

Canoeing on the Imperial River in Bonita Springs

Two articles in Naples daily News

Hidden Gems: Calusa Ghost Tours take visitors back in time on the Imperial River

TRACY X. MIGUEL-NAVARRO Apr 25, 2014



BONITA SPRINGS - I recently ventured off on a morning adventure — the Imperial River tour (\$35) with the CGT (Calusa Ghost Tours) Kayaks Inc., the only authorized kayak vendor on Bonita Springs's Imperial River, and got a close look at southwest Florida's wildlife. Would kayaking on the Imperial River feel like an exotic getaway? Judge for yourself. Standing outside the colorful historic cottages in Riverside Park, adjacent to the Liles Hotel in Bonita Springs, Aaron Thomas blows a conch shell to gather and welcome the group of 11 women, including myself, on a recent morning.

"We have an awesome day for kayaking," said Thomas, one of the owners and one of two tour guides on my trip, minutes before heading to the creek.

The Imperial River, originally named Surveyors Creek before being developed, is part of The Great Calusa Blueway. The river winds through the city stretching from Bonita Grande Road — headwaters from Corkscrew Swamp — into Little Hickory Pass to Estero Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

I liked that staff assisted everyone "full service" into their kayaks. We definitely had less chance of flipping over (I came prepared in case that occurred).

Life jackets weren't required, yet we all got one. I used it as a backrest in the kayak the entire time.

I carefully stepped into the 10-foot kayak. As I began to dip the paddle blade along the side of the kayak, drawing it back and steering it forward, a rush of excitement overcame me. I knew right away that I was in for a treat.

The sun was shining brightly during the tour but we paddled under an array of red mangroves, banyan trees, Florida oaks, resurrection ferns, bamboo and cypress knees trees. The sound of birds chirping filled the air. We kayaked through the 30- to 40-foot wide river, later narrowing to about 20 feet wide.

At first, I focused on making precise strokes steering through the tea-colored water. I soon realized that the river was calm and easy to steer as the current led me deeper into the peaceful "jungle" of the Imperial River. With each stroke, the scenery and sounds of the river — including a vast array of birds — continued to amaze me.

I paddled swiftly toward the Matheson Street Bridge, that crosses over the Imperial River, where underneath more than 1,000 Brazilian free-tail bats roost. I could hear their squeaks even before passing under the bridge. The bats stayed curled up, tucked away deep into the cracks of the bridge's cement slabs.

All of a sudden, I seemed to gain momentum in my strokes. I'm not too sure, if this was because of the fear of having a bat fly toward me or if the musky smell was intensifying.

John Paeno, one of the owners and tour guide who stayed behind with me — since I was a tad slower than the group at first — told me not to worry since the bats only come out at dusk.

At any rate, the bats' squeaks made me nervous. When a fellow kayaker found out that I'm from El Paso, she asked me if I had ever visited Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico.

Sure, I have, but this experience was very different, because I could potentially tip over my kayak and fall into the water if a bat flew out and surprised me.

About an hour into my trip, I spotted two cute turtles and three raccoons. I kept looking for manatees, but didn't see one.

On a side note: I thought that my arms were in good shape, but boy, was I wrong. Those little weights that I've been lifting at the gym didn't prepare me for two hours of kayak paddling. In total, I kayaked about 1.5 miles.

I went kayaking nearly 10 years ago in the Gulf of Mexico. Paddling through the river is much different from the ocean because there are no waves and the kayak is narrower.

I did come prepared to get wet on this trip.

I left my stilettos at home and opted for flip-flops. But don't worry, you could probably take the tour wearing tennis shoes, too — if you don't mind getting them splashed with water.

After two hours of adventure, the tour guides led us back to the kayak launch area.

As we paddled back, I wanted to say, "Please, let's not rush," so that I could savor the natural beauty of the river. Diane Hoge, a seasonal North Naples resident of Wisconsin, agreed that CGT Kayaks is a hidden gem in Southwest Florida. "When you see the rivers as you go east, it's wonderful and beautiful," she said. "It's like old Florida and you would never see it if you didn't go kayaking." Hoge said she likes kayaking because it's peaceful, surrounded by natural beauty with no distractions. "It's nature at its best," she said. Hoge's friends, who joined her for the morning adventure, echoed her thoughts about the guided tour.

The Imperial River was originally named Surveyors Creek before being developed. The river is part of the Great Calusa Blueway.

CGT Kayaks, established in 2004, offers more than just the Imperial River kayaking tours. Visitors can also go canoeing or stand-up paddle boarding with the company.

"This is one of the few places where you can go up the old Florida black river," said Paeno. "You don't get much motor boat traffic, which also means you have a lot more wildlife ... they aren't intimidated by a kayak."

I would definitely return any morning for a peaceful experience.

Do you know of a hidden gem I should visit? Let me know where your hidden gem is at tmiguel@naplesnews.com.

IF YOU GO GCT (Calusa Ghost Tours) Kayaks Inc.

WHERE: 27300 Old 41 Road, cabin No. 6, Riverside Park, Bonita Springs

HOURS: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily (last boarding of crafts due back by 5 p.m.) Summer hours will change in May.

Calusa Ghost Tours opens retail store for amateur explorers

John Osborne Mar 12, 2015





The next time you visit Riverside Park on Old 41 Road, chances are pretty good you'll see a ghost. If you want to, anyway.

And the best part of the whole thing is that all the ghost-busting equipment you could ever want can now be found directly across the street.

That's because Calusa Ghost Tours, a paddleboard and kayaking sightseeing service that's been operating in the park for the past eight years, opened its first brick-and-mortar retail store in mid-February at 27313 Old 41 Road, just a short walk from its popular kayak hub on the Imperial River.

"We started on Pine Island as a mobile service nine years ago, and we had a contract with Lee County to provide tours on Fort Myers Beach for two-and-a-half years, but between the weather and parking we found that we couldn't get customers out there," said John Paeno, 58, who owns and operates Calusa Ghost Tours along with his son, Nick, and business partner, Aaron Thomas. "When we expanded into Bonita, that turned out to be awesome, so we got rid of everything else and decided to consolidate everything right here in Bonita Springs."