

ESCAPE TO GLADES COUNTY IN FLORIDA'S LAST PRISTINE WILDERNESS
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A soft breeze feathers through thatches of palmettos spiking a crimson horizon, as dragonflies “toe-dance” from peak to peak, flashing their turquoise iridescence along a whimsical path. Beams of sunlight stream through waving cabbage palms tracing their graceful stalks into native scrub. Quietly, the morning awakes in this small crevasse of Glades County, nestled on the western shore of Lake Okeechobee in the vast Everglades prairie; a living spectacle of Nature’s unobtrusive Beauty that captures the senses and stamps its unique imprint upon space, time, and those who carry their weary bodies from the bustle of city drama into the fresh air of the pristine wilderness.

Traveling from the coast about 35 miles along Highway 80 West (Southern Boulevard) through South Bay, the road curves northwest on U.S. 27 towards Clewiston, named after Alonso Clewis, who founded the first sugar company when he discovered that cane grew well in the “black-gold muck” along the southern tip of Lake Okeechobee (the second largest fresh water lake in the nation). In the heart of Clewiston is the majestic Clewiston Inn built in 1938, reflecting the southern charm and hospitality of the 1900s “boom days” when tourists visited from all over the world seeking adventure in wild Florida. The Inn, on the National Register of Historic Sites, serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner with a small bar off the lobby and hosts corporate retreats, meetings, weddings, and other specialty events. For reservations or information: (800) 749-4466 or info@clewistoninn.com

Traveling another 16 miles north on U. S. 27 is Moore Haven, settled along the Caloosahatchee River that links the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. The old town square, just beneath Highway 27 overpass, now remains silent but is reminiscent of the days when it was a thriving farm and cattle town.

For a breakfast, lunch, or dinner break in Moore Haven on U.S. 27, there is Tico's Spanish and Mexican Restaurant serving authentic, delicious dishes in pleasant surroundings with courteous service. A few blocks further west is Joey's Pizza with a menu of take out food and hot fudge sundaes, just across the street from the county seat, Moore Haven's restored courthouse.

As the highway curves another 11 miles through native habitat and pastures to Palmdale, the time clock returns 200 million years ago when ancient dinosaurs roamed the earth leaving behind today's curious reptiles: The alligators and crocodiles, both native to Florida. Palmdale is the home of the giant behemoths and one of the oldest roadside attractions, Gatorama, purchased in 1986 by "Florida Cracker" David Theilen from an alligator poacher, Cecil Clemons. Theilen's premise in buying Gatorama was that alligators would be a curious attraction to northern visitors who had never before seen the gigantic reptiles.

Today, Gatorama serves as a science center for the study of endangered crocodiles and for alligator breeding and harvesting with "hands-on" science, managed meticulously by present owners, Patty and Allen Register.

Through the gift shop, walking along the open boardwalk, crocodiles, alligators, and humans peer at each other from a safe distance as the reptiles swim underneath in surrounding ponds. The reptiles flaunt their posture with spiked tails above the water giving a sense of each creature's size. As the eye moves toward the triangular head of the crocodile, or the rounded muzzle of the alligator snout, Patty Register gives a guided tour to visitors explaining the difference between the two ancient beasts.

Gatorama began with a clutch of 800 alligators and today has expanded to more than 4,500. The largest alligator on sight, Goliath, weighs 1,400 pounds and is approximately 15 feet long. Gatorama also harvests alligators for meat and hides that they sell at the gift shop. Gatorama is open seven days a week, rain or shine, from 9 am to 6 p.m. Cost of admission: \$11.95 adults and children 56 inches and shorter, \$5.95; plus, you can take a picture holding an alligator.

For special groups, there is a "Gator Shining Night" to tour the park as the sun sets, and enjoy a home-cooked "cracker style" meal including alligator tail, swamp cabbage, and sour orange pie. Reservations are required. Call (863) 675-0623 or visit www.gatorama.com.

One mile north of Gatorama, on the west side U.S. 27 is Fisheating Creek open for camping, canoeing/kayaking, swimming and peaceful walks through the woods.

Fisheating Creek is 52 miles long and is filled with native catfish, brim, and bass. The

park covers 28,000 acres and is also one of the largest nesting areas of the migratory Swallowtail Kite that travels from Brazil every spring to build nests in the tall trees along the Creek. There are also great white herons, egrets, and wild turkeys. Alligators, mud turtles, and bobcats roam the cypress hammocks rising along the tannic creek waters from the crystal white “sugar sand” that once was the bottom of the ocean before the last Ice Age when Florida arose from the depths.

Fisheating Creek is on the lower section of the Lake Wales Ridge that curves up the spine of Florida some 200 miles north and is a unique eco-system of paleo-islands that never sunk as Florida’s sea-levels fluctuated over millions of years.

Fisheating Creek’s headwater flows from Highlands County to the north and meanders through marshes, pastures, forests, winding into Lake Okeechobee. The early Indians used the creek as a trade route to Punta Gorda and early settlers used it to deliver mail.

Fisheating Creek provides 100 campsites with full hook-ups and primitive sites. The cost is \$20.00 nightly for a full hook-up, monthly sites are \$500.00 plus tax, and primitive sites run from \$10 (off the creek) and \$15.00 on the creek. The campground provides a small country store for staples, local newspapers, ice, and information on guided eco-tours. Canoe rentals are \$30.00 for a full day with a day trip to Burnt Bridge, \$20.00, or a two day trip to Ingram’s Crossing at \$25.00.

The beauty of Fisheating Creek is a place where the only night lights are a canopy of stars over the warmth of a campfire and the aroma of roasting hotdogs. Fishing, swimming, relaxing is the attraction for visitors here to forget the burdens of the city and refresh in Nature. The address: 7555 U.S. Highway 27 N, Palmdale, Florida 33944. (863) 675-5999. www.fisheatingcreekresort.com

Moving less than a mile north along U.S. 27, past Palmdale's old country store, is Vanishing Species Wildlife Preserve, open Thursday through Sunday, 9:30-4:30 p.m. Vanishing Species Wildlife is a haven to a variety of non-releasable bears, primates, big cats, reptiles, and other animals. Jeff Harrod, owner, provides educational programs designed to entertain and educate all age groups about wildlife, the environment, and protecting endangered species. Vanishing Species new resident is "Daisy," a 2 month old bear rescued out of Ohio. With a broad knowledge of reptiles and mammals, Harrod fearlessly wraps himself in a giant Columbian Boa Constrictor captured in nearby LaBelle, that he explains, was apparently released into the wild.

Inside the attraction, visitors can stroll through a herpetarium of venomous and non-venomous reptiles and ponder ancient relics featured in the history museum. There is a gift shop and just outside, a family picnic area to feed goats, sheep, and other livestock that roam freely. Call (954) 347-1404 for admission and tours or www.VanishingSpecies.net/palmdale .

In this unspoiled corner of “old Florida,” little known by many who bypass this destination, Glades County provides a rare serenity that tingles the spine and rekindles the spirit and can only be discovered in the last pristine wilderness.