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Scenic Watch is a free bi-monthly publication of Citizens for a Scenic Florida, Inc., dedicated to the preservation, protection and enhancement of Florida's scenic heritage. Individuals, organizations and government agencies are welcome as members. [Join Scenic Florida now](#) to protect our scenic qualities. If Scenic Watch was forwarded to you, you can receive your own copy of Scenic Watch - [Subscribe to Scenic Watch.](#)

From the editor:

It's a new year - or is it. The calendar says it is but the issues remain the same. Local governments striving to maintain their uniqueness and scenic qualities. Central governments trying to establish 'one size fits all' legislation. For the over 200 cities and counties in Florida that have banned new billboard construction or prohibited changeable billboards, the task is less difficult. But those that try to accommodate the desires and demands of the outdoor advertising industry find that each year brings a new round of issues that must be negotiated. Giant monopole signs with 4 billboards each looked less sinister on paper when first proposed but now dominate the landscape.

Digital billboards are the new frontier. Looking down that road it is not difficult to see our streets and highways lined with the equivalent of giant television sets all changing messages on a negotiated time interval - or perhaps continuously. Where does it stop? Las Vegas and Times Square have made a business from 'glitz', lights and action. Does that model work for your community. If not, be careful that you don't incrementally end up with that result.

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The Editor

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Stephen Shore

Moss-draped trees in Ocala.

By WELLS TOWER

Published: November 18, 2007

It takes many fingers to count all of the allurements Florida claims for itself. According to assorted tourist literature, the state simultaneously contains the Winter Strawberry Capital of the World (Plant City), the Indoor Foliage Capital of the World (Apopka) and the Lightning Capital of the World (the whole state), among lots of other Capitals of the World, including the Cigar, the Nudist, the Possum, the Shark Attack, the Golf, the Phosphates, the Scientology and the Sponge.

Multimedia



[Slide Show](#)

[Pastoral Florida](#)

Driving through the Fabulous Fun Capital of the World ([Orlando](#)), I was struck by the thought that Florida should probably add to the list a planetary title for human perversity. There is something wondrously upside-down about a state to which people flock, purportedly for its climate and natural loveliness, but where most of that loveliness has been drained and covered in Rooms to Go's and Scratch and Dent Worlds, and where most residents feel about air-conditioning the way astronauts feel about spaceships.

If you are one of those people who has given up on Florida, I encourage you to venture about an hour and a half north of the Magic Kingdom, into Marion and Alachua Counties, where Orlando's ravaging grid falters and the landscape stops looking like something loaded off a truck. A green edema of hills rises from the coastal flatness. Tire dealerships give way to boiled-peanut stands. Artesian springs the color of glacial ice spill from the earth. Horses that are not on theme-park salaries stalk rolling acreage beside the highway.

South of Gainesville on Route 441, my friend Alexa Dilworth and I passed McIntosh and Evinston,

unassuming whistle-stops where Victorian clapboard houses sit alongside trailer parks under such dense canopies of Spanish moss that it looks like someone dragged a squeegee down the view while it was still wet.

As dusk ripened, we stopped in Micanopy, a one-boulevard town of aged brick and log buildings, a place so steeped in old-style charm it's hard to stand on the main drag without a faint anxiety that at any minute movie studio security guards are going to roust you off the set. And while Micanopy surely has one of the highest number of antique shops per capita in the nation, the town is sufficiently rust streaked and mold spangled that the place somehow pulls off the feat of not seeming twee. "This is Florida like it used to be," said Monica Beth Fowler, the owner and operator of Delectable Collectables, a shop specializing in rare cameos. "It's one of the few places in the state that hasn't been ruined yet."

Past Micanopy's antiques strip sits the Herlong Mansion, a bed-and-breakfast of commanding elegance — Corinthian columns the size of grain silos, verandas exploding with ferns. But at Alexa's suggestion we'd made plans to stay the night 20 minutes to the east, in the settlement of Cross Creek.

Alexa is an editor who lives in North Carolina but who proudly descends from Florida "cracker" stock. In north Florida, "cracker," a reverent sobriquet for the area's swamp-dwelling pioneers, is far from an epithet. Cross Creek — home of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, the novelist and chronicler of the Depression-era cracker monde who died in 1953 — could probably be described as the Florida Cracker Capital of the World. Our destination was the Yearling Restaurant ("Home of Cracker Cooking"), named after Rawlings's 1938 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. A plain, roadside building of sun-scorched boards, the Yearling, we found, was extremely serious about its rustic bona fides. A varnished gator hide, a Confederate flag and a rack of historic outboard motors trimmed the restaurant's walls. A local blues musician presided in the dining room, crooning to his dobro, while diners tucked into a menu of traditional fare. We ordered the "cracker appetizer plate," which included fried mushrooms, fried ingots of gator tail, fried green tomatoes and fried frog legs whose girth and musculature would have put a speed skater to shame.

