

Florida's Roadside Attractions

A little kitsch for the kid in all of us

by Chelle Koster Walton

Stop, daddy, stop!" the four of us would plead whenever we saw signs alongside the road advertising two-headed calves or water that runs uphill.

Roadside attractions: They have always fascinated me, mostly because my parents flatly denied our curiosity with categorically dismissive words such as "ripoff" and "hoax."

Now it's my job to investigate these vestiges of early tourism, and my favorite occupy the stretch of Tamiami Trail that mows through Everglades country.

By definition, a classic roadside attraction should be kitsch at best, bordering on hokey. The "Glades" brand of roadside attractions fall in line, but they boast their own twist and bite: (specifically) alligators. Many of them started up in the 1950s and '60s to grab dollars from families with the sticky paper of natural wonderment—no hoax required. They still appeal strongly to families, while adults, and particularly environmentally conscious ones, might find them a bit...less in the wonderment department than the kids.

As a part of Old Florida, nonetheless, I'm happy to see them survive. Beside gators, the attractions thrive now as they did back then on the exotica of the Native Americans who share the land and the thrill of noisy airboat rides into the River of Grass, impenetrable by any other means because of the threat its sawgrass poses. Many throw in a funky museum; some others, live animals in pens, a gift shop, a restaurant serving frog legs and gator tail, animal shows, a campground, a nature trail, or any combination thereof. Look for these roadside stops along the Trail (an American flag atop a tall pole marks



Every form of natural oddity from gators to pythons, can be found along Florida's Tamiami Trail that mows through Everglades country.

nearly every stop). Buses bringing in cruise ship passengers are another signpost.

Roadside attraction: Wooten's Airboat Tours, since 1953

Where the heck? In Ochopee, One and one-half mile east of Route 29.
What the heck? Snakes! Panthers! Turtles! Crocodiles! Swamp Buggy Rides! (See an old fish camp complete with moonshine still!) Airboat Tours!

How about them 'gators! Dozens of 'em in captivity, from babies to monster-sized. They're laid up on the bank of the park's central pond like beady-eyed logs. See them in the wild on the tours.

Phone: 239-695-2781 or 800-282-2781

Web site: www.wootensairboats.com





Roadside attraction: Skunk Ape Research Headquarters

Where the heck? At Trail Lakes Campground (look for the super-sized statue of a Florida panther), a few miles east of Wooten's.

What the heck? Don't let the name fool you—this is as hokey as it gets. David Shealy, the second-generation owner, shows a video and sells souvenirs and a field guide to the Everglades' version of Big Foot in his "museum." The animal park includes a petting zoo, emus, and pythons that have been released into the environment and rescued by his staff.



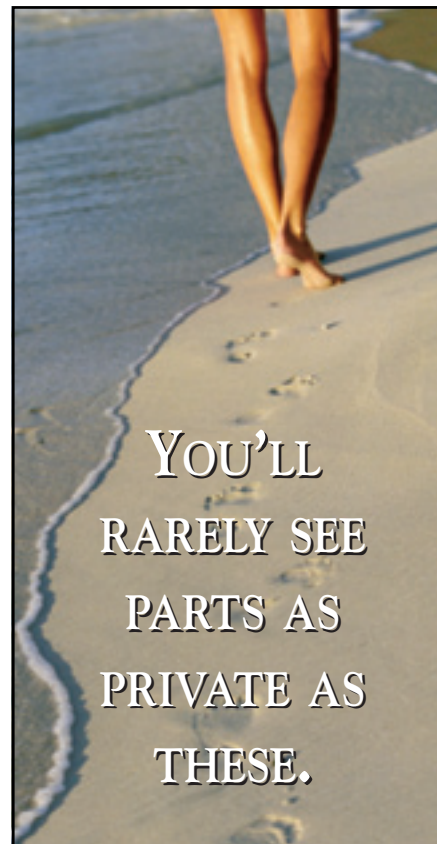
How about them 'gators! Not the main focus here, but you'll see a few, and more are reportedly on their way.

