

CRYSTAL RIVER, FLORIDA:

# More Than Manatees

*Adventures can be found throughout the area*

STORY BY TAMI BROOKS • PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED





**C**rystal River, Florida, is the Manatee Capitol of the World, attracting visitors from around the globe to swim with the lovable, gentle giants — but the manatees are only the beginning. The area is an outdoor enthusiast's paradise offering kayaking, hiking, fishing, paddle boarding, golf and more, so we set off for an old-school adventure along Florida's Nature Coast.

## DAY ONE

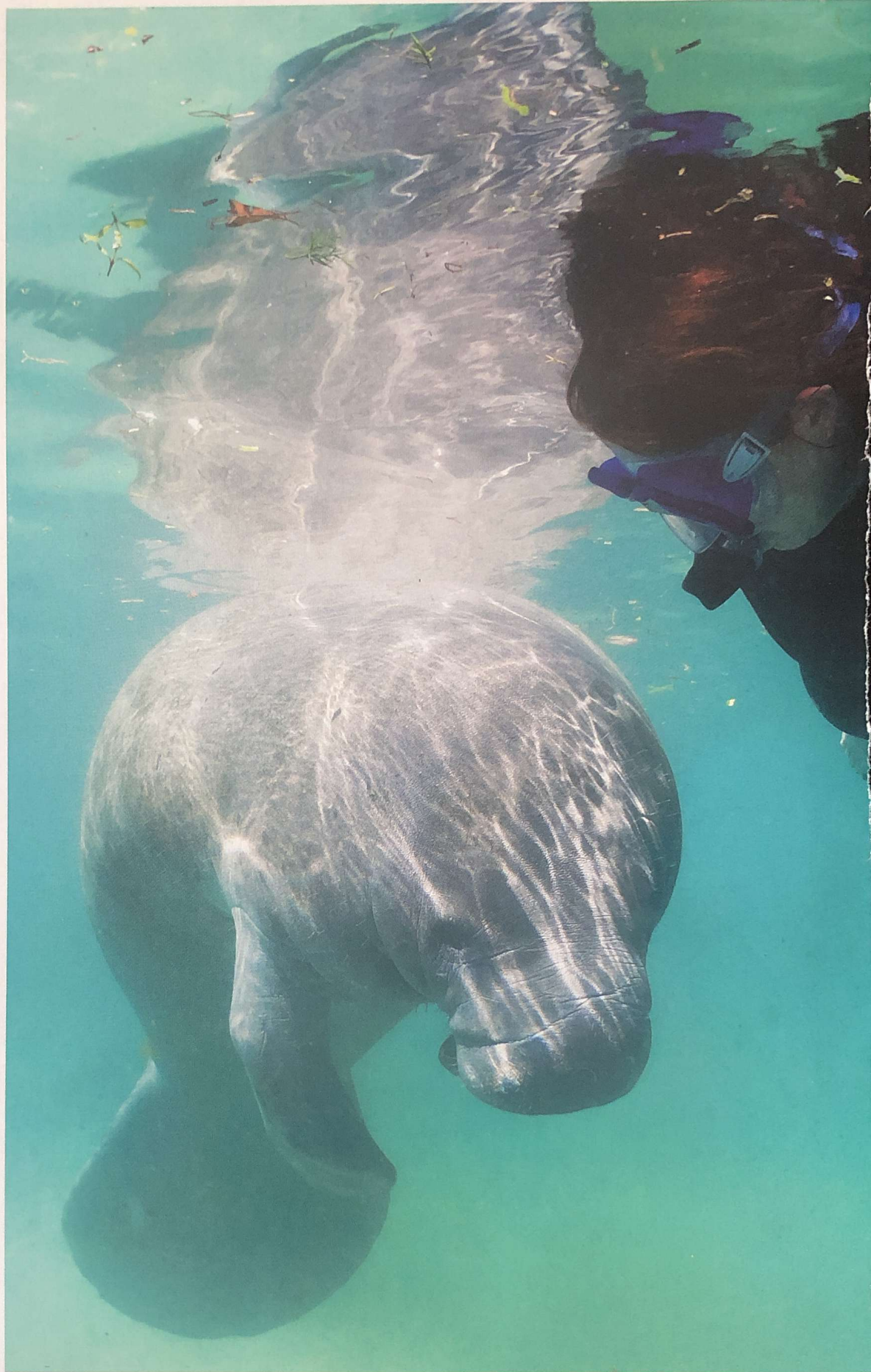
The alarm goes off at 6 a.m. It's been raining, and there's fog swirling through the grounds of the hotel. We head to Fun 2 Dive to get ready for our Manatee Swim Eco Tour at 7 a.m.

Greeted by the friendly staff with hot coffee and the news that we're the only people on tour this drizzly morning, we squeeze into wetsuits, grab some gear and watch the required informational video. We load into the van and head for the dock.

A U.S. Coast Guard-certified captain welcomes us aboard, goes over a few safety features of the vessel and pulls out into King's Bay. Mist is rising from the glass-like water and there's a slight chill in the air, but it's warm on the boat, and both the captain and our swim guide keep us entertained with area history and wildlife sightings.