The Yearling's owners also operate the nearby Secret River Lodge Cabins, where we'd booked accommodations for the night. The lodge consists of seven humble cabins arrayed under a hangar of live oak limbs and echoes with the lusty belchings of bullfrogs in the nearby creek. Ours was a squat two-bedroom bunker of cinder block the color of Crest toothpaste, and it was, admittedly, a little less than I'd expected for the uncrackerly sum of \$152. I turned on a faucet, which unleashed an aroma as though an egg-salad pipeline had ruptured in the room. I did a bit of complaining, but for Alexa the odor had an effect like Proust cracking into his doughnut. "Oh, wow, it's that super-groovy sulfur smell!" she said, and fell into a reminiscence about childhood afternoons in north Florida [fishing](#) camps whose wells were similarly fouled.

When a cockroach the size of a cribbage board wandered out of the bathroom, Alexa greeted it as another cherished emblem of north Florida's rough-hewn charm. "A palmetto bug — I love it! That's what's so great about it out here. This could never be Orlando. You could never get rid of all the banana spiders, palmetto bugs and snakes." The creature eyed us for a moment and then strolled off behind a cabinet. Alexa watched its departure fondly. "So awesome," she said. "It's the land that time forgot!"

Until three or so decades ago, Florida's east-northwest corridor pretty much lay in the blind spots of developers, snowbirds and vacationing throngs. In 1970, the entire population of Marion County was 70,000. But thanks to skyrocketing coastal real estate prices and an influx of property owners who prefer an acre of backyard to meager square footage with an ocean view, the county's population now tops out at around 300,000, a startling number for a place that not long ago was mostly forest and pastureland.

The county owes much of its curb appeal to the deaths of countless tiny, shelled organisms that swam in primordial seas over the region 36 million years ago. Their skeletons have since compacted into limestone, and grasses that grow in the calcium-rich soil do marvelous things for Thoroughbred bones, according to the scuttlebutt of horsemen. Plenty of horses raised on it have risen to greatness. Forty-four national champions were raised or trained in Marion County, including six Kentucky Derby winners. Street Sense, who won the 2007 Derby and finished second in the Preakness, trained on a

local farm, and Affirmed, the last Triple Crown winner (1978), hails from the county as well. Six hundred Thoroughbred farms dot the countryside around Ocala, Marion's largest city, and Florida's breeding and training industry now rivals Kentucky's. George Steinbrenner owns a farm here, as do a host of heirs to industrial fortunes. "We're the Horse Capital of the World," I was told by Richard Hancock, the executive vice president of the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Association.

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Scenic Highways & Trails

Overseas Trail slow trek through Keys

By HERB HILLER
Correspondent

Anything that happens fast in the Florida Keys is probably bad.

Hurricanes, ships that crash off course onto coral reefs, time-stressed drivers racing along a two-lane road.

Slow isn't always better either.

Lingering hurricanes? Sightseers gaping at turquoise waters who back up even sane but soon-crazed drivers? You get the picture.

Slow-inducing and benign, on the other hand, is the Overseas Heritage Trail through the Keys.

The 106-mile, still-building paved off-road alternative for walkers, cyclists and their slow-wheeling counterparts lays out alongside the highway like a homily against speed. The trail seems fast only when cars stack up, as invariably they do heading home Sundays. While stuck in traffic, you can read an entire issue of the Keynoter, the local newspaper, and watch cyclists zip past, blissfully unaware of current events. Small sections of the trail already finished or nearly so include:

- Paths on both sides of Indian Key Fill from Mile Marker 74 to 83, including the 2-mile causeway that joins Islamorada's two major islands.
- Below the Dolphin Research Center, four miles behind a planted buffer where cyclists enjoy interpretive map displays, benches, bike racks, and, at Mile Marker 55, a link to Curry Hammock State Park. This section also connects to seven miles of path through Marathon, though the town trail is more sidewalk than trail.
- Lower through the Keys, one mile on Big Pine Key, four on Saddlebunch Keys, and two on Stock Island connecting to Key West. Big Pine and Stock Island now include bike signs, striped road crossings and red pavement at crossings that alert motorists to pay special attention.

By 2010, when the Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority finishes installing water pipes through Key Largo, 14 miles of what until now has been broken sidewalk will become 14 miles of 8-foot-wide trail.

That means that, by 2010, another 36 miles could be finished, completing more than 80 miles altogether, including all 23 of the Henry Flagler-era railroad bridges that constitute a discontinuous linear district on the National Register.

