

Our Town

GAINESVILLE

FREE TAKE ONE

Camping in the Sunshine State

Discovering the real outdoors



plus Paddle Out

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Florida's
Lighthouses
Shine a Light
On History



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PROJECT MAKEOVER

UF Student Organization
Gives Back to Local Schools

AT A CROSSROADS

Florida Attraction Silver Springs
is No Longer Privately Owned

Camping in the Sunshine State

Discovering the Real Outdoors

BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

The rush of warm Florida sun filled my tent at dawn — bringing to life the birds, the sleepy campers and the hunger that had been building inside me after four days hiking trails. I was hundreds of miles away from my apartment, trying to resurrect some primal outdoorsiness I believed was hidden inside.

This was years ago, on my big camping trip around the Panhandle, the one that sparked my passion for hiking and the outdoors. I had set off with a gear-packed car, hoping to come back with a new sense of appreciation for my Sunshine State. I was on a trip to reconnect with the untouched patches of Real Florida that I believed were still waiting for me.

And the remarkable thing was — I did.

Somewhere between the Suwannee and Apalachicola, I fell into place outdoors. On the trails, in the water and out among the dunes, I recognized the gift that a night out in nature can be, especially here, in our Florida.

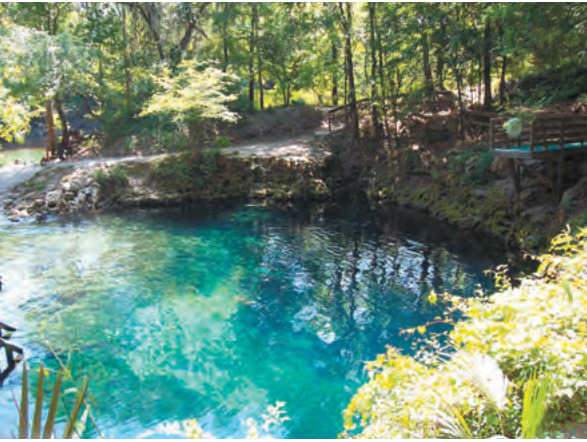
But among the thousands of tucked-away spots to camp in natural Florida, these six will stay with me as my favorites.

Blue Spring State Park (Orange City)

Blue Spring State Park, just a couple miles down the road from where I grew up, is the busiest on two types of days. The first is in scorching summer, when icy spring water is just the right thing

for bathing away heat. On these afternoons, before the thunderstorms roll in, the park gets so busy that cars form a line at the entrance. Caravans full of kids tube down the St. John's river, with snorkel masks and deep tans.

The second is when the manatees come. Beginning in winter, the manatees migrate down the river and spend time at what is now a designated manatee refuge. Herds of these "sea cows" are around from mid-November to early March, and most days you'll find crowds of visitors peering over the boardwalk's lookout, just a stone's throw away from Florida's gentle giants. On my weekends home during Christmastime, we'd always go out with cameras to take pictures of what were sometimes groups of 20 or more manatees right at the river's edge.



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Blue Spring is the largest spring on the St. John's River, a winding 300-mile behemoth unto itself. When it's not too cold, you'll usually find scuba divers suited up, heading into the mouth of the spring — a deep crevice that leads down into the Florida aquifer.

This spot is particularly popular for boat tours, fishing, canoeing and snorkeling. The campsites are tucked into sandy scrubland, just walking distance from the springs. This park also has fully equipped cabins. Be sure to get up early and hike along the boardwalk, which winds along next to the water underneath a shady hammock. The view near the mouth of the spring is particularly great from the boardwalk's gazebo. I know it well; it's where my fiancé proposed.

Anastasia State Park (St. Augustine)

This coastal park is only miles away from downtown St. Augustine, and the park's history is deeply rooted in the old Spanish port town. My trips to Anastasia have been part of larger trips to the city — to go see the nearby fortress and national monument, Castillo de San Marcos; to walk through the narrow streets of downtown's shops and restaurants; and to trek to the top of the 19th-century lighthouse at the north end of Anastasia Island. While the park can be enjoyed by itself, its strip of untouched Atlantic coastline is more meaningful when seen as a piece of Old Spanish Florida.

