

Starting with "Dear Sir/Madam" sounds old school and maybe a bit bureaucratic, since we had such great advice and support for (and during) our short visit in the unknown mid-northwest of Florida. However, the southern manners of the locals will make you feel like you have stepped back in time.

For globetrotters who seek authenticity, freedom and peacefulness, the Hidden Coast can truly deliver this in packs. The fairly untouched idyllic coastline and hinterland with its overwhelming amount of magnificent and extraordinary wildlife was an awesome experience and, we must say, an unexpected discovery.

Our duty now is to thank everybody who provided us with valuable information, who encouraged and convinced us to come over. We've also prepared an article which will be sent to the travellers' section of the Belgian newspaper "De Morgen". It is an independent and progressive newspaper which applies advanced printing technology to be able to print with greener, water-based ink and higher quality paper. It also won several prizes for its revolutionary lay-out.

Why do I want to write an article about The Hidden Coast, for a relatively big Belgian newspaper?

Somebody has to.

My wife's youngest sister lives, together with her hubby for more than 15 years now, in Florida. And ten years ago we visited her for the first time. We had good fun, but we returned again only just recently last year. If it were not because of a small but interesting newspaper piece about Sarasota, we still wouldn't have made plans for this second appearance on Floridian soil. On the other hand they always came over to our old continent every year, sometimes twice.

So this time we decided for a family reunion in the US again and it would start with a three day stay on Captiva Island, arrangements made by "siss". After that, my wife and I would do some kind of a road trip and plow happily through the hot and flat countryside.

Purchasing flight tickets and making a reservation for a rental car was the easy part. Since we go for remoteness and peacefulness when on holiday abroad, pre-planning at home always means reading tons of articles and long nights of surfing on the net. Almost everything that smells of theme -and faulty animal parks and a roast on the beach is wasted on us. Just by wandering our eyes over a laid out map our attention was caught by a 130 km section of a coastline in the Gulf of Mexico, intriguingly called "The Hidden Coast". When we asked our brother in law Scott - a real Floridian - about it, he simply replied: "?? never heard of". In fact, after digging deeper into it, one conclusion surfaced,.....most people have never seen or heard about it! GREAT!

The USF&WS manages this vast, remote and pristine area of national wildlife refuges. It is best described as a whole of seascapes of an exceptional charming beauty. Undeveloped little sea islands lie practically untouched and close to land. Stretching out inland you will discover a magical marshy creek-laden area packed with an overwhelming amount of magnificent and extraordinary wildlife! The reserves are surprisingly open for wildlife-oriented outdoor recreation. Bikers, hikers, bird spotters and especially kayakers will be thrilled in this "Lost World". All kinds of rare birds of prey, wading birds, manatees, dolphins, otters (!!), wild boar, black bears and the prehistorical survivors like

the alligator, the Gulf sturgeon, the alligator snapping turtle, the horseshoe crab etc., they all can show up when you are silently exploring their playground. But it is not something for the "instant tourist" for sure. In most places you will not have cellular phone access! It is that remote.

But how and where to observe, who can guide, what about the heat and humidity, the bugs? Is the coastline not harmed by the horrendous Deepwater Horizon oil-spill accident, a real disaster for the Gulf? These questions will well up, but can be answered by dedicated rangers, professional outfitters and private guides. Their knowledge of the various terrains and its cultural, historical and environmental importance as well is not something to be taken lightly.

Websites, the non-commercial ones we will mention, can be very helpful for gathering all the necessary information you need or want when preparing the trip for a stay in this unsurpassed coastal jewel. One that stood out and gave a good picture of what proper outdoor recreating can be and what it takes to maintain and protect the reserves, is the one of "The Friends of the Lower Suwannee and Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges". In short, this large group of volunteers and nature enthusiasts promote the protection of the Reserves by trying to model appropriate behavior to minimize the human impact. With a vision and an ethics code which describes how to experience this vast and exceptional coastline in a respectful and peaceful way, fundamental for its conservation.

Certainly one amazing way to absorb and explore Florida's Hidden Coast is in a canoe or better, a (sea)kayak. Check the "Friends" ' Paddling Project with its fine and thoughtfully prepared panels in high res pdf format. They provide necessary navigational and biological information when gliding through the different habitats of the refuges. It must be said, these Panels pulled us in.

The "Friends" were quite surprised when we contacted them, but told us immediately we made an a-m-a-z-i-n-g decision to choose this corner of the world, the "Real Florida". They gave us helpful thoughts and advice. But do visit their website

<http://www.friendsofrefuges.org>. and <http://hiddencoast.net>

They also pointed out not to forget to travel north about an hour to the middle Suwannee River, the worlds largest concentration of fresh water springs. It's also close to the crystal clear Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers. Very scenic for paddlers and a real underwater wonderland for snorkelers and scuba divers. Be sure to visit the authentic little rural coastal towns and stay in a historic B&B. No resorts or big hotels!

An equally important and free from the net downloadable book is "Sea Kayak Day Paddles on Florida's Hidden Coast" of the British couple Nick and Sandra Crowhurst. Even if you are not an experienced kayaker it has lots of useful information for first time visitors. It also tells you what to do and how to prepare yourself, its coast and creek-laden area can be challenging and the exploration of it should not be underestimated. But do visit their website [http:// kayakhiddencoast.com/](http://kayakhiddencoast.com/) ! It must be said, this book hooked us, like many thousands of readers before us. Year after year Sandra and Nick return to this region and update the book constantly. Nick has said: "It is the best paddling destination in this hemisphere".

We did 2 of their 16 superbly documented day paddling trips, one on our own and one with a local professional guide. Do not make the mistake we did. We hesitated and were too

reluctant to contact an outfitter at first. One of the Refuge Friends directed us to Suwannee Guides & Outfitters. We were happily surprised by their genuine enthusiasm, personal approach and professional skill, they will be your private guide and you will be all alone, no other soul to be spotted!

We left rainy Belgium in September 2013 in a very excited mood, with high expectations, but believe us, during our too short two weeks stay, they were not toned down. A lot of emotions surfaced, we were touched by this strong feel of freedom and peacefulness. We can only visit cities for a short time. The more civilized, the more lost and lonely we feel. The Hidden Coast was an awesome experience. It is an uncut and big diamond, a truly unique place.

To conclude.

In PART One I mentioned the otter, but with exclamation marks. Since 1988, this playful and harmless animal is extinct in Belgium due to river pollution and loss of habitat by non-sustainable farming, uncontrolled overdevelopment and industrial sprawl. River otters are highly sensitive to pollution and will not reproduce correctly when a minimum of toxic(s) appear in the fish and water. The species is often used as a bioindicator!

All the prime links:

<http://kayakhiddecoast.com>

<http://www.friendsofrefuges.org>

<http://www.hiddecoastlines.com>

<http://www.suwanneeguides.com>

<http://www.suwanneehouseboats.com>

<http://floridaspringsinstitute.org>

<http://highsprings.com>

<http://kayakcedarkeys.com>

<http://www.floridastateparks.org>

<http://www.floridastateparks.org/resources/mobileapp.cfm>

<http://www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee>

<http://pubs.er.usgs.gov/> and example <http://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/71>

<http://paddleflausa.com>

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