

What to Do in Florida's Big Bend

By Nancy Moreland

Walking along Dixie Mainline, a remote trail deep in the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, forester Daniel Barrand paused by Sanders Creek. The still waters reflected a brilliant blue sky.

"This is what my Panhandle hometown used to look like," he said. A little later, as if confirming Barrand's remark, a black bear bolted across the path.

Barrand was referring to his 53,000-acre workplace, but could have been describing the entire Big Bend region. Following Florida's peninsula south from Tallahassee along the Gulf of Mexico, there are places where manatees outnumber people and rivers outrank roads as the preferred mode of transportation.

Nestled in that southward curve, Jefferson, Taylor, Dixie and Levy Counties encompass vast expanses of public conservation land and miles of undeveloped shoreline. Each county promotes nature tourism, with boat launches, paddling, hiking and biking trails and the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail.

Life in the Slow Lane

Jefferson County, the only county in Florida without stop lights, is an appropriate place to begin your Big Bend journey. A walk-don't-rush town, the county seat of Monticello shows its age beautifully, with centuries-old oaks sheltering historic homes and B&Bs. Built in 1890, Avera-Clarke House is walking distance to the town square. There, you'll find a 1909 courthouse presiding proudly over shops, cafés and Monticello Opera House. One of the few 19th century opera venues still in use, it features plays, musicals and concerts in an acoustically perfect building.



*Spring-hoppers enjoy camping and cabins at Fanning Springs State Park.
- Andy Wraithmell, Fish and Wildlife Service*

Sparkling Personalities

South of Monticello, country roads dotted with horse farms and pecan groves lead to several freshwater springs. Wacissa Springs County Park is the launching point for a family-friendly paddle through the Wacissa River to Blue Springs. "You can see 35 feet down in some places," said Liz Sparks, a recreation planner for Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. About 10 miles beyond Blue Springs, Goose Pasture offers camping. Spring-hoppers also enjoy camping at Manatee Springs State Park and cabins at Fanning Springs State Park.

Rivers of Awe

With plentiful fresh and saltwater trails, the Big Bend is a paddler's paradise. The Suwannee is the region's best known river, but don't overlook the Aucilla, Wacissa and Econfina. These "Rivers of Awe" meander through miles of wilderness before reaching the Gulf. The sun-drenched, gentle Wacissa welcomes novice paddlers. Changing mood with water levels, the coffee-colored Aucilla enthalls paddlers with rapids, shoals and high limestone banks. For a truly remote experience, follow the tree-canopied Econfina's serpentine course. "It's a very wild river. A bobcat once watched me from the banks as I paddled past. And astronomers love its lack of ambient light," Sparks said.

A Hiker's Haven

If the four-county region is perfect for paddlers, it's ideal for hikers, with nearly 300 miles of trails. Along primeval Aucilla Sinks Trail, the river appears and disappears beneath limestone outcroppings and sinkholes. Those seeking a paved path and luxurious lodging at day's end can hike or bike the Nature Coast State Trail. The 32-mile trail adjoins Putnam Lodge, a 1927 inn boasting pecky cypress beams, gleaming heart pine floors and Hemingway-sized breakfasts.



*In the fishing village of Steinhatchee, worries seem to drift away on the tide.
- Anne Glick, Fish and Wildlife Service*

Venerable Villages

The Big Bend is your destination if rural roads clear your mind and calm your soul. Some lead to fishing villages where worries seem to drift away on the tide. Bills and bosses may bother you back home, but there are better things to think about in Steinhatchee. Just ask Capt. Troy Charles. His charters transport anglers from the Steinhatchee River to the Gulf in search of redfish and trout. June 25–September 17, his skiff fills with scallop-seekers bagging bivalves in the shallow Gulf waters.

If Florida has a Brigadoon, it might be Cedar Key. One long, lonely road leads to this seaside town, heightening the sense of idyllic isolation. Tourists bewitched by its Victorian-era cottages and quirky charm may not realize how resolutely locals fought to retain the working waterfront. The net ban of 1994 plunged commercial fishermen into a David and Goliath struggle to maintain their livelihood. Thanks to a re-education program and the tenacity that has kept this community intact for 175 years, the displaced fishermen launched a thriving clam industry.

“This is my office,” said Capt. Bobby Witt, gesturing to the Gulf of Mexico. These clean inshore coastal waters are prime habitat for filter-feeding shellfish. On Witt’s clam boat tours, visitors experience an unspoiled environment while learning how Cedar Key became a top clam producer.

A full-time fisherman, part-time tour guide, Witt calls Cedar Key “one of Florida’s last true fishing villages.” From shellfish sacks drying on fences to maritime hammock islands that dodged development to stories of a bartender who once dodged bullets in the Neptune Bar, Cedar Key is unapologetically real.

Plan ahead before visiting this small community, especially if you want to stay at the Island Hotel. The local landmark has plenty of character but only 10 rooms.

Whether staying the night or day, don’t let the sun set without you. Stroll over to G Street for a quieter version of Key West’s nightly celebration. You won’t find flame swallowers here, but you will find fiery sunsets.

Another way to wind down your Big Bend adventure is by touring the Lower Withlacoochee River on Capt. Rick LeFiles’ boat tour. If the sight of mullet-munching dolphins whets your appetite, Yankeetown’s Riverside Inn awaits your return. There’s nothing like watching manatees while you lunch on local scallops to feel one with the real Florida.

Monticello and Jefferson County: www.visitjeffersoncounty.com

Scalloping: www.visitdixie.com

Steinhatchee Fishing and Scalloping Excursions: www.taylorflorida.com

Cedar Key, Yankeetown and Withlacoochee River: www.visitnaturecoast.com

Florida Greenways & Trails System: www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/

Reach Nancy Moreland at www.ConveyMore.com