The park is speckled by scrub and cactus — patches of green against the rolling tan of the beach's dunes. Marshland, sea-blown trees and a distant view of the lighthouse line the ocean's edge, where summertime swimmers, surfers and kayakers pile in. We'd comb the sand for shells while watching the shorebirds.

The park is an archaeological site where coquina, a type of sedimentary rock made up of shells, was mined to build the fort. It's also home to one of my favorite short hikes, the Ancient Dunes Trail. A little less than a one-mile loop, the trail winds through slightly hilly dunes, shaded by a maritime hammock.

Campers are set up in some of the more wooded spots, but are still just a walk from the water's edge.



Wake up early to bike along the beach at sunrise. Take your canoe out to Salt Run, the park's tidal salt marsh, and bring your fishing gear. Or just lay in your tent through the morning, breathing in salty air and listening to the laughing gulls and the songbirds.

Florida Caverns State Park (Marianna)

When I first visited the caverns, the water inside had just begun to flow. Our tour guide led us through puddles, around the raining stalactites and dripping limestone. The water that carved the spectacular cave formations, over thousands of years, was doing its slow work in front of us. The caverns, cold



and wet, had begun to gleam with underground dew.

Florida Caverns State Park is the only state park that offers cave tours to the public. In a half-hour trek from room to room, visitors learn the caverns' geological history and the history of the park itself. High-quality lighting is set up throughout, making the views impressive and picture-taking easy. My favorite rooms are set up with multi-colored lights, splashing the massive rocks with bright greens, reds and blues.

But the park is more than just the caves. The Chipola River winds through the area, diving 90 feet underground at the site's river hole sink, and a freshwater spring is available for swimming during warmer months. It is the northernmost state park, and the land changes from Florida's typical scrubland to elevated rocky bluffs.

I first visited in early spring, and the land's mosses and leaves were that shade of freshly born green. Sweetgum trees, hardwoods and

just-sprouted wild flowers lined the trails, alongside lichens, black walnut trees and oak-leaf hydrangeas.

The campgrounds are walking distance from the nearly half-dozen miles of trails. On cold mornings, walk along the river and watch the steam rise through the woodlands and just-broken light.

Falling Waters State Park (Chipley)

Falling Waters State Park is home to the highest waterfall in the state, but visitors should look down, not up, to appreciate its stature.

From a distance, the waterfall seems small — a mild stream flowing over the edge of a moss-covered rock. But as you get closer, the water churns louder and reveals the 100-foot drop below. The water, whose final destination is unknown, falls into a 20-foot-wide sink and makes for one of Florida's most picturesque landmarks.

The park's Sink Hole Trail leads



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to the falls itself and has a shaded boardwalk lined with large trees and ferns. Trickling streams wind through the gently sloping landscape and are what I would consider perfect for afternoon hikes.

When I visited, I didn't have a chance to hike the other two longer trails (the Terrace and Wiregrass trails), but their paths through the sloping North Florida hardwoods would make for moderate day hikes. The campsite itself, tucked into the longleaf pines, is situated on one of the highest hills in Florida, 324 feet above sea level.

On warmer days, dip into the two-acre lake or bring a picnic to eat in the shade.

Suwannee River State Park (Live Oak)

The Suwannee River runs through Old Florida — through its land, its people, its history and even its songs. The river is a picture of the south: fishermen along the riverbanks, low-hanging moss, cypress trees. Alligators, hawks, turtles and herons make their

home in and around the wide, black and strong water — too strong, in fact, to swim at the park.

The park features trails, sinkholes and even Civil War earthwork mounds, telling the story of the area's Confederate defenses of the old town Columbus.