Phone: 305-695-2275

Web site: www.skunkape.info



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Roadside attraction: Miccosukee Indian Village

Where the heck? Thirty-five miles east of Route 29, twenty-five miles west of the Florida Turnpike.

What the heck? The most authentic exhibit of native life, it includes a culture museum, outdoor chickee displays and native craftspeople, a gift shop, and, down the road, Miccosukee Restaurant, featuring gator tail, frog legs, and Indian fry bread. It offers airboat tours to a Miccosukee Indian hammock camp. Down the road, an elder and former chairman of the tribe, Buffalo Tiger, runs another airboat tour operation. At ninety-something, he still personally greets customers when his health allows.

How about them 'gators! The Native American alligator-wrestling show is one highlight of a visit to the Village.

Phone: 305-223-8380

Web site: www.miccosukeetribe.com



Roadside attraction: Everglades Safari Park

Where the heck? Forty-five miles east of Route 29, fifteen miles west of the Florida Turnpike. Look up in the air for the black bear and deer riding an airboat.

What the heck? Jungle Trail takes you via boardwalk through wetlands where it feels like wilderness, except for the sounds of Trail traffic and the bullhorn announcing airboat departures. There's a small natural history museum, wildlife shows, a restaurant, and an appropriately tacky gift shop.

How about them 'gators! The Jungle Trail leads to Gator Island, filled with crocs as well as gators.

Phone: 305-226-6923

Web site: www.evsafaripark.com



Roadside attraction: Everglades Gator Park, since the 1950s

Where the heck? Forty-eight miles east of Route 29, twelve miles west of the Florida Turnpike.

What the heck? What's an Everglades roadside attraction without snakes and a recreated Miccosukee village? The wildlife shows here are well-done, and the forty-five-minute airboat tour more is entertaining than educational. (My guide was fond of naming the animals he recognized, such as the two turtles he calls Soup and Stew.) Other facilities: restaurant, gift shop, RV park.

How about them 'gators! We saw a couple of gators in the canal on our airboat tour. An alligator show includes the typical daring stunts peppered with some education.

Phone: 305-559-2255 or 800-559-2205

Web site: www.gatorpark.com

Roadside attraction: Coopertown, since 1945

Where the heck? A mile down the road from Gator Park, it is its own town, population—eight.

What the heck? The restaurant here, straight out of a movie (fact is, you've probably seen it in a number of movies, TV shows, and commercials), special-

Everglades Safari Park tour boat (above). Tribal designs herald your arrival to Miccosukee Village (left).

FOR THE ENVIRONPHILE

If you're screaming "get me outta here" after your first stop and alligator-wrestling show, don't despair. Here's the route for those looking for a more genuine nature experience—hold the kitsch and goofy humor.

Collier-Seminole State Park: an easy introduction to the Everglades environment and a nice campground.

Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park: take a leisurely boardwalk stroll or get serious on the trails off V.V.J. Janes Memorial Scenic Drive.

Big Cypress National Preserve H.P. Williams Roadside Park: look for gators from the boardwalk.

Big Cypress National Preserve Oasis Visitor Center: gators guaranteed along the boardwalk out front. (Take Loop Road for more wildlife.)

Everglades National Park's Shark Valley: ride a tram tour or rent a bike to see gators galore, river otters, and lots of bird on the fifteen-mile loop.



izes in frog legs and swamp café ambience (is that an oxymoron?). It touts its rides as “the original airboat tour” and rated best by the *Miami Herald*.

How about them ‘gators! Cooper-town’s alligator exhibit has ‘em in all sizes, up to fourteen feet long. Chances are you’ll see more on the airboat tour.

Phone: 305-226-6048

Web site: www.coopertownairboats.com 🌴

Chelle Koster Walton annually updates the Everglades chapter for Fodor’s Florida and, despite her eco-conscience, hasn’t met a roadside attraction she hasn’t loved.



A little swamp humor in the form of a sign over the restaurant that reads “Illegally Parked Frogs Will Get Toad Away” (left). Egrets, herons, ospreys, and gators are among the natural sights on an Everglades airboat tour (above).



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