

# Florida for real outdoor enthusiasts

Five reasons Florida should be your next escape BY DAVID WEBB

For Canadians, summer is too short; we pack a year’s worth of paddling trips, camp-outs, hiking and cycle tours into just a few months. It’s part of the fun, I suppose, but it’s also a shame to see those balmy summer nights come to a close, leading to long stretches of rain or snow.

Of course, they needn’t end. Beyond shopping, nightlife and theme parks, Florida offers expansive wilderness and unique outdoor experiences to keep enthusiasts satiated year-round. In fact, winter is often the best time to go – temperatures are conducive to outdoor activity and there are fewer bugs. But Florida is the land of endless summer – so no matter what season you choose to visit the Sunshine State, outdoor adventures await. Here are some of the best:

## EVERGLADES CANOE & KAYAK TRAILS

Spanning more than 600,000 hectares and three counties in Southern Florida, Everglades National Park harbours wild water-based adventures, typified by its legendary canoe and kayak trails. These routes meander through mangroves, marshes, cattails and saltwater bays offering both day trips and committing multi-day adventures. For the former, try **Nine Mile Pond**. Accessed off Main Park Road (Highway 9336) about 60 kilometres southwest of Homestead, this four-hour paddle leads through marshes and mangroves, treating adventurers to sightings of wading birds, turtles, fish and alligators. It’s easily marked and best paddled in winter when water levels are high and bugs are low. Or, head into **Hell’s Bay**. This challenging trail requires advanced route-finding skills, as things can get convoluted while you paddle through mangrove forests and a maze of small bays. The route can be paddled in about eight hours, or

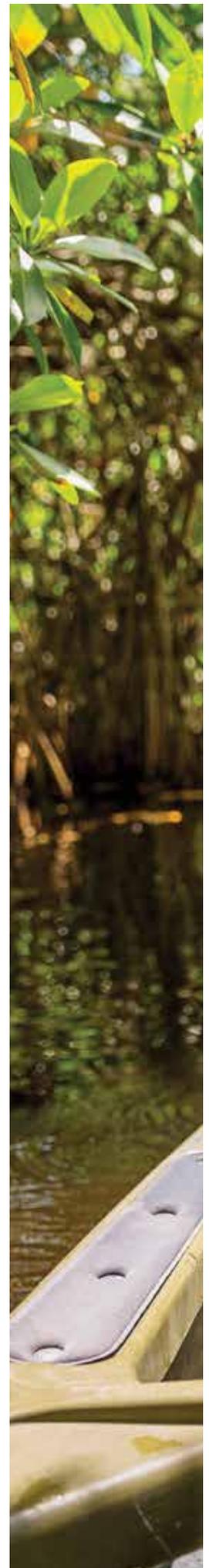
snag a backcountry permit and set-up camp on one of the “Chickees,” floating elevated tent platforms offering an overnight in the Everglades. [nps.gov/ever](http://nps.gov/ever)

## SEBASTIAN INLET SURF CAMP

Follow State Road A1A – a National Scenic Byway – into the heart of Florida’s beach culture as it leads north-south along the Atlantic Coast. Midway, Sebastian Inlet State Park awaits. With five kilometres of beach facing the open sea, Sebastian Inlet is one of the East Coast’s most renowned spots to shred a wave. Surfers: head to **First Peak** or **Monster Hole**, both consistent waves renowned for long rides. You’ll need a few days here to fully get in the groove, so pack your camping gear. The park has a full-service campground with 51 sites for tents and RVs, as well as a recently-added primitive campground for walk-in tenting and serene nights under the Florida stars. Shore fishing, kayaking and historic sites – including a 1700-era Spanish treasure fleet – complement the world-class waves. [floridastateparks.org](http://floridastateparks.org)

## FLORIDA’S MEGA-TRAIL

Extending a whopping 2,000 kilometres from near the Alabama border on the Florida Panhandle to the wildlife-rich Everglades, the Florida National Scenic Trail is a hiker’s paradise. This subtropical route is within an hour’s drive of most major cities in the State, and provides adventures ranging from a simple walk in the forest to an extreme multi-day backpacking adventure. And every year, some brave souls set off on a two- to three-month-long through hike. But you don’t have to get too hardcore; pick a leg and tackle it with gusto! In the Panhandle, trek the silver sand beaches of **Gulf Islands National Seashore** – the trail’s only designated beach hike. In Central Florida, the trail passes through **Ocala National** >



Visit Florida



Everglades National Park

**Forest**, dubbed “the heart of the Florida Trail” Expect wildflowers, dense forest canopy and the sparkling waters of Alexander Springs. Or embark on a real adventure in South Florida’s **Big Cypress National Preserve**. On the wildest section of the trail, your hike will likely see you hip-deep in water as you trudge through cypress groves, home to elusive ghost orchids and maybe even the Florida panther.  
[fs.usda.gov/fnst](http://fs.usda.gov/fnst)

### CYCLE OVER THE SEA

Once completed, the Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail will be an international draw for the world’s cycle-tourists. Get there before it’s famous! Currently a 145-kilometre linear route, with an additional 25 kilometres under construction, the FKOHT travels from Key Largo to Key West, incorporating some 23 historic Flagler Railroad Bridges as it treats cyclists to seaside scenery, 17 parks, quaint towns and historical monuments. If the full 145 kilometres is too daunting, pick a leg and ride. **Long Key**, from Mile Marker 71 to 62, is renowned for expansive ocean vistas as well as the second-longest railroad bridge on the trail. And **Lower Keys to Key West**, a roughly 30-kilometre (or more) stretch, hugs the water as it connects laidback towns and breathtaking Florida Keys scenery.  
[floridastateparks.org/trail/Florida-Keys](http://floridastateparks.org/trail/Florida-Keys)

### KAYAK THE KEYS

As a collection of some 1,700 islands dividing the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean at the southernmost tip of the continental U.S., it’s no surprise the Florida Keys is a prime paddling zone. The concern is narrowing your focus enough to pick just a few spots to launch a kayak – travellers can push-off from multiple locales right along the Overseas Highway. In the Upper Keys, **John**



Ocala National Forest

**Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** offers a four-kilometre-long mangrove forest paddling trail. It’s also a colourful snorkel spot. Visit on a weekday to avoid the crowds. In the Middle Keys, **Curry Hammock State Park** is a gem. Much of the area is motorboat-free, so paddlers can enjoy serenity and fewer crowds in this less-populated region. In fact, Curry Hammock is the largest chunk of uninhabited land from Key Largo to **Big Pine Key**, a 109-kilometre stretch. Rentals are available in both parks. While visiting Big Pine Key in the Lower Keys, connect with kayak legend Bill Keogh, owner of Big Pine Kayak Adventures and author of Florida Keys kayak guidebooks. Join his group tour and explore Great White Heron and Key Deer National Wildlife Refuges (three hours for \$50) or rent a boat and paddle at your own pace.  
[floridastateparks.org](http://floridastateparks.org); [keyskayaktours.com](http://keyskayaktours.com)



Old Seven Mile Bridge

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