

## The Billie Swamp Safari Park: Off the Beaten Path in Florida

by Heidi Bamford, PassPorter Guest Contributor

An unusual cold snap in Florida sadly coincided with our family's February trip to Siesta Key Beach near Sarasota. Looking on the bright side, the record chill temperatures presented an opportunity to explore our surroundings, beyond the confines of the white sand beach that normally beckons! My 12-year old daughter had studied regions of the US last year in her social studies classes, and has been obsessively focused on getting to the Florida Everglades ever since.

Luckily, I did some quick checking on the Internet before we left. The Everglades National Park offered buggy tours but no airboat tours, while commercial services in and around the park offered airboat tours at exorbitant prices and would take a good part of the day. Driving distances were also a factor -- we wanted to do this in one day, and the Billie Swamp Safari Park was about the shortest drive possible. After weighing all options, I decided we would try a visit to the Billie Swamp Safari on the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation if the opportunity arose -- and so it did!

The Big Cypress Seminole Reservation is located just above the northern boundaries of the U.S. Everglades National Park, and below Lake Okeechobee. The best way to get there is to take I-75 to Exit 49, and then drive roughly 19 miles along marked county roads. We got slightly lost, but luckily had the number of the park with us, and they were very helpful in directing us back on track! There are directions from multiple locations on their site. The website itself is very cool -- the roaring bear can get to you after awhile, but there's lots of nice graphics and well organized information, including their restaurant menu, photos of the activities, and discount coupons.

From the Sarasota area, it takes roughly three hours to get there. The car drive was essentially uninspiring and a bit worrisome -- you find yourself in remote areas with long stretches of roads, surrounded by alternating open fields and orange groves, with occasional plumes of smoke rising from distant orange processing plants. However, once we arrived all was well! Just before you get to Billie Swamp Safari, you will pass the Seminole Native American museum, Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. Unfortunately, we did not budget time for the museum, but it looked very impressive on the outside and will be on our list of things to get back to at a future travel date.

The Billie Swamp Safari grounds are very attractive and comfortably laid

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out -- a first impression is a cross between Disney's Wilderness Lodge and Adventure Land in the Magic Kingdom. The rustic log buildings and the tropical vegetation dotted with caged birds and small creatures along a path winding through them was quite impressive! Adjacent to the parking lot is the visitor building and gift shop. You can purchase separate admission for the airboat tours, eco-buggy tours, and critter shows. Since we wanted to stick to the "untamed" parts of the Everglades, we purchased tickets for the airboat and eco-buggy tours, skipping the shows. Before our tours we needed to refuel, so we headed to the Swamp Water Cafe where you can get breakfast or lunch. The menu offered traditional burgers and sandwiches -- but we opted for a Seminole alternative that was available -- Native fry bread filled with ground beef or tuna. We also decided to try the "gator nuggets" (skipping the frog legs and catfish), which were kind of the texture of chewy mussels in fried dough! The Seminoles also produce their own delicious orange juice, which can be purchased at the Cafe.

Following our lunch break, we headed over to the Airboat Dock and waited a short time before boarding a 12-person airboat (three rows of four). There was just one other family with us, so our two girls and theirs sat in the front row, with each pair of parents in the other two rows. Earplugs are provided and yes, you need them! The boats are very loud, but incredibly smooth and fast. Our skipper could only narrate when the boat was stopped or idling, but it didn't matter too much -- it was a beautiful panoramic view of the Florida Everglades! We cruised through open areas as well as waterways canopied by trees. We saw lots of gators, a few different types of birds, and even a raccoon, standing on his hind legs, following our boat a short distance!

Apparently, because of the cold weather, the gators were out basking along the shores. Our skipper informed us that when they are cold, they don't eat, so we didn't feel quite as nervous, especially as our boat was at that moment directly approaching a gator with just his eyes visible above the water, looking right at us. The skipper just drove right over him which gave the girls a shock! As novice spotters, our skipper congratulated us several times when we excitedly pointed to "gator rocks" -- that is, rocks that you think are gators.

After the airboat tour, we headed towards the loading area for the eco-buggies. Giant wheels and open sides make this a fun way to get around. We were there in what was technically the dry season, so water levels were low and we saw marks on trees that indicated just how high it could get in the rainy season -- the reason for the mega wheels! The tour takes you around a large area of the reservation, through open fields where you can see water buffalo, American bison, ostriches, and wild pigs. We headed into the forested areas where the stillness and

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shadows easily lead you to imagine that a stalking panther or a deadly, slithering snake can't be too far away. We saw neither that day, but apparently they are out there!

Our guide used a mix of humor and history that was entertaining and informative. We learned about the fact that this area became home to the Seminoles as they and other Native groups were being forced further and further south in a time known as that of the Indian Removals. The Everglades became a refuge for the Native Americans who would rather remain free in the east than be moved onto reservations in the west as many others were forced to in the first half of the 19th century.

It was also interesting to note how the palm tree (of which we also learned there are hundreds of varieties) was used for everything from food, to medicine, to clothing, transport, shelter, and toys for children. And we discovered that the little thatched structures we had observed earlier along our ride there, in fields and in front of houses, were in fact replicas of the original "chickee" which means "house" in Seminole. The structures are two stories high and made of cypress logs and palmetto thatch. They date back to the period of Indian Removal and appear to be a symbol of cultural pride for the Seminole people.

After our buggy tour, we took a quick walk along the marked trails. The first was a short boardwalk trail, leading into a section of the forested swamp. The second was a circular path along an area called the Seminole Camping Village, where about a dozen or more chickees are situated, and that are actually available to rent for the adventurous camper. You can stay overnight in one of these structures and take advantage of the night tours that are offered as part of the camping experience. Finally, there was an area where you could see the more dangerous animals of the Everglades, safely ensconced in enclosures: the black bear and Florida panther!

It was a full day and a fun day -- a worthwhile trip off the beaten beach path. We even saw a bit of sun that day in the Billie Swamp Safari! If you want more information on the history and culture of the Seminole Native Americans, go to: <http://www.semtribe.com/>

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