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Cruising With Kayaks

Paddling the Everglades

Captain Charles Wright

Covering almost the entire tip of Florida is the western Hemisphere's largest mangrove estuary, Everglades National Park. This is a biologically rich wilderness consisting of over 1.3 million acres of paddling wonderland. The Everglades' natural beauty and wildlife abundance are world renowned, home to over 300 species of birds, and the most significant breeding grounds for tropical wading birds in North America.

The intermingling of plant and animal species from both the tropical and temperate zones, plus the merging of fresh and saltwater habitats, provide the vast biological diversity that makes Everglades National Park unique. Protected within the park are endangered West Indies manatees, green Ridley, hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles, American crocodile, wood stork, and Florida panther. It is also home to the largest continuous stand of saw grass prairie in North America, and has significant ethnographic resources, with 2,000 years of human occupation.

For paddlers, the park offers wonderful campsites along its pristine beaches. In the interior, the Wilderness Waterway is a kayaker's dream, a marked, 99-mile passage through protected waters, typically a seven-day paddle with designated campsites strategically placed along the route.

The park is also a wonderfully abundant fishery. With the re-discovery of the kayak as a fishing platform, these plentiful waters are being experienced by the ardent kayak angler as well as the 'fresh fish for dinner' touring kayaker.

Beautiful as it is, the park is so vast that many paddlers cannot enjoy its full richness due to the physical demands of long distance paddling. Fortunately, several operations have now opened up to provide mothership services into the park. Kayak anglers can be transported deep into the area on day trips, or groups of paddlers along with their kayaks and gear can be delivered or picked up anywhere they choose.

Another fantastic trip is provided by way of the *Iva W*, a classic 1929 wooden vessel which will steam to Ponce De Leon Bay at the mouth of the Shark River where you can paddle among old-growth mangroves, some towering close to a 100 ft. skyward. Here you can explore the maze of tidal rivers. The Bay is full of bottle-nosed dolphin, sea-turtle, tarpon and manatees, and countless wading birds.

The Everglades National Park is truly one the most spectacular padding areas in North America. As environmentalist Joe Podger says: "The Everglades are a test. If we pass it, we can keep the Planet."

© Captain Charles Wright runs Chokoloskee Charters.



THREE WAYS TO ACCESS THE PARK

- Using a specially outfitted boat, ChokoloskeeCharters.com transports kayak anglers deep into the park's core to fish, returning to Everglades City by dusk.

- EvergladesKayaks.com operates a mothership shuttle service for the touring kayaker/camper. Able to carry up to six kayaks, paddlers and all your gear, you can be transported into a remote area and leisurely explore a section of the park, then be picked up for a ride home at the end the day, or the end of a multiday camping trip.

- The *Iva-W* is a sixty foot, 1929 Chesapeake Bay wooden vessel, run by Captains Art Wolfe and Marilee Ives, completely re-furbished to accommodate up to six overnight guests. With kayaks and sailing dinghies and three air-conditioned staterooms, she is, without a doubt, the most luxurious way to enjoy the park. The *Iva-W* has two hot showers, a spacious salon and a large aft deck with deck chairs for viewing wildlife or just enjoying the sunset. Richly steeped in history, she will steam you slowly from Everglades City to wherever you wish to go. Just 90 minutes from Miami and Ft. Lauderdale and an hour from Ft. Myers, Everglades City is the *Iva-W*'s winter home. Whether it is a day trip or a multiple night cruise on the *Iva-W*, the kayak/mother ship combination is a wonderful way to experience this paddler's paradise. www.ivawcruises.com. □



The elegant *Iva-W*.