



Alligators aplenty in the Okefenokee Swamp, as might be expected. Still, seeing large ones up close ... PHOTO/CAPT. JOHN CAMPBELL

## Visit solitude and nature in the Okefenokee Swamp

By Capt. John Campbell

The Okefenokee Swamp lies on the Florida-Georgia border in the southeastern United States, a two-hour drive from Savannah. The northern two-thirds of the swamp that are in Georgia are protected as a National Wildlife Refuge. It covers a vast area, something in excess of 400,000 acres or about 1,700 square kilometers.

These figures are hard to comprehend until you venture out into the swamp. The feeling of isolation, of remoteness, is literally awe inspiring.

The best way to explore the swamp is by canoe or kayak. There are many tours offered using motor boats, and I am sure that the guides are veritable founts of knowledge, but having heard a few of these boats pass, I cannot help but feel they chase away most of the wildlife.

I rented a kayak from Okefenokee Adventures, which is located at the boat basin inside the eastern

entrance to the swamp (www.okefenokeeadventures.com, +1-912-496-7156).

Admission to the park is \$5 a car, and this has to be the bargain of the century, especially as the pass is good for a week. To rent a kayak was just \$25 dollars for the day.

Armed with a small map that the park staff gave me, I ventured westward along a narrow, shallow canal, which is off limits to motor boats. I had, of course, expected to see alligators, but as I rounded the first bend, I came face to face with a big one. In fact, it was the biggest one I saw all day, and it was about the same size as the kayak. We eyed each other warily, and he swam slowly past, barely 3 feet away.

Once my pulse rate returned to double digits, I paddled on slowly and a bit more circumspectly. Along the length of that canal, some 2 miles, I passed a dozen more alligators.

See **OKEFENOKEE**, page B12

## Watch for buoyage change

SAVANNAH, from page B10

the northeast.

He says to turn to the northwest as soon as you see G9, G10 and G11 in line. From here it is about 18 nautical miles to Thunderbolt. Remember to slow down (no wake) at the Landings Marina on Skidaway Island, and the Savannah Yacht Club, and keep minimum wake off the private docks off Wilmington Island.

Lastly, he reminded, don't be caught out by the buoyage change just south of the Savannah Yacht Club where the ICW joins the Wilmington River.

For another next destination north of Savannah River, Capt. Bootsma said enter into Calibogue Sound for Hilton

Head and Harbor Town. Enter at the main ship channel to Tybee Roads. Make a securité and call the pilot station to inform of your intentions, but you do not require a pilot (+1 912-236-0226). It is 3.5 miles to Harbor Town (www.harbourtownyachtbasin.com, +1 843-671-2704).

There is a lot to do here and they can accommodate yachts up to 150 feet. Well worth a diversion.

*Capt. Tony Perry has worked on yachts since serving in the Royal Navy in the 1950s. He is in working retirement on Wilmington Island as a relief captain. Comments on this story and suggestions for other local knowledge stories are welcome at editorial@the-triton.com.*

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# Camping permits available, but are snapped up quickly

**OKEFENOKEE**, from page B11

Sometimes all I could see was a pair of eyes, and two or three feet in front, a pair of nostrils. The water is the color of strong, black tea, so the rest of the animal was invisible.

I would find out that if the canal was narrow and an alligator thought I was too close, it would quietly submerge and disappear. This was actually more intimidating than having it swim close by, because I knew it was below the kayak. I much preferred to see them swim slowly past.

At the end of this canal, I crossed the larger Suwannee Canal, which is the main route of the motor boats. This canal was dug in 1891 in a misguided attempt to drain the swamp for logging.

Fortunately for us, the project failed and the swamp lives on.

I quickly crossed the canal, and the steady stream of motor boats, and entered a northbound canal, which is also motor-free. It leads to Cedar Hammock.

For a mile or so I paddled in company with another couple, but then we went our separate ways, and I

continued alone for 3 more miles. Huge cypress trees, draped in Spanish moss overhang the bank. At times it felt like I was paddling through a tunnel.

I cannot mention Spanish moss without pointing out that it is neither Spanish nor moss. It is actually an airplant, and is more closely related to the pineapple family than to any moss.

I was still passing alligators every few hundred yards, and there were many birds. I spotted two sandhill cranes foraging. They are big, looking to my inexperienced eye like two skinny ostriches. I passed a white ibis that was

sitting on the top of a broken tree, and it looked imperiously down on me as I paddled by.

It is hard to describe the feeling of remoteness, of solitude without resorting to clichés: awe-inspiring and primordial being the two that most often came to mind. I was 3 or 4 miles from the nearest road or path, probably a couple of miles from the nearest person. I found the solitude addictive; I did not want to turn round, but kept paddling ever farther into the swamp.

Even when no alligators were in sight, I was constantly reminded of their presence. It was late spring and the males were staking out their territory ready for mating and nest building. They make a curious double grunt, which is a low frequency and can be heard for a mile or more. I can best describe this sound, which I could feel as much as hear, as a cross between the noise made by a large flatulent man, and Rolf Harris playing his didgeridoo.

It is possible to camp overnight or longer, but permits are restricted. They can be booked up to two months ahead and often get booked out on the first day of issue.

**For those not inclined to venture out afloat, there is a boardwalk across the swamp.**

Unfortunately I was not able to spend the night, so eventually I had to head back. The kayaks have to be off the water and logged back in with the operator before 6 p.m.

For those who are not inclined to venture out afloat, there is an interesting boardwalk that wends its way across the swamp for almost a mile.

At the end, there is a four-story tower from which you can look out across one of the prairies, an open area almost choked with water lilies.

While I was in the tower, I met an enthusiastic group of bird watchers. They were getting excited at having spotted several rare birds. Although I did not see any alligators from the tower, you could hear them clearly calling from all sides.

At the north end of the swamp there is another entrance, which sounds more like a theme park.

Next time, I will try the western entrance, where the Suwannee River drains the swamp and begins its journey across Florida.

*Capt. John Campbell has been yacht captain for more than 20 years and a sailor all his life. He is currently in command of the 45m S/Y Timoneer. Comments on this story are welcome at [editorial@the-triton.com](mailto:editorial@the-triton.com).*

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