

ADVENTURE

# SEA OF

SWIM OR PADDLE WITH THE  
GENTLE MANATEES ALONG  
FLORIDA'S NATURE COAST

STORY BY TAMI BROOKS





LOVE

**C**rystal River, Florida, the Manatee Capital of the World, attracts visitors from around the globe who come to swim with the lovable, gentle giants. But manatees are not the only attraction in this quirky, eclectic town. An outdoor enthusiast's paradise, the area offers kayaking, hiking, fishing, paddle boarding, golf and more.

With a lot to look forward to, my family set off on an adventure along Florida's Nature Coast.

#### DAY ONE

My phone vibrates on the nightstand as the alarm chimes. It's early, 6 a.m. After a quick bite, we head to Fun 2 Dive to get ready for our 7 a.m. Manatee Swim Eco-Tour.

Greeted by friendly staff with hot coffee and the news that we're the only people taking the tour this morning, we squeeze into wetsuits, grab gear and watch a video to learn how to use passive interaction to swim safely with manatees.

This ensures that the animals enjoy the experience as much as we do.

We then embark on our journey with a Coast Guard certified master captain who serves as in-water chaperone, educator and photographer for the next three hours.

Mist is rising from the glass-like water. There's a slight chill in the air, but it's warm on the boat. The captain and swim guide keep us entertained with stories about the

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area's history and wildlife sightings.

Soon we arrive at the headspring where the manatees are gathered. We acclimate quickly to the 72-degree water.

In a matter of minutes, our guide spots a manatee. Swimming to it, we come face to face with a baby. Manatees are inquisitive and friendly. They even roll over for an occasional belly scratch.

We swim and float calmly and let the manatee approach us. A small amount of patience yields great rewards. If your hair is in a ponytail, don't be surprised if a manatee munches on it. It's no cause for concern, manatees' teeth are even with their eyes and too far back to bite.

One juvenile put its flipper around my arm, giving me a hug!

Three hours pass in the blink of an eye while we are submerged in the manatee's world. Back on the boat, we're offered hot chocolate as we make our way across the spring-fed King's Bay Wildlife Refuge.

Pro Tip: Take the early morning tour because typically you'll encounter more manatees and fewer people. Arrive about 30 minutes early to give yourself plenty of time to squeeze into a wetsuit — the tighter it fits, the warmer you'll be.

Crystal River and Homosassa are the only places where people are allowed to interact with manatees in their natural habitat.

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

Next up are a trip to the Three Sisters Springs and an afternoon Segway tour.

Three Sisters Springs is reached via a short narrated trolley ride from the Visitor's Center in Crystal River. A boardwalk circles the springs. From viewing platforms we observe the springs and wildlife. The crystal clear, turquoise water is mesmerizing. The manatees in the springs occasionally stick their noses out for a breath of air as we meander through the sanctuary.

After Three Sisters Springs, we 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.



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Gliding along the roads of Crystal River, we are greeted by shop owners and residents.

We end the evening with a meal at Vintage on 5th and retire to the hotel.

## DAY TWO

First this morning is a trip to the Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park.

We travel by pontoon boat along Pepper Creek to reach the Visitor's Center where we stroll along paved trails and boardwalks viewing Florida wildlife.

At the Fish Bowl underwater observatory, we descend stairs to view hundreds of fish.

Famished, we enjoy lunch at the Margarita Grill in Homosassa. Offering great food and waterfront dining, it is 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 even a few stingrays. Gliding through canals, we make our way to another manatees hot spot.

In no time, manatees are swimming alongside our kayaks. Some of them are larger than our kayaks.

We spend the afternoon on a thrilling paddle adventure during which we see manatees, the monkeys on Monkey Island and spring-fed freshwater flow of the Halls River.

