

Floating Florida

Story and photos by Colleen Friesen

I'm in an anonymous diner, somewhere in Northern Florida near the Georgia state border. A television blares the weather report from its corner perch near the ceiling. There's a large map of the USA. At the very top, in the vast no-man's land above the Northern border, are tall, frosty letters spelling out CANADIAN CHILL. The announcer is explaining why most of the US is suffering from the cold. I grin to myself, hum a little 'Blame Canada' and wiggle my warm Canadian toes in my flip-flops.

For me, Florida usually conjures up thoughts of Miami-pink hotels, the Everglades, Disneyworld, gated condo-communities, NASA, partying college kids, beaches and key lime pie. But I'm in an entirely different Florida. And it's not just the surrealistic paddling that has me hooked. I've entered another land altogether.

I've come to paddle the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, a 207-mile watery path that begins in southeastern Georgia, where it rises from the Okefenokee Swamp (the largest freshwater swamp in North America). It wends a snaky, southwestern path through eight counties in Florida to the Gulf of Mexico, fed along the way by mysterious springs that bubble up between the cypress, oak and tupelo trees and the tributaries of the Alapaha, Withlacoochee and Santa Fe rivers.

The range of accommodations on the Trail is impressive, including screened sleeping platforms and covered-shelter cooking sites at some of the campgrounds. Once completed, there will be some form of accommodation every ten miles so that even a novice paddler can complete an easy day-trip before pulling in for the night. The work is ongoing, and not quite on target, as plans get



Floating along on tea-colored water.

modified and set back due to hurricanes and floods.

The night I arrived I was booked into the Stephen Foster Park cabins (of "Way Down upon the Suwannee River" fame). I had envisioned... well... a cabin. I didn't expect to find myself in a deluxe two-bedroom house with a wrap-around screened porch, rocking chairs, full kitchen, fabulous couches and deluxe stereo system. I wished I'd booked it for a week and had flown down a few friends to enjoy it with me. Instead, I rambled about, finally tucking in under a patchwork quilt with a jetlagged sigh.

I am writing in my new favorite screened porch next morning when my outfitter/guide, John Vassar shows up right on time. He's wearing a Columbia shirt and shorts with a lethal-looking knife tucked into his back belt and a grin that would put even a skittery cat at ease. That, along with his Indiana Jones hat, gives me a →

INVEST 20 MINUTES*
ENJOY FOR LIFE ...

www.automarine.ca
info@automarine.ca

Klepper Kayaks ...
Trusted Quality
Since 1907

In Canada
1-866-323-3525

* Average time of assembly

Where in the world do you want to paddle?

Feathercraft
FOLDING KAYAKS

www.feathercraft.com



The impossibly wide trunks of the cypresses.

reassuring feeling that if he's not good at what he does, at least he has all the right props.

Seems we need to have eggs, grits and watery coffee at the Suwannee Diner before starting our voyage. We mop up the last of our eggs and jump in his truck. It's stuffed with packages of food, bottles of water and gear.

In short order, we're at the ramp. It's October and hot. I feel my shirt sticking and despair at ever getting all this stuff into the kayaks. It's sweaty work and I'm regretting the very weather I flew south to find. Vassar reviews safety, handing me my life vest that "will not be removed" and finally allows me to wiggle into my boat.

Pushing off, my Inner-Whinge is silenced. I am instantly transformed. No longer am I a sweaty, awkward land mammal. I've become a gliding, sleek, amphibious creature, at one with the

river breeze. The temperature is perfect. I feel the current hold and carry me. I'm happy.

The paddling is easy. The impossibly wide trunks of the cypresses narrow as they rise to the blue skies. I drift with the steady stream of brown, clear water. The oaks spread their fingers up and out. I realize I'm staring, mindless yet mindful, the way one stares at aquariums or camp fires—the way one stares when thoughts have finally abated and nature has taken her Zen hold of you.

There is silence, save for the rolling sound of desire from the cicadas hidden among the cypresses that drape their shadowy mossed arms overhead. When we drift into sync together, Vassar explains how the river is steeped in tannins from the trees, coloring the water a curious, clear orangey-brown. It is the type of swampy world where a dinosaur chewing at the tree tops would not be out of place. I find myself looking up a lot.

