

Paddling Through Paradise By Jenny Lee Allen



Paddle, glide or just float through Martin County to experience its natural beauty

Fifteen minutes after slipping into our kayaks and crossing the Intracoastal Waterway off **Port Salerno**, my friend, Zach, and I find ourselves alone in a lagoon. Dragonflies dance over our heads. Schools of fish swim beneath the surface. Nearby, a great blue heron looks for lunch.

For hours, we paddle the mangrove-lined creeks at **St. Lucie Inlet Preserve State Park**, a pristine barrier island in **Martin County** that is accessible only by water. Zach and I hear nothing but the sound of our paddles slicing through water and a cool breeze rustling leaves.

This is solitude. This is paradise.

Taking to the water is one of the best ways to explore the natural beauty of Martin County, conveniently located on Florida's east coast, just north of Palm Beach and halfway between Miami and Orlando. Navigate the serene waters of the **Loxahatchee and South Fork rivers**, or cruise along **Boy Scout Island** or one of the county's 16 beaches. With a boat, canoe or kayak, you can paddle, glide or just float through Martin County.

On the Kayak Trail

My two-day boating adventure began at St. Lucie Inlet Preserve State Park. In our low-slung watercrafts, Zach and I made our way along the kayak trail. We ducked under low-hanging branches and kept an eye out for sea life in the lush ecosystem.

Zach, who spent most of his life in landlocked Iowa, saw for the first time oysters clinging to mangrove shoots (and secretly vowed to never eat the slimy creatures). It was also his first time in a sea kayak. Though there were a couple of moments when he teetered – and I was sure he would plop headfirst into the water – he soon got the hang of it. The calm lagoon waters were a perfect place to learn the basics, like how to hold the paddle and balance weight.

The 927-acre park also features an undeveloped beach on the Atlantic Ocean. We tied the kayaks to the park dock and strolled along a 3,300-foot boardwalk, past cabbage palms and paradise trees. We crossed sand dunes sprinkled with coconuts, wildflowers and driftwood. Good-sized waves washed up on



The Loxahatchee River's calm waters are ideal for kayaking or canoeing

the deserted shore.

We found ourselves in paradise – again.

A Wild and Scenic River

For my second Martin County paddling adventure, my mother and I canoed the pristine Loxahatchee River. The sweet smell of honeysuckle wafted through the air as we paddled beneath majestic cypress trees hundreds of years old. Wild lilies and bright green ferns lined the banks. It felt like an enchanted forest.

This is Florida, the way it used to be.



The Seminole Indians named it the Loxahatchee, which means "river of turtles." We saw plenty of those animals, big and small, sunning themselves on logs, as well as alligators, sandhill cranes and osprey.

Fallen trees blocked portions of the narrow, winding waterway, known as Florida's first wild and scenic river. Occasionally, my mom and I had to get out and haul the canoe over downed debris. It was a delicate balancing act, one where I almost ended up plopping headfirst into the water. Other times, we managed to shake and shimmy the canoe across logs.

Picturesque Martin County offers many possibilities for outdoor adventure

As the river winds south into **Jonathan Dickinson State Park**, it widens. Here, boaters can drop by an old alligator trapper's cabin and learn about his life as the "wild man" of the Loxahatchee. Picnic tables make it an ideal spot for lunch.

More Water Adventures

A section of Florida's only cross-state canal lies in Martin County, too. The **St. Lucie Canal**, known as a good fishing hole, is the eastern portion of the Lake Okeechobee Waterway. The waterway stretches from Stuart to Fort Myers via Lake Okeechobee, the largest lake in Florida. Every year, thousands of boaters pass through Stuart on their way between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico.

A handful of places in Martin County rent kayaks, canoes and boats. Depending upon your destination, try South River Outfitters in **Stuart**, Beach Water Sports on **Hutchinson Island** or Jonathan Dickinson State Park in **Hobe Sound**.

Guided boat tours are another great way to enjoy the water. Take a nature cruise with Sunshine Wildlife Boat Tours or Island Princess Cruises. Travel the Loxahatchee River aboard the 44-passenger *Loxahatchee Queen II*. In the mood for romance? Couples can exchange vows on a paddlewheel boat with Riverboat Cruises.

For more information on outdoor adventures in Martin County, call the Martin County Convention & Visitors Bureau at 877-585-0085 or visit www.martincountyfla.com.

Jenny Lee Allen is a freelance writer based in Sarasota.