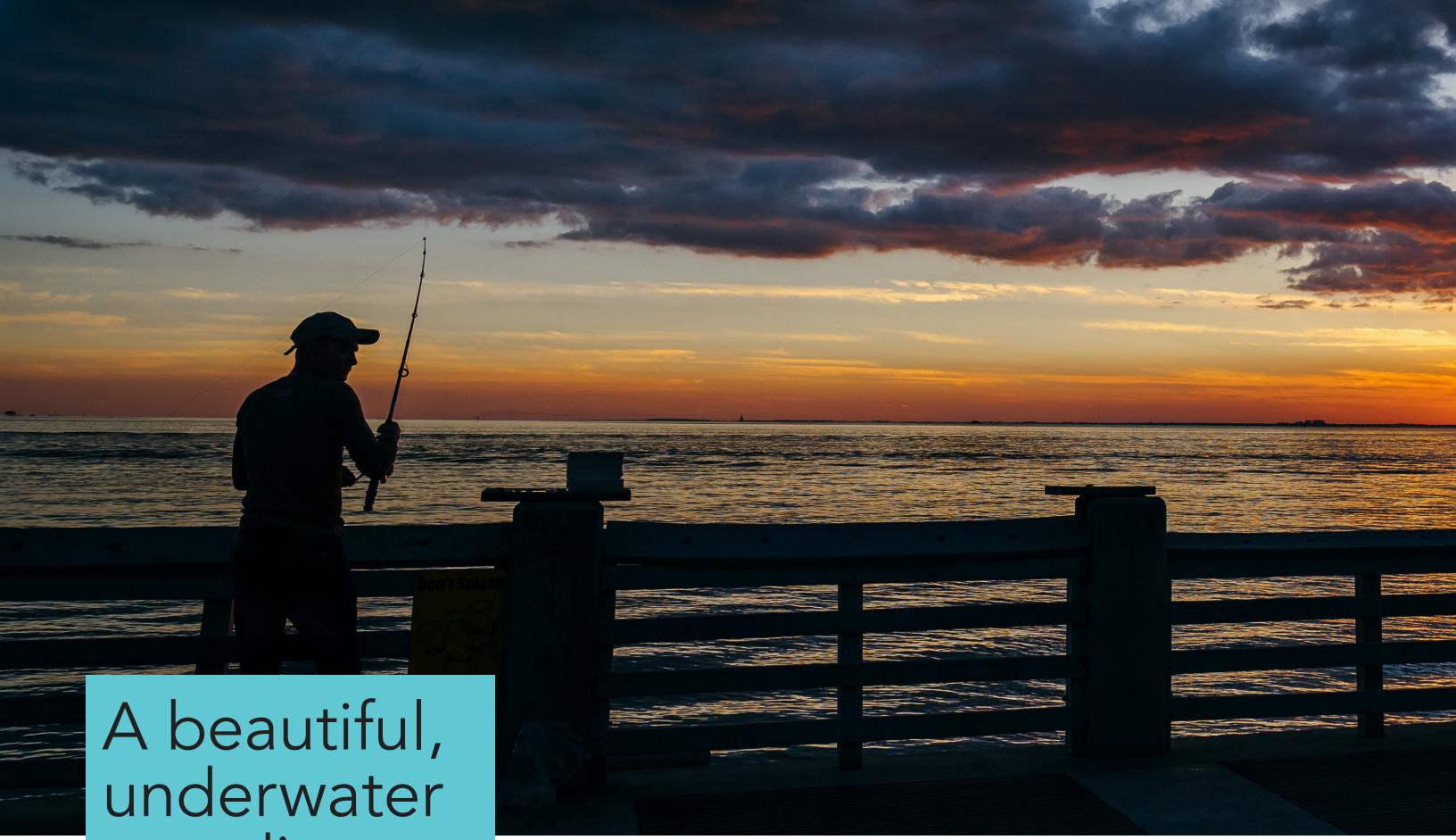


# Biscayne — how to — National Park

*Story by: Alex Schechter  
Photography by: Bradley Siefert*







## A beautiful, underwater paradise—and, it's free.

About an hour south of Miami, beyond the glittering nightclubs and traffic jams of South Beach, is the country's largest marine park—a tropical paradise with 95 percent of its area submerged underwater. Here, you'll find lagoons, shoals, creeks, and channels filled with schools of rainbow-colored fish, vibrant and vast coral reefs, sea turtles, and leaping bottlenose dolphins.

At Biscayne National Park, a federally-protected site that stays open 364 days of the year, travelers can enjoy 72,000-acres, including one of the world's largest coral reefs, as well as thousands of individual patch reefs, native fisheries, and dense mangrove forests.

### Play Video

**JetBlue Is Giving Free Flights to People Who Owe Taxes**

JetBlue is giving away 1,000 free one-way flights to taxpayers who owe money on their returns as part of its Tax Return Flight giveaway.

