

Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail
Segment 11
Charlotte Harbor

Emergency Contact Numbers:

911

5 Charlotte County Sheriff's Office: 941-639-2101

Lee County Sheriff's Office: 239-477-1000

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922

Begin: Weston's Resort near Stump Pass Beach State Park

End: Cayo Costa State Park

Distance: 18.5 miles

Duration: 2 days

Special Considerations: Extreme caution should be taken in crossing Stump Pass and Boca Grande Pass. Due to currents, boat traffic and breakers on the Gulf side, these crossings should only be attempted by experienced paddlers in favorable weather conditions along the bay side.

As with most South Florida segments, boat traffic can be heavy, especially on weekends. Boca Grande Pass can be packed with boats during the peak tarpon season, from April through June.

Advance reservations are recommended for motels and campgrounds, especially during holidays and the spring season.

Introduction

Developed and pristine barrier islands contrast each other in this segment, which spans Charlotte Harbor. Paddlers have the option of cruising the bay side or the Gulf side,

depending on weather. This guide will focus on the bay side since most of the camping and lodging opportunities are inside the barrier islands, and it is considered safer.

This area was clobbered by Hurricane Charley in 2004, with numerous buildings damaged, some so severely they had to be torn down. Coastal forests took a hit, too, as countless trees were knocked over or defoliated. Beaches suffered extreme erosion. It will take years for the area to fully recover.

The centerpiece for this segment is Charlotte Harbor, an area with a rich history. Early Calusa Indians built canals and temple mounds in the region. Houses can be seen on some of their early shell middens along Pine Island. Ponce de Leon is believed to have visited in the early 1500s, and he was followed by various European explorers. Cattle was king in the 1800s, with cattle being shipped through the harbor to Cuba and other points. Sports fishing became popular by the turn of the last century, especially for tarpon in Boca Grande Pass, a trend that continues.

Five contiguous aquatic preserves cover most of Charlotte Harbor: Lemon Bay, Cape Haze, Gasparilla Sound-Charlotte Harbor, Matlacha Pass and Pine Island Sound. Altogether, they total more than 150,000 acres. Besides serving as a valuable nursery grounds for both recreational and commercial species of fish, crabs and shrimp, the Charlotte Harbor region harbors 86 endangered or threatened species. They include five species of sea turtle, the Florida manatee, and numerous birds such as roseate spoonbills, peregrine falcons and bald eagles. To learn more, log onto <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/charlotte/info.htm>.

Four scenic state parks are featured in this segment: Stump Pass Beach, Don Pedro Island, Gasparilla Island and Cayo Costa. All of the parks offer sandy beaches, hiking trails, restrooms, fresh water and picnic facilities. To learn more, log on www.floridastateparks.org.

Only one state park, Cayo Costa, offers cabins and camping. For reservations, call Reserve America at 800-326-3521 or log onto www.reserveamerica.com.

For day paddling opportunities in and along the bay's many tributaries, Charlotte County has put out an excellent blueway trails guide. To ask for your free guide, call 941-625-7529 or log onto <http://charlottecountyfl.com/Parks/blueway.asp> to download a copy.

1: Weston's Resort to Dog Island (9 miles) or Hoagen Key (12 miles)

Weston's resort is conveniently located on the bay and Gulf adjacent to Stump Pass Beach State Park. Paddlers can use the ramp right at the motel, check in, and secure kayaks on shore. The problem is that they do not take reservations for one-night stays. These are on a first-come, first-serve basis, so don't arrive late. If you want to reserve for more than one night, or check on potential availability, call 941-474-3431. Spring is considered the high season.

If staying at Weston's, you can walk to Stump Pass Beach State Park and hike a mile or so to Stump Pass, either along the undeveloped beach or down the park's nature trail through the interior. Look for shells and shark teeth along the beach, especially after a storm.

Proceeding from Weston's along the paddling trail, paddle along the state park on the bay side and be watchful of heavy currents, boats and breakers as you cross Stump Pass. You can take a rest stop/bathroom break on the mainland land base of Don Pedro Island State Park, landing just to the left of the dock. For a longer break, make sure to visit Don Pedro Island. Look for a shallow channel and state park sign off the Intracoastal Waterway at green marker #35. This channel leads to a small cove and the island's dock. Before state acquisition in 1985, this property was used as a private beach for people who owned land in the Rotunda Development on the mainland, seen from the air as a huge wagon wheel. The park boasts about a mile of unspoiled beach and five distinct natural communities.