No Florida trail more than this through the Keys so entices long-distance cyclists. In one critical way,

more than car drivers, they're inheritors of "the railway that went to sea."

Little already built existed in 1912 when Flagler rode the first train down to Key West. Passengers whistled their way through wilderness. Today's successor cyclists pass more in sync with the natural than manmade.

Their wish for more natural vacationing in the Keys will likely become a focus of travel promotion when the Keys next year celebrates its Flagler centennial.

Says Bob McGlasson at Midway Cafe in Islamorada, "The trail is absolutely necessary.

"This can't just be a place for cars to zoom in and out. You get twice the experience on bike."

But island residents also know the trail will lead to an alternative economy that depends on visitors now more sensitive about where they find themselves.

Now trail supporters have joined with the Florida Keys Scenic Highway in a not-for-profit Florida Keys Scenic Corridor Alliance. They support informational kiosks along the way at natural scenic overlooks. Reconstructed historic bridges along the trail already include extended platforms so that rod-and-reelers don't obstruct cyclists' passage.

Sitting in a line of crawling cars is hardly the enjoyable way to move slowly through the Keys.

This occasional series discovers great spots in the Southeast. Herb Hiller, who lives in DeLand and Georgetown, Fla., is an adviser to the Florida Discovery Bicycling Center and the Florida River of Lakes Heritage Corridor.

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Other Scenic News

Paddle Florida to meander down Suwannee River March 20-27

Weeklong kayak and canoe event born from Georgia event.

More than 300 participants took place in 2007's Paddle Georgia event. The first annual Paddle Florida will take place in March and span 123 miles along the Suwannee River. COURTESY PHOTO



By [TROY ROBERTS](#)
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Published: Saturday, January 12, 2008 11:55 PM EST

More than 123 miles of the scenic Suwannee River await adventurers who plan to take part in the first ever Paddle Florida event, which is scheduled to take place over a seven day period in March.

The weeklong kayak and canoe event, which begins March 20 and concludes March 27, will launch at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park and finish at Manatee Springs State Park. Those taking part in the adventure will travel down part of the 171-mile Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, averaging approximately 18 miles during the day, and camp on the banks of the river at night.

“We view this as a terrific opportunity to get users to come enjoy and be wowed by the serenity and beauty of this river and go back and provide for us the singular best method of marketing,

and that’s favorable word of mouth,” said Harvey Campbell, executive director for the Columbia County Tourist Development Council.

Event organizer and Gainesville resident Bill Richards, an avid outdoorsman, said he came up with the idea for Paddle Florida after attending a similar event during the summer in Georgia. Approximately 300 rivergoers attended the third-year event along the Ocmulgee River in Georgia, and during the trip Richards realized that there was not a comparable event in Florida to showcase the beauty of its many rivers.

Because of its comparable size to the Ocmulgee River, Richards set a maximum number of paddlers at 300 on the Suwannee River for the event. He said that, although there will be a large number of boaters on the river at one time, those adventurers shouldn’t expect to be elbow-to-elbow on the whole trek.

“The natural stagger that takes place works so that you don’t see but the five or six people that you paddle with each day,” Richards said.

And unlike Paddle Georgia — where at the end of the daily trek you catch a bus and sleep at a local school and eat at a cafeteria — Paddle Florida is all natural. Because of the development of the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, participants will camp on the banks of the river each night and take part in a number of nighttime activities.

The first day of the event begins with a night full of activities and orientation. Paddlers take to the river the following morning and begin a 21-mile trek down the river to their final destination at the Suwannee River State Park.

Day three sees the longest leg of the journey, a 25-mile trip to Lafayette Blue Springs State Park. Because the third day’s trek will be the longest, adventurers can expect the fourth day to be a little more mild — a 13-mile journey to River Rendezvous at Convict Springs. After 13 miles on the following day, travelers will spend the night in Branford at Ivey Memorial Park.

Day six and seven see 21-mile and 20-mile treks, respectively, and stops at Gornto Springs and Fanning Springs State Park, before concluding with a nine-mile journey the following day to Manatee Springs State Park.

Through each leg of the journey, travelers should expect to stop for breaks at some of the Suwannee River’s most majestic sites.

There is a lighter version of the trip, for those wanting only to get their feet wet rather than commit to a full week’s worth of activities. Those signing up for the light version of Paddle Florida will be able to choose the leg of the journey they wish to take part in.

Richards said 65 people have already registered for the event and he expects more before the event begins, which is two months away.

For more information on Paddle Florida or to register for the event, visit the official Web site at www.paddleflorida.org.

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Wilton Rooks

Scenic Watch Editor

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