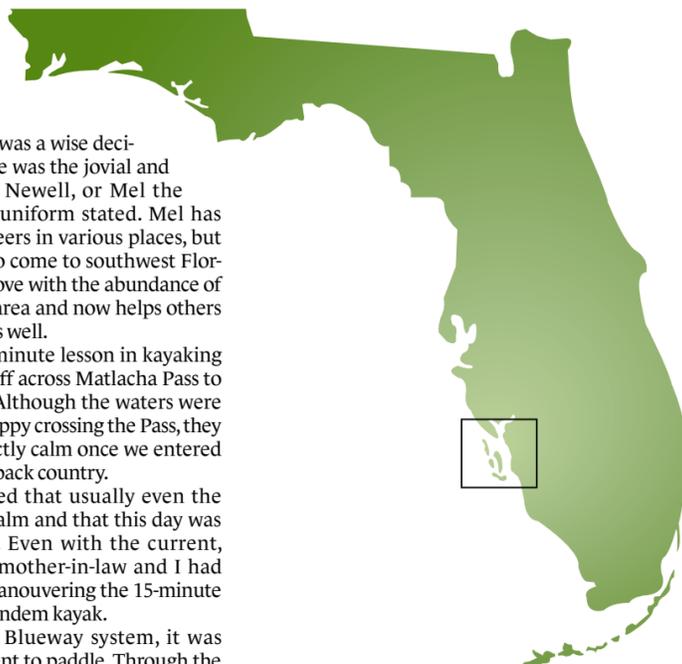
Gulf Coast Kayak offers rentals and a daily morning guided nature tour, which we opted take, rather than paddling without a guide. It was a wise decision. Our guide was the jovial and amusing Mel Newell, or Mel the Guide, as his uniform stated. Mel has had many careers in various places, but like many who come to southwest Florida, he fell in love with the abundance of nature in the area and now helps others appreciate it as well.

After a five-minute lesson in kayaking basics, it was off across Matlacha Pass to the Blueway. Although the waters were somewhat choppy crossing the Pass, they became perfectly calm once we entered the protected back country.

Mel explained that usually even the Pass is quite calm and that this day was an exception. Even with the current, however, my mother-in-law and I had no problem manouevring the 15-minute crossing in a tandem kayak.

Once in the Blueway system, it was sheer enjoyment to paddle. Through the tranquil waters, the only sounds were

THE BLUEWAY SYSTEM WAS SHEER ENJOYMENT TO PADDLE. THROUGH THE TRANQUIL WATERS, THE ONLY SOUNDS WERE THE CRIES OF OSPREY AND THE SPLASHING OF MULLET.



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Lee County's Great Calusa Blueway is a 306-km marked-and-meandering saltwater trail on southwest Florida's coast.

PLEASE SEE → CALUSA, F4