My favorite trail in the park is not the one running alongside the river, but instead the Sandhills Trail, a little farther away. Just under a mile, the trail loops around near the old stagecoach road where wagons filled with cotton and other goods used to head toward the river. But

the best part of the trail, halfway around, is the emergence of the old Columbus Cemetery. Gravestones from the mid-19th century emerge among the trail's pines.

The camping is alongside the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, which leads to the old Lime Sink and winds through the woodlands.

The best view in the park is up on the lookout, standing over the intersection of the Suwannee and Withlacoochee. Here, you can see the strength and size of the old rivers — the way they have both defined and kept alive the people and wildlife of the Florida backcountry.

Torrey State Park (Bristol)

When I first arrived to Torrey State Park, the northern chill of the panhandle was in full swing. The circular campsite sits on a high bluff, with a lookout to the area's rare and striking elevation. The winds whipped around the hardwoods, flickering the fires that every campsite had burning throughout the evening.

Torrey, to me, didn't feel quite like the Florida I knew. In the fall, the leaves turn. And in the winter, the cold is bitter. The fauna is even unique to the area — famous for the rare species of Torrey tree that makes it home specifically on the bluffs overlooking the Apalachicola River, the dividing point between time zones.

Some of the best trail systems I've seen in Florida are at Torrey — miles of hardwood forest pushed up against the edge of the river and hills.

The Weeping Ridge trail begins at the edge of the campsite, winding down to a ravine at the bottom. When I hiked it near dusk, I spotted deer, which sprinted away immediately, and heard the nighttime cries of distant coyotes. They continued to sing throughout the night.

If you are interested in more primitive camping, the park provides something dubbed "The

Torrey Challenge." This five-mile loop allows for backpackers to set up camp halfway around, and then finish up the rest of the loop the next day. Equipped with fire rings and benches, these back-in-the-woods trails give campers darker, quieter nights — lit only by the stars and the domed glow of lanterns.

During the day, walk to the historic white-paneled Gregory House, a 19th-century plantation house overlooking the Apalachicola.

Growing up near Orlando, I had forgotten there is more to our

state than too-packed amusement parks and sprawling suburbs. Somewhere between the miles of trails and the dozens of parks, I fell in love with Florida again. I canoed across rivers and came face-to-face with wildlife. I slept on the ground and woke up with the sun.

These six camping spots are my favorites, some because of their beauty and some because of the memories I have there. But these parks are just an invitation to discover the hundreds of others — the corners of Florida best seen after a night in a tent and a day on the trails. ■

TENT TIPS

- 1** Bring a propane stove for easy cooking. **Things like pasta, oatmeal, and ground beef are easy meals.** Bring cheap pots and pans, and wash them by hand at the camp ground's water spout.
- 2** Bug spray is a must. If you're camping in winter, it will be less of an issue, but **during summer bug spray is critical.** Also check for ticks every night.
- 3** Leave food outside your tent, and preferably in an airtight container a distance from the campground. Food attracts wildlife such as raccoons, but **in areas like the Ocala National Forest, campers should be wary of black bears.**
- 4** Make sure you bring a tarp for under your tent and a waterproof "rain-fly" cover in case of rain.
- 5** Bring good hiking shoes with ankle support, thick socks, and **plenty of Band-Aids.** Florida has mild terrain, but after a week of hiking your feet will appreciate appropriate footwear.
- 6** Only make fires in designated fire pits. Most campgrounds offer wood, and campers shouldn't gather timber themselves from the surrounding area. **Bring a bag of instant match-light briquettes** and lighter fluid to get nighttime fires started more easily.
- 7** Bring activities for nighttime, such as books, cards, or smores. **Bring plenty of lanterns and batteries.**
- 8** Air mattresses aren't a requirement, but will make sleeping a lot more comfortable than with just a sleeping bag on the ground. **Most campsites will have a power outlet** so you can plug in an air mattress pump. Battery powered pumps are also available.
- 9** **Practice setting up your tent at least once** before you arrive. First, make sure all the pieces are there, but also practice a speedy set-up in case you have to race against rain or darkness.
- 10** Lastly, respect the environment. **Take only pictures, leave only footprints.**