From the park, paddle through Little Gasparilla Sound, heading east toward the Intracoastal Waterway. Dog Island, an optional destination for the night, is near the mainland just on the other side of the Boca Grande Causeway (S.R. 771) to Gasparilla Island. An adjacent island, Little Dog Island, is a bird sanctuary.

A permit is required to camp on the island for a small fee. Permits are obtained from Grande Tours Family Outdoors Center on the mainland, about a half mile from the island. Proceed northeast and enter Coral Creek. The outfitter is just around the bend on

the left. Since there are no facilities on the island, you may want to use the restroom and fill up water bottles. Reservations can be made in advance by calling 941-697-8825.

Leave No Trace guidelines should be followed on the island, meaning that all trash and human waste should be packed out. To learn more about Leave No Trace guidelines, log onto <http://www.lnt.org/>. Even though Dog Island is public land, failure to adhere to rules regarding use of the island could ban further camping on the island.

Near Dog Island, you can enjoy the Woolverton Kayak Trail through a scenic mangrove forest. Ask for a map at the Grande Tours Family Outdoor Center.

Another option for primitive camping is Hoagen Key, a privately owned site that is maintained by the Florida Paddling Trails Association and only accessible by small watercraft. Camping is free and on a first-come, first-serve basis. A maximum number of 8 people (4 small tents) can stay on the island. Leave No Trace guidelines should be followed. There are no facilities.

2: Dog Island or Hoagen Key to Cayo Costa State Park, 9.5 or 6.5 miles respectively

If you land on Gasparilla Island on your way to Cayo Costa, look for some of the many naturalized geckos that roam the island. Some are an impressive three-foot long and look like mini kimodo dragons. You have the option of extending your trip by staying at The Innlet, a motel accessible by kayak from the bay side. For reservations or information, call 941-964-2294 or log onto www.innletonthewaterfront.com. From the motel, you can more easily check out the restaurants, shops and culture of Boca Grande.

A must stop is Gasparilla Island State Park, along Boca Grande Pass. You can land along the bay side and stroll along scenic beaches. Be sure to visit the historic Boca Grande Lighthouse, built in 1890. The lighthouse contains an informative museum and visitor's center. Learn more about the Calusa civilization and early European and American settlers, and how tarpon gather in the waters around Gasparilla Island to prepare for their journey to offshore spawning grounds (the reason why Boca Grande Pass is known as the Tarpon Capital of the World).

Carefully cross Boca Grande Pass along the bay side to Cayo Costa Island. This island is only accessible by boat. After roughly two miles, you'll see the park's boat dock and kayak landings. Pull up your boat and keep it separate from the rental boats.

Even if you have a camping reservation, you must check in at the office near the dock. Until five p.m., a shuttle can take you and your gear (not your kayak) to the campground and cabins about a mile away on the beach side.

If you happen to land on the Gulf side near the campground, you must register at the park office (on the bay side) before setting up. You can carry your boat to your campsite or cabin. Periodic shuttles can give you a lift to the office, or you can hike.

Advanced reservations for campsites or cabins are highly recommended, especially on weekends and holidays and during the spring. Call Reserve America at (800) 326-3521 or log onto www.reserveamerica.com. Restrooms, water and cold showers are available at the park.

In the 1800s, four Spanish fishing “ranchos” were once located on Cayo Costa, places where fish were caught, dried and shipped to Cuban markets. In the early twentieth century, the island was a small fishing village for about 20 families, with a school, post office and grocery store. Most of the island is now owned by the Florida Park Service.

If visiting or staying on Cayo Costa, take time to hike the several miles of beach and interior trails. Numerous wildflowers may be blooming in spring, such as the deep red coral bean. Look for wild pigs of many different color varieties. Mosquitoes can be pesky in warm weather. Along the beaches, you’ll see numerous bleached tree trunks, victims of hurricanes and rising sea levels.

Being remote and scenic, Cayo Costa will likely be a highlight of this segment.