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24 HOURS (/CATEGORY/24-HOURS)

Outnumbered by sharks, alligators, dolphins and jellyfish? Only in the Everglades



Alisha McDarris
October 9, 2023



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(<https://www.intrepidtravel.com/au>)

In the sparkling water of the Gulf of Mexico, writer Alisha McDarris spent a day paddling through Everglades National Park, saying that it “felt like floating through a fairy tale.” But every fairy tale trip needs a dose of reality to make it memorable.

Everglades National Park

(<https://www.nps.gov/ever/index.htm>) is mesmerizing. One of the largest wetlands in the world, it encompasses 1.5 million acres of subtropical land and sea with endless miles of kayaking through snaking mangroves, hundreds of species of birds, and nine unique ecosystems. National parks (<https://adventure.com/national-parks-overcrowding-reservation-permit-solutions/>) in the US are often defined by their soaring peaks, desert landscapes, and wide-open spaces. But in Everglades National Park, that isn't the case. It's a subtropical wetland, shrouded in water and grasses. Here, it's all about the critters.

But while alligators and airboat tours are what most visitors seek out when they visit the country's third largest national park, I was on a different mission: To paddle across the Florida Bay and camp on a lone wooden platform hovering above the waves for a night of true wilderness. The sharks were just a bonus.



According to the NPS, Everglades National Park in Florida is the largest continuous stand of sawgrass prairie in North America. It's a predominant water recharge area for all of South Florida via the Biscayne aquifer, and is deemed a World Heritage Site, a Biosphere Reserve, and a Wetland of International Significance.

Photo: South Florida Water Management District

10am: Off-season Everglades

October is still technically considered the wet season in South Florida, which means most visitors with any sense wait until the dry season starts in November to visit the Everglades. At that point, the minute the sun goes down, mosquitos don't descend like a plague and the humidity doesn't smother you like a wet blanket.

But since October was when we found ourselves in Miami for other work, October was when we were visiting. Which explains why my husband, Josh, and I were the only ones renting a kayak in the Flamingo area of Everglades National Park for an overnight paddle last October, setting off that fall morning.

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So insects be damned, we loaded our borrowed tandem with dry bags full of food, camping supplies, and our backcountry permit. Within an hour, we were on the water with the rental employee's dismissal of our concerns about alligators still dancing in our heads.



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Exploring the Everglades requires getting out on the water; whether you're on a kayak, a canoe, a fanboat, or camping on a chickee—a stilted wooden platform on the water.

Top: Laurent B; Middle: Nigel Burgher/Flickr; Bottom: Photo: Keppet/Flickr

11:30am: If you don't hear the alligators, they aren't there... right?

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The first ocean-shattering explosion erupted not 20 feet from the front of my kayak—and my heart very nearly did the same. It sounded like someone had dropped a boulder from the sky as foamy white water spewed into the air.

My mind raced and heart pounded. Was that an alligator? A shark? Swordfish? Whatever it was, it was big enough to have me silently reconsidering every decision that had led us to paddling a tiny plastic boat into open water. I'm not afraid of wild animals, but I do respect their power, and I did not love the thought of a large aquatic carnivore getting rowdy next to my tippy sit-on-top kayak and dumping me in the drink. So I swallowed, kept paddling, and made sure I wasn't sitting in a puddle of my own terror as my heart thrashed in my chest for the next 30 minutes.

"What is *that*?" Josh asked from the stern, pointing directly ahead. Dorsal fins.

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The sun glinting off the rippling surface of the water obscured the distinction: Dolphins or sharks? As we continued paddling in the still shallow bay, more fins popped up. Closer. And closer.

“They’re sharks!” I squealed, smiling. Small reef sharks no longer than four feet hunting for their dinner. Both shy and adorably small, our reticence to paddle near them instantly faded as we filmed them gliding around us, darting away the minute they noticed our yellow vessel floating so close we could have reached out and touched them.



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According to the National Wildlife Federation, the Everglades is internationally known for its extraordinary wildlife, including alligators, crocodiles, the Florida panther, and more than 360 species of birds.

Top: Richard Sagredo; Middle: Alex Shutin; Bottom: Sterling Lanier

2pm: The rain won't last

Traversing channels to deeper water, sharks were replaced by the occasional dolphin pod (<https://adventure.com/captive-orcas-blackfish-documentary-seaworld-dolphin-shows/>), with chipper members popping above the silky blue surface in softly curving arcs. Upside-down jellyfish drifted just out of arm's reach, seeming to go nowhere but where the current took them.

We veered toward a small island to dock ourselves among the mangroves and I scanned the shallows and shore for glassy eyes and gnarled noses, fairly certain alligators wouldn't swim this far from the mainland, but better safe than sorry. Just in case, I formulated a plan to pee over the side of the kayak without leaving the boat.