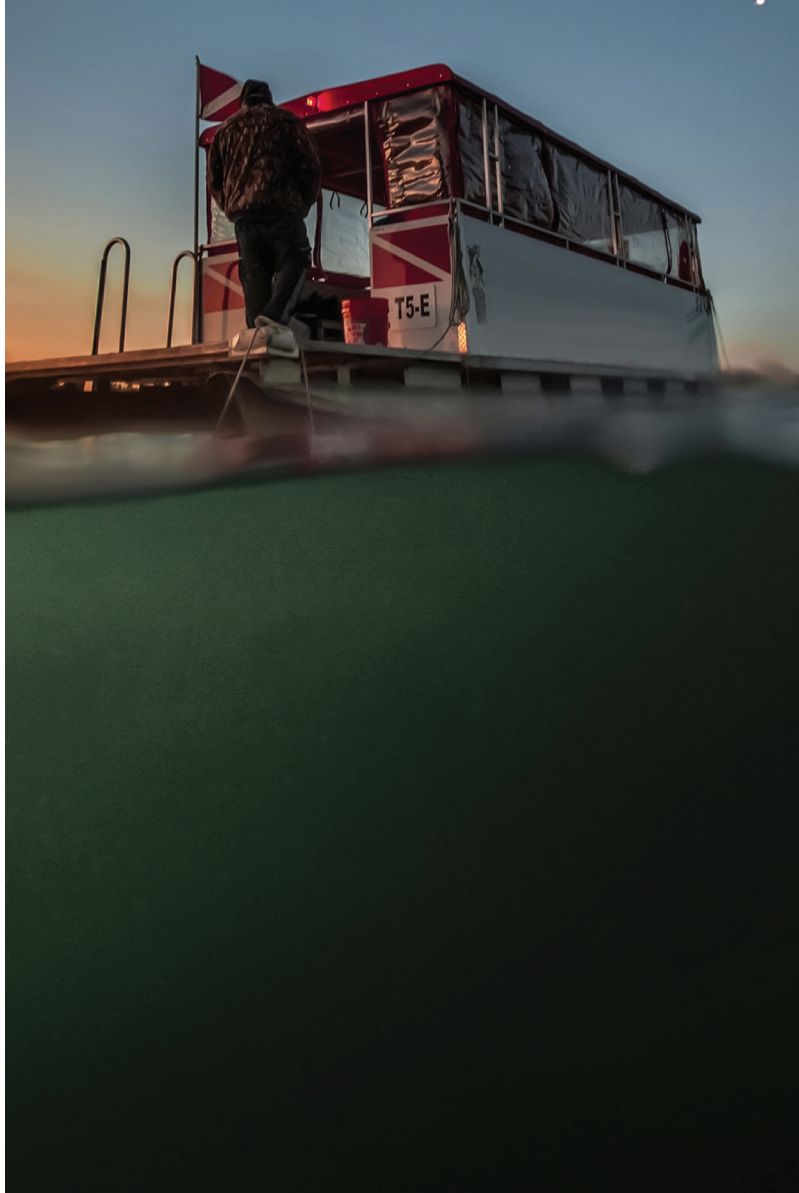
Before returning to the hotel, we have a meal at Katch-22 in Lecanto. It is a little off the beaten path, but well worth the drive.

Manatees can be seen in Crystal Springs year round, but the highest concentrations are in the 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 when vacationing in those cities.

For more information, visit Discover Crystal River Florida.

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## A Sensitive Creature

### VISION

Manatees have poor vision and are often nearsighted but can see some color.

### BODY

Manatees have 3,000 specialized hairs to help them navigate.

### SKIN

Manatee skin can be an inch thick and is covered with shallow pits.



### FACE

Manatees have 2,000 specialized hairs on the face. They are used to grasp and explore objects.

### THE BRAIN

Manatees have the smallest brain-to-body ratio of any mammal.



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

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

■ Manatees come to the surface to breathe on average every three to five minutes. 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 deaths are human-related. Most often when manatees and watercraft collide.

## Where to see manatees in Florida



