

Chicago Tribune TRAVEL

COASTING ALONG SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Boomer buddies become kids again in Marco Island, Naples, the Everglades



Airboats skim over the Everglades, a vast wetland flowing from Lake Okeechobee south to the tip of Florida's mainland. Only a fifth lies in the national park, where airboats are banned.

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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MARCO ISLAND, Fla. — “No, Pete, turn here.”

Navigating a pontoon boat through the maze of islands off the southwest coast of Florida turns out to be nothing like sailing on the Great Lakes. Our friend Pete has done the latter for decades, but finding our way to Keewaydin Island dumbfounds us all.

The boat-rental guy said it would be easy. Just follow the map, he said. But with beer in hand and the map spread on his lap, my husband, Bill, directs Pete under one wrong channel after another.

Then the guys do what guys are loath to do. They ask for directions.

“Sure,” a fellow boater replies. “Just follow us.”

Our day on Keewaydin Island became a highlight of the week. We had several more as the four friends who graduated high school together 50 years ago set off with their wives to share in camaraderie and experience what Marco Island, Naples and the Florida Everglades have to offer 60-something vacationers like us.

Aside from renting a house on Marco Island through a local rental management company, we didn’t do much planning, choosing instead to wing it. Over evening cocktails or morning coffee, we’d discuss activities for the next day or two. Meals weren’t a problem. One of the guys loves to cook but hates the beach. While the rest of us were off sunning, he hit the grocery stores and laid out feast after feast.

About those beaches

A few jobs on a smartphone search engine led us to “Dr. Beach,” university professor Stephen P. Leatherman, and his annual list of top 10 U.S. beaches. One on his 2015 list, Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park, is just north of Naples. A mangrove forest takes up 80 percent of the park’s 199 acres. We picked our way through the thicket, ducking around sea grapes, and stepped onto a milelong stretch of gorgeous white sand. We could have rented paddle-

boards or kayaks, but nah, sitting in beach chairs next to a cooler seemed just our style. Some ventured into the surf; others strolled the shore. Shelling on this narrow barrier island rivals that of Sanibel Island, we were told, so we picked up a few specimens.

Another day, another beach, this one closer to our rental and quite a contrast to the wilds of Delnor-Wiggins. A wall of high-rise hotels and condos lines much of the Gulf of Mexico on Marco Island, and while the beach is technically open to all, finding parking can be a problem. County-owned Tigertail Beach, on the north end, has a paid lot, restaurants and an overpriced cafe.

The beach sits on a tidal lagoon facing Sand Dollar Spit. Getting to the surf and nicer sand on the Gulf side means taking a long walk to where this slender spit of sand meets the mainland. Before Hurricane Irma hit in September, beachgoers had the option of wading across the lagoon, hoisting beach bags and cellphones overhead. Irma moved some sand around so now the current has become too strong for safe wading.

Swamp or no swamp

One of the gals was adamant about seeing alligators, so we began looking for likely spots.

The word “swamp” put off three of the guys, so a small contingent ventured into the outback 30 minutes east of Naples to the Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. After slathering on bug repellent, we set off on a 2.25-mile boardwalk that winds through a fraction of this 13,000-acre wilderness. Alligators poked their snouts through water lettuce, one poised to pounce on an egret. We saw Florida redbelly turtles, an anhinga bird and a pig frog, or so we geeks discerned from the booklet we bought in the gift shop.

The sanctuary encompasses the largest virgin bald cypress forest in the world, spanning 700 acres. Some of these trees, cousins of redwoods, sprouted five centuries ago. The gardener among us seemed more interested in smaller flora, like blue pickerelweed and the strangler fig sending its tentacles around the trunk



Everglades City, Fla., is the Stone Crab Capital of the World. Crab claws are in season mid-October to mid-May.

of a pine tree.

We made the guys who stayed behind feel bad enough to agree to an excursion to the Everglades, or perhaps it was the prospect of racing across the water on an airboat. Even grown men in their golden years can be little boys at heart.

Calling the Everglades a swamp doesn’t do it justice. This complex ecosystem has pine forests, sawgrass prairies and mangrove estuaries. We didn’t have to enter the national park, which covers just a fifth of this wilderness, to enjoy it. Everglades City had a kitschy collection of airboat operators hawkking their tours on gaudy road signs. Captain Jack’s speedy, twisty thrill ride through mangroves sent hair horizontal on those of us who still have some. We saw gators and held one at an animal sanctuary that was part of the package.

Everglades City bills itself as the Stone Crab Capital of the World, so we decided to try some for lunch at the historic Rod and Gun Club, a former private club that once hosted presidents and movie stars. Ernest Hemingway stayed here in 1942. The kitchen was out of claws, but our server pointed down a channel to a marina

and drawled, “We can go git you some.”

They were worth the wait.

Slow boat to secret beach

Compared with the airboat ride, our pontoon journey from Rose Marina to Keewaydin Island was downright dawdling. But with a picnic lunch and cooler of adult beverages, we were happy to chill out, dividing our time hanging out on the deck and exploring 8 miles of beach only accessible by boat. Southern Living magazine listed Keewaydin among its Top 10 Secret Beaches of the South.

We might not have gotten there but for the young boater who led the way. With a couple of bikini-clad ladies behind him, he stood with muscled torso at the wheel of his speedboat, patiently slowing his throttle while our paunchy pontoon crew putt-putt-putted behind him. When we reached the island, he gave a friendly wave before he gunned it and sped off.

At least we thought it was friendly. For all we know, he could have been saying, “So long geezers!”

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