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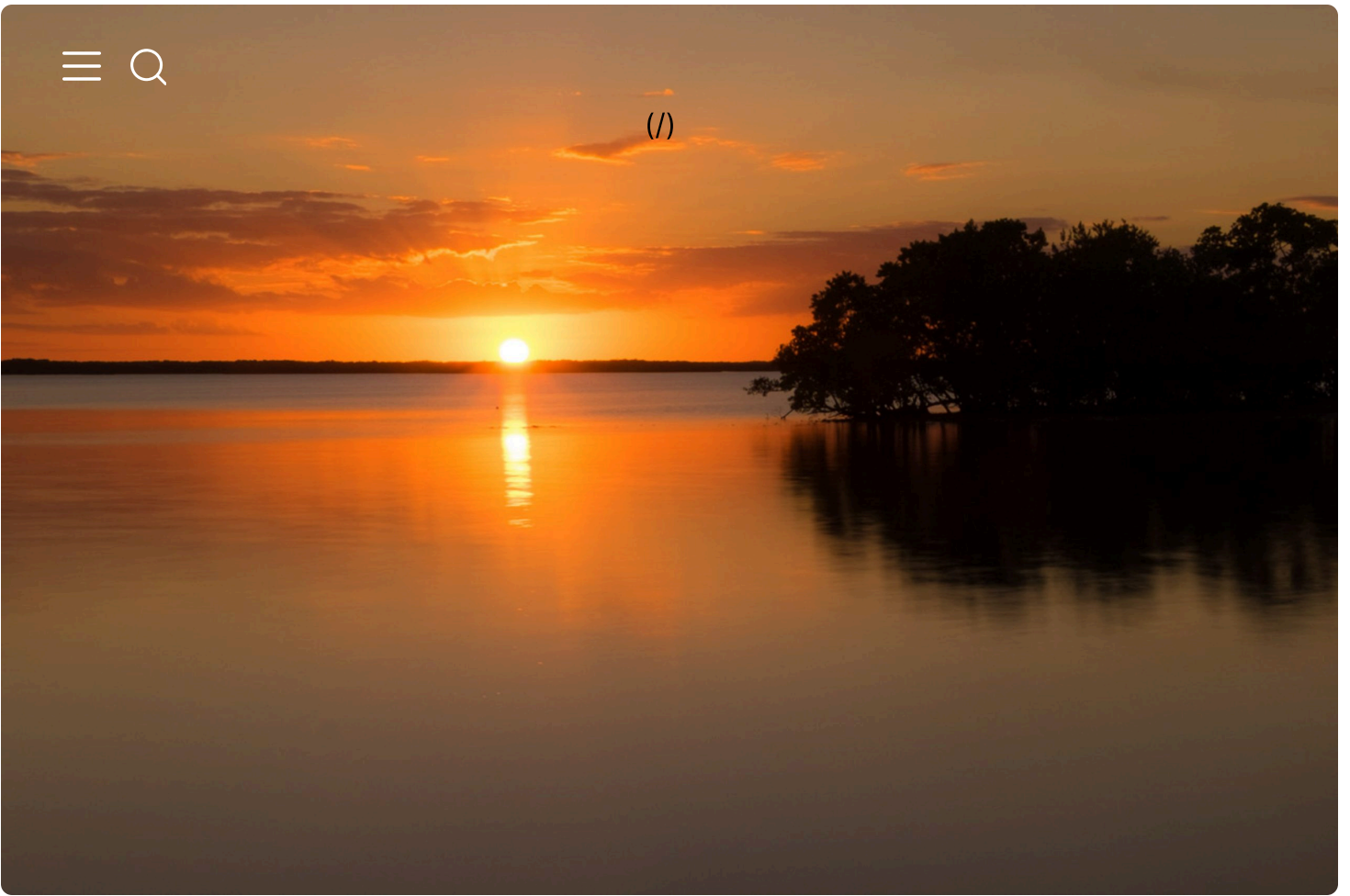
Within a few hours, rain clouds rolled in, replacing the morning's white, fluffy cotton ball clouds. But it was the headwind that kicked up with the shower that forced me to lean forward, straining with every paddle stroke, and make the chickee

(<https://www.nps.gov/ever/planyourvisit/wildernesscamp.htm>)
(shelter) we had recently spotted on the horizon—a strange, tall, wooden monolith sprouting from the ocean—seem decidedly more distant.

But the rain abated after only 20 minutes. As did the cantankerous gale. And because it's Florida, our synthetic sun shirts were dry in just 20 more.



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The water—and the sky, too—are known to put on a show in Everglades National Park.
Photo: Robert Shea/Flickr

6pm: A burial at sea

As we pulled up alongside the chickee, we rejoiced, high-fiving with tired arms after the nine-mile paddle. We unloaded our gear and passed it up the ladder to the sleeping platform above before pulling the kayak up on the dock and tying it off securely amid waking nightmares of a boat that might depart for a walkabout on the open ocean in the middle of the night.

Not two minutes later, as I pitched our tent, the distinct *plop* of a bag of tent stakes slipping through the gaping slats in the floor and hitting the water sent both of us

scrambling down adjacent ladders just in time to watch the little yellow bag sink to the depths. Good thing we didn't need them. (/)

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Alone out there with the cool evening breeze, we leaned on the railing and watched the setting sun wash everything in a molten glow, swathed in a cozy feeling of wondrous seclusion that only miles of water in every direction can offer. Seclusion—and joy—paired with the sense of accomplishment only achieved by alighting on such a regal pedestal under the power of my own strength.

8am: Florida, man

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After breakfast, we returned to shallower water. Reef sharks abounded once more and we bravely sat and watched them swerve, now (u)ndaunted by their presence after only a day spent among them.

With the wind at our backs, we found ourselves back on the mainland in an hour less than the outward journey required, just in time to spot a 12-foot alligator chilling near shore... I was thrilled we hadn't been introduced before departing.

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