Vassar points to the places where the bank is undercut to expose the limestone bedrock. With so little topsoil, droughts hit hard. I'm beginning to realize that this Floridian panhandle is just a big piece of limestone Swiss cheese. More learned people might refer to it as *karst* geography. No matter how you describe it, it's a crust where springs bubble to the surface, creating a swampy, gorgeous world perfect for endless paddling.

Vassar pulls up to a sugar sand beach, one of the many we'll paddle past and later sleep on, all made by a gazillion years of eroding limestone. I follow him up the sand-bottomed creek to the spring source. The creek ends in a little round pool, the size of a VW Beetle. It's scummy and fuzzy with phosphates, a heartbreaking witness to leachate from the nearby landscape. We see a red fox watching us from his viewpoint on a small ridge.

We paddle and drift, drift and paddle. I hang my feet over the bow of my boat letting the Jack Daniel's-colored water spill over my white toes. Vassar is pointing to the bank. In the deep shade, I see the gator. It grins a deadly smile and sinks into the black

Patent Pending

Model AE1006-GRA
Length: 9'8"
Beam: 35"
Weight: 34 lbs.

ADVANCED ELEMENTS

STRAITEDGE KAYAK
Self-bailing option

New and unique paddlesports products that will enhance your outdoor experience!

For a dealer near you, visit our website!
www.advancedelements.com
1-866-262-9076

TRAVEL KAYAKS

CUTTING EDGE INFLATABLE KAYAK

Patented

Model AE1009-B
Length: 13'
Beam: 34"
Weight: 30 lbs.

ULTRA-LITE KAYAK

INNOVA
Portable Performance

Seaker
15-minute setup

innovakayak.com

shadowed water.

We come around another bend and encounter a couple of fellows chatting about fishing.

"What are you fishing for?" I ask them.

"Catfish."

"Is the fishing any good?"

"Uh-huh, we catch about a hundred, hundred and fifty at a time."

"Are there no limits?"

"No, ma'am... not on catfish."

"But what do you do with that many catfish?"

"We just give 'em away."

A more conservation-minded point of view is held by Park Ranger Paul Heinmuller. After three nights spent camping on sugary beaches with Vassar, I meet up with Heinmuller to go paddling down the Perrier-sparkly water of Ichetucknee Springs. Floating on the clear effervescence, we see only one other couple paddling down our Eden-like paradise. Heinmuller explains that once the warmer weather comes, this serenity I'm experiencing will be lost as hundreds of tube-floating day trippers will bump and bob down its meandering current. His reverence for his surroundings is clear as he quietly back paddles our canoe so he can point out the slider scooter turtles sunning on a rock and the irises flagging in the sun.

He explains how this four-mile river spills 233 million gallons of water per day into the Santa Fe River and talks of his concern about the huge spike in the nitrate levels that is adding to the noxious algae growth. It's hard to believe something so blue and appearing so perfect, is sustaining such damage.

Back home, I unpack my zip-locked passport. Fine white sand spills onto my now wool-socked toes. The Suwannee already seems so long ago. I'm missing that strange and beautiful place, where characters are larger than life and good people fight to save a delicate eco-system. A place where gators grin and white orchids rise from swamps.

Next time I'm ready to escape the Canadian Chill, I'm going to cover the whole Suwannee River—from its bubbling beginnings to its immersion in the Gulf of Mexico.

TO PLAN YOUR OWN ESCAPE

www.OriginalFlorida.org

SUWANNEE EVENT

Suwannee River Challenge & Marathon

White Springs, Florida, Oct 14.

Contact: aca1@isgroup.net

386-397-1309

www.aca1.com



For more information, see www.floridastateparks.org/wilderness or call 800-868-9914.

© Colleen Friesen is a freelance writer living on BC's Sunshine Coast. www.colleenfriesen.com.

Feathercraft Folding Kayaks
Legendary performance you can trust

1-800-586-9318 www.foldingkayak.com
Folding Kayak Adventures (Feathercraft Authorized Rep.)