

THE EVERGLADES

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South Florida is known for beauty. The model in her tight jeans; that renovated deco hotel; the glitter and sweep of the sun on Biscayne Bay and the city skyline.

But none of the above compares to an alligator's back breaking the blackwater. An aninga flexing its wings before breaking into a corkscrew dive. The slow, dinosaur-flap of a great blue heron gliding over its domain. Or the sun kissing miles of unbroken sawgrass as it sets behind humps of skeletal cypress domes.

No words can really seize the soft curves of this geography, the way the light attaches to water running under the grass, or the mud-and-wood smell of an eroded limestone hole sunk into a pine hammock. In a nation where natural beauty is measured by its capacity for drama, the Everglades subtly, contentedly flows on.

Forget what you've heard about airboats and swamp buggies. The Glades should be approached with the same silence and gentle persuasion she shows her inhabitants. Come by car and canoe, bike, kayak or walk around the park. To understand the way a nutrient-rich patch of water produces a mosquito that feeds a frog, who becomes lunch for a gator, who snaps up a fish that gets speared by an aninga under these long, low marsh winds, you need to be still. In the quiet spaces, you realize the Everglades, so often dismissed as a swamp, are more beautiful than all the sin and flash Miami can produce. South Beach changes by the day. The Glades have beautifully endured forever, and if we're very lucky, they'll last that much longer.

GETTING THERE

The largest subtropical wilderness in the continental USA is easily accessible from Miami. The Glades, which comprise the 80 southernmost miles of Florida, are bound by the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Gulf of Mexico to the west. The Tamiami Trail (US Hwy 41) goes east-west, parallel to the more northern (and less interesting) Alligator Alley (I-75).

INFORMATION

Ernest Coe Visitor Center (☎ 305-242-7700; www.nps.gov/ever; Hwy 9336; ☹ 9am-5pm) The principal visitor center is packed with excellent information and there are also rangers who can answer any of your questions.

Everglades Area Chamber of Commerce (☎ 239-695-3941; cnr US Hwy 41 & Hwy 29, Everglades City; ☹ 9am-5pm) Provides general information about businesses and attractions in the region.

Everglades National Park visitor centers (☎ 305-242-7700; www.nps.gov/ever; 40,001 State Rd 9336, Home-

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- Sunset over the ingress road to **Pa-hay-okee Overlook** (p226)
- **Hell's Bay paddling trail** (p226)
- **Big Cypress Gallery** (p222)
- Gator nuggets and frog legs at **Seafood Depot** (p223), Everglades City
- Spotting alligators at night, **Royal Palm Visitor Center** (p225)

stead) The main park entry points have visitor centers, where you can get maps, camping permits and ranger information. Pay the entrance fee (\$10 for seven days) only once to access at all points. Fishers need a license; call ahead at ☎ 888-347-4356.

Flamingo Visitor Center (☎ 239-695-2945; ☹ 9am-4:30pm) On the park's southern coast.

Gulf Coast Visitor Center (☎ 239-695-3311; Hwy 29, Everglades City; ☹ 9am-4:30pm) This northwestern-most ranger station provides access to the 10,000 Islands area.

Royal Palm Visitor Center (☎ 305-242-7700; Hwy 9336; ☹ 8am-4:15pm) Adjacent to Ernest Coe Visitor Centre.

Shark Valley Visitor Center (☎ 305-221-8776; Tamiami Trail; ☹ 9:15am-5:15pm) Sells tickets for the tram tour.

HOW DOES IT ALL WORK?

It's tempting to think of the Everglades as a swamp, but 'prairie' may be a more apt description. The Glades, at the end of the day,