The best part? It's totally free to the public. Here's how to maximize your time at one of the country's most underrated national parks.

### Take an expert's advice

"My personal favorite area of the park," confided Matt Johnson, the park's public affairs officer, "is Jones Lagoon." Fringed with mangroves and located at the southern end of the park, miles from any roads, the lagoon offers a perfect (and secluded) spot for canoeing or kayaking. And, Johnson added, "The serenity is stunning. There are so many amazing wild creatures here like the cassiopeia, or upside-down, jellyfish. Their tentacles look like plants waving in the water."

### Start at the Visitor Center

Most travelers begin a trip to Biscayne National Park at the Dante Fascell Visitor Center: an unflashy boathouse-type structure that offers unlimited resources for newbies to the region. From here, you can visit a museum that explains the park's different ecosystems (there are four, in case you're wondering: mangroves, Biscayne Bay, Florida Keys, coral reef), or speak to a park ranger about renting a boat.

### Explore the Keys on a boat

Though Biscayne National Park isn't technically considered part of the Florida Keys, you'd never know it. The park's combination of aquamarine waters, brilliant emerald islands, and coral reefs represent a truly remarkable sight, especially for first-time visitors to Florida. And the best way to see it all is to get out on the water.

The park makes it easy for visitors to rent boats right at the dock. Simply show up at the visitor center to sign out a paddleboard or kayak, and away you go. Soon, you'll be paddling through ancient rows of mangroves, but no one's stopping you from charting your own course. With full access to Biscayne Bay's seven-mile expanse, you'll only be limited by your own sense of adventure (and rowing stamina).

### Spend the night on Boca Chita Key

Boca Chita, a small island off the northern tip of Elliott Key, can only be accessed by boat, and is a must-see for anyone paddling his or her way through the bay. The island's centerpiece is an impressive 55-foot-tall lighthouse that dates back to the 1930s, when the island was still privately owned. Nature enthusiasts should hike the half-mile promenade that curves along the edge of the harbor, ringed with swaying Thatch Palms and stunning views.

When night falls, plan on sticking around. The utterly secluded Boca Chita campground offers picnic tables and BBQ grills, and aside from the overnight docking fee you'll pay upon arrival (\$25), use of the campgrounds is totally free. As the sun sets, look north—you can see the Miami skyline glowing in the distance.

### See a real shipwreck

One of Biscayne National Park's claims



## About the Photographer

Hello, my name is Bradley Siefert I'm a Chicago based graphic designer and photographer available for portraits, documentary and editorial work. My favorite kind of photography is extended travel photo stories, especially outdoor photography work. My strengths are in balancing documentary and editorial style photography often combining studio strobes on location.

to fame is its collection of six separate shipwrecks, the oldest of which is a 1,480-ton iron-hulled steamship dating back to 1878. The Maritime Heritage Trail, explained Johnson, offers exciting opportunities for snorkelers to experience a shipwreck in a beautiful natural setting. Access, of course, is by boat and flipper only.

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# Sunset at Key Biscayne, Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park

SUNSET

# HISTORY & CULTURE

Ponce de Leon named this area 'Cape of Florida' when he led the first Spanish expedition to Florida in 1513. The Cape Florida lighthouse was completed in 1825 but was damaged during the Second Seminole War. The rebuilt tower, completed in 1846, remains the oldest standing structure in Miami-Dade County. The island served as a secret meeting place and port for runaway slaves and Black Seminoles waiting to rendezvous with sea captains or board dugouts for a passage to safety in the British Bahamas. Although the lighthouse was built to save lives and ships, its unflinching light brought an end to this avenue of escape. In September 2004, Cape Florida was designated a National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Site.

## BICYCLING

The park has a paved bike path approximately 1.5-miles long and unpaved service roads where you can enjoy easy cycling. You can easily ride a few miles in a loop by routing through the various paths and roadways.

The terrain is completely flat. Some paths will take you beneath the trees, and others offer views of Biscayne Bay. If you're lucky, you might spot an eagle ray or manatee. You can rent individual bikes or quad bikes from the park's concession located a few steps from the Lighthouse Cafe. Helmets are highly recommended for all cyclists and Florida law requires helmets for cyclists age 16 and under.

## BEACH

Cape Florida's 1.25 miles of natural beach has consistently been ranked as one of the top 10 beaches in the United States by Dr. Stephen Leatherman of Florida International University, aka 'Dr. Beach.' The park's concession offers rental chairs and umbrellas as well as ocean kayaks and hydro bikes. The waves are very gentle, thanks to a reef six miles offshore.



Lighthouse in Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park photographed by Bradley Siefert

## BOAT

Visitors are allowed to anchor overnight in No Name Harbor for a fee of \$20.00 per boat per night. Mooring to the seawall overnight is not permitted. During operating hours, visitors who have paid the overnight fee have access to coin operated laundry machines. We also have a free pump out for all boats, a picnic shelter and restrooms. Boater's Grill is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.