Soon we arrive at the head-spring where the manatees gather. Climbing down the swim ladder, we acclimate quickly to the 72-degree water. In a matter of minutes, our guide spots a manatee. Swimming over, we come face to face with a baby. These animals are so curious and friendly, even rolling over for the occasional belly scratch.

We spend a couple of hours interacting with the manatee, and then it's time to go. On board, we're offered hot chocolate to warm us up for the ride back. Crystal River and Homosassa are the only places in the world where you are allowed to swim and interact with the manatees. Truly a unique, bucket-list worthy experience.







Visitors can swim with manatees on tours at Crystal River.

After a quick shower, we grab a delicious lunch at The Crab Plant, a working seafood market and restaurant located directly on the water with a jaw-dropping view of the marina and bay.

Next up, a trip to the Three Sisters Springs and an afternoon Segway tour. Three Sisters Springs can be reached via a short narrated trolley ride from the Visitor's Center in Crystal River. The springs are fantastic, with water so clear it looks unreal. Manatees are resting throughout the springs, occasionally sticking their noses out for a breath of air as you meander along the boardwalk.

From Three Sisters Springs, we go to meet Broderick, our Segway tour guide. The tour begins with instruction and practice. In no time, we are gliding through the streets and parks of the town — an exciting and unexpected way to spend the afternoon.

We end the evening with a fabulous meal at Vintage on 5th, retiring to the hotel afterward to get ready for the next day's adventure.

## DAY TWO

Our adventures are land-based today, and we make the short drive to the Florida Tree Top Adventure, an aerial obstacle and challenge course. Climbing up the first ladder, my heart beats a little faster. Fifteen feet can seem like 50, but we gain confidence as we complete different challenges and games. Before I know it, we're zipping

through the forest and walking through the air.

After a quick lunch, owner Scott Baggerly takes us to Soquili Stables on the other side of the property. There, we meet the Florida Cracker horses that we'll spend the rest of the afternoon with on a trail ride.

The day ends at Seafood Seller & Café, which serves fabulous food with a Cajun flair. The house is packed on a Wednesday night, and there's live music playing. It is literally magic as owner Jimmy hops from table to table performing everything from card tricks to shell games to bending a fork while moving between two fingers — or as Carin insists, bending the fork with his mind. What a way to end Day Two!

## DAY THREE

Up first this morning is a trip to the Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park. Park the car and travel by pontoon boat along Pepper Creek to reach the Visitor's Center. Travel the paved trails and boardwalks viewing Florida's wildlife in a natural setting. Well, except for Lu, the hippo, who is the only resident not native to the area.

Don't miss the Fish Bowl underwater observatory. We stepped inside to view hundreds of fish, but no manatees for us that morning. Hopefully, we'll make up for it on our afternoon kayaking trip.

Another delicious meal, >>>





A cruise down Pepper Creek in Florida's Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park.

this time at the Margarita Grill in Homosassa. Great food and waterfront dining conveniently located next to the launch of our kayaking adventure with River Adventure Tours. Paddling to the headsprings of the Homosassa River, we see birds, turtles, fish and, of course, more manatees, some swimming up right next to the kayaks.

We end day three with another fabulous meal at Katch-22 in Lecanto, a little off the beaten path, but well worth the drive, and return to the hotel to enjoy a quick soak in the hot tub before preparing to return home.

Manatees can be seen in Crystal Springs year round, but the highest concentrations are in the cooler winter months as they seek refuge in the 72-degree springs. Crystal River is a stand-alone destination, but its

proximity to Orlando and Tampa make it a natural for a day trip.

Don't miss out on a world-class adventure along Florida's Nature Coast. For more information, visit [discovercrystalriverfl.com](http://discovercrystalriverfl.com).

*Tami Brooks is the owner of Brooks Consulting Services LLC and publisher of The Field Trip Field Guide. She completed a 52 week, 52 hike project in 2016 and writes the blog Tami's Trippin. When she's not busy with work, you can find her on the trail, in the kayak, or on the deck planning her next adventure. Visit [Tamis-Trippin.com](http://Tamis-Trippin.com) to read more and be sure to sign up for post notifications and newsletter while you're there. You can also follow Tami's Trippin' on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest. f*

## West Indian Manatee Facts

The average, adult manatee is about 10 feet long and weighs about 1,000 pounds.

They can reach up to 13 feet in length and weigh up to 3,000 pounds.

Manatees emit sounds under the water and can be heard by humans while under water. They make these sounds when they are frightened, or when interacting with another manatee and with their babies.

Manatees are very gentle, slow-moving, graceful swimmers. They eat aquatic plants and can consume 10 to 15 percent of their body weight daily.

Manatees come to the surface to breathe every 3 to 5 minutes on average. When they are sleeping, they may only take a breath every 20 minutes.

Manatees have no natural enemies, and it is believed they can live 60 years or more.

Many manatee mortalities are human-related. Most occur from collisions with watercraft. The loss of habitat is the most serious threat facing the manatee today.

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