

# Exploring The Peace River *by Rebecca King*



In a state that has become a bastion of theme parks and instant thrills, it can be easy to forget that, nestled just 100 miles south of Mickey's lair, sits a perfect family vacation destination.

The Peace River is a slow-moving, 67-mile waterway that offers a quiet getaway for paddlers. Nearly unbothered, the river offers natural spectacles, from wildlife to vegetation, and is ideal for overnight canoe trips. While camping in the wild offers a more authentic immersion into nature, two different campgrounds sit on the river banks, Pioneer Park and Brownville Park, so even inexperienced adventurers can set up camp with the comforts of modern amenities.

Our group disembarked on a Saturday morning – six canoes and one kayak, carrying a total of 13 people – on an unforgettable 23-mile overnight canoe trip. Many locals plan overnight trips along the river; its length and gentle current make it a great location for paddlers of all abilities. If you want to ensure a hassle-free launch, you might try to arrive early; we were stuck behind about 30 Boy Scouts who clogged the Pioneer Park ramp

for almost an hour. However, by the time we were on the river, these able paddlers had glided on, and we were fortunate to have the river to ourselves for much of our journey. We were fortunate, too, that motorized vehicles are a true rarity along the river, and we only encountered one airboat during our entire trip.

The next two days brought us loads of fun, in the forms of floating down miles of waterway, tossing a Frisbee from boat to boat, snacking on wholesome food, soaking up the marvelous winter Florida sun, and scouting wildlife. On the first night, we found an isolated patch of flat coastline to set up camp, where we warmed ourselves beside a crackling fire and reflected on the day's journey – one canoe in our group had capsized, its contents spilling into the water, soaking clothes and gear. We got a good laugh over that, even though the poor victims had to spend the night on soggy, cold pillows. When night fell completely, we stared, awestruck, at the millions of stars that shone so clearly in a sky devoid of smog and urban lights.

But the fun was tempered with the undeniable fact that the Peace River is in decline. Phosphate mining and increased agricultural pursuits have impacted the river in several ways, according to Florida's Department of Environmental Protection. Because the Peace River supplies water to much of that region and habitat for several species, the impact is far-reaching and complex.

Water quality has been sacrificed, which is severely diminishing the wildlife population. With agriculture occupying much of the land, cows are beginning to overpopulate it. Instead of the silly coo of the whippoorwill, we heard the constant deep grunt of cows all night, and we had to watch our step on land, lest we step in one of the hundreds of cow patties that dotted the landscape. Although we did spot some typical Florida river animals – fish, alligators, deer, an otter, and a few turtles that glided into the water – we were dismayed by how rare those sightings were.

Plus, the dense flora typical of Florida's natural areas has been reduced. Thanks in part to Hurricane Charley, which ripped through central Florida in 2004, trees have been uprooted and lay, desiccated, along the banks. Partly stripped are the canopies offered by mighty, centuries-old oaks. Some of that damage is being repaired,

though, according to the park ranger at Brownville, who smiled gratefully as she pointed out new growth.

That the Peace River is still a source of beauty and recreation is a testament to the power and endurance of nature, but both can be compromised through abuse of the land. The trip reminded me both how rewarding outdoor adventures can be and, yet, how fragile the natural areas are. Environmental groups are working hard to protect and preserve the Peace River, and I hope they succeed. Otherwise, we'll lose out on fulfilling canoe trips down gently rolling Florida rivers, with sunlight twinkling on the water's surface. Instead, we'll be forced to spend our outdoor vacations theme-park style, floating on rented foam mats atop chlorinated waterways dug out of concrete.

**To rent a kayak or canoe at the Peace River, visit Canoe Outpost at [www.canoe-outpost.com](http://www.canoe-outpost.com) or call 800-268-0083. The Arcadia outpost is open seven days a week; gates close at 5pm weekdays, 6pm weekends.**



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