

The Manatee Tour: Cocoa Beach Shore Excursions

by Sue Kulick, PassPorter Featured Columnist

If you are traveling to Florida's Port Canaveral area, consider taking some extra time to appreciate all the wonderful things the area has to offer.

On a recent trip, we decided to book a Manatee tour. I have always been fascinated by manatees, Called "sea cows" they are huge (800-1200 pounds) gentle and intelligent creatures. However, they are endangered. In 2009, only 3000 manatees could be accounted for. They are slow moving, which accounts for some of the injuries they sustain, as boaters don't see them and they can't get out of the way of engines. Changes in climate and toxins in their feeding area also accounted for some of the loss. But in January 2010, a new count revealed over 5000 manatees in the Florida area! Could this gentle giant be making a comeback?

We decided that we wanted to see these beautiful animals for ourselves. We booked a tour with a company called Wild Side Tours . Our tour left at 10 AM from Ramp Road City Park on the inlet in Cocoa Beach. Much to our delight, we were the only ones on the tour! Captain Ben was well versed and knowledgeable in all things manatee. He was a retired biology teacher who had always had an interest in manatees and other Florida wildlife. Three years ago, he started doing the tours, and he has never regretted it.

We boarded the comfortable catamaran boat. Captain Ben had a cooler with water and soda for us, and he did the mandatory safety check. The boat even had a small bathroom on it! Soon we were on our way.

We sailed out past the inlet. Our first encounter was with a manatee named Patty. We didn't get too much of a glimpse of her, because she sailed past us and into a small cove. Apparently, she is the star resident of this cove and comes back here year after year!

From there, we sailed out and onto the Banana River. Here, the water got very rough. It was a windy day, and we really felt it out there on the water. For about 15 minutes, we held onto our hats and sunglasses. Captain Ben pointed out some of the sights to us. One of our favorites was the Assembly building at NASA. During shuttle launches, these waters are filled with charter boats with a perfect view of the launch site!

Once we were past the rough river, we turned into a quiet cove and past some condos. Once past them, we turned into a small inlet and Captain Ben cut his engine. He didn't want to take a chance of hurting the manatees with his propellers. We drifted for less than a minute, and suddenly, we were surrounded by manatees! One, two…at least 6 were coming up to see what this boat thing was all about! Our first impression was, they are so cute! And our second impression was, they are so BIG!! Its hard to appreciate 1000 pounds until its swimming next to your boat!

They played, surfaced, swam and looked at us for almost a half hour. Eventually, they got bored, and moved on. We drifted out of the channel before Captain Ben would turn the engines back on, and then we headed back to shore. On the way, we saw dolphins and all sorts of birds, including egrets, herons, kingfishers, cormorants and ducks.

It was an awesome trip, and we loved every minute of them. I would highly recommend Captain Ben and his tours. Cost was \$29 per person. The tour ran about 2 ½ hours. Tours leave at 10 AM Tuesday through Saturday, and 2 PM Sunday and Monday.

Take a few hours to do this tour…you'll be very glad you did!

About The Author: Sue Kulick is a resident of the Pocono Mountains and an avid Disney fan. She and her husband, Steve, live in a log home with their Golden Retrievers, Cody and Belle and their cat Tigger.

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