



The author and her husband, Larry Kline

A RELUCTANT KAYAKER TRAVELS TO THE EVERGLADES

by Carole Kline

I'm not a person who usually looks for reasons to leave Colorado in the winter because I like the snow and most of the associated outdoor activities (cross country skiing, snowshoeing, etc).

Judd Hurd's well timed e-mail caught my attention though, proposing a kayak camping trip for a week in the Everglades. I needed to burn up some extra vacation time and my husband Larry and I were looking for a winter trip. The website showed a kayaker peacefully floating through the mangroves watching exotic birds; another photo promoted their excellent campsite meals prepared by the guide.

The "no experience necessary" statement was all I needed to prompt further interest. No fan of wind, swells or brisk currents, the trip sounded like one I could enjoy. We scheduled with _____ for a five day and four night trip in late January; we would be kayaking in the Ten Thousand I lands area of Everglades National Park in southwest Florida.

We were met on our first day at park headquarters in Everglades City by our guide "JP" who showed up promptly with Seaward and Eddyline kayaks (tandems and singles), spray skirts, life vests, paddles and food for the entire trip. JP looked like a skinny kid just out of high school in need of more calories. "Where is my paddle float so I can do a self rescue?" was my question for our young leader. "I'll be the one who rescues you, m'am, but you probably won't need it, these boats are super stable," he said.



Mangrove trees



Carole and Larry are in the center. JP is the fellow in knickers to the right of Larry. Jud Hurd was the photographer.

I wondered if he was adult enough to lead six kayakers through the "wilderness". His enthusiasm and energy level however were contagious, setting a good tone for the trip ahead. I soon realized he was a strong, experienced, mature and competent leader.

In our group was my husband Larry and Judd Hurd from RMSKC, and Thor, Karen and Wendy. Thor was from Norway, Karen from a small town in Michigan and Wendy from Portland, Oregon. All had done some kayaking in the past.

After a few pointers on paddling and maneuvering our boats, we set off for our first night's destination. A tailwind pushed us through Chokoloskee Bay into the mangroves to Tiger Key where we set up camp on the white sandy beach. On the way we saw cormorants, pelicans and white ibis. Our island was on the Gulf of Mexico, chosen for the light breezes that kept the mosquitoes away. The camping was primitive on this trip, with a sparsely maintained porta-potty at the second camp and no shower facilities. Our guide cooked a delicious dinner of tilapia, couscous and fresh salad with strawberry cheesecake for desert. It was impressive to see what he could put together with just a camp stove.



Day Two was very windy ahead of an approaching cold front. Our plan was to paddle across the bay to explore some mangroves, have lunch on Fakahatchee Key, and then return to our campsite. I found out how difficult it



was to maneuver a tandem kayak in the wind and current. The bow was sitting high out of the water with all of our gear out of the boat, creating more wind drag. My husband became frustrated with me and my weak paddling; I became tired and frightened as our boat nearly crashed into the shore opposite of where we needed to be. Larry's concern was that we were being blown towards the mangroves with low laying limbs and roots encrusted with barnacles. Only the day before one of our group inadvertently paddled into these river-like "sweeps" and almost capsized. It was a tough seven miles. I vowed I would never kayak again and thought about all of the good skiing I was missing. That night, a thunderstorm roared through the islands and brought colder weather.

My nemesis, the wind, was still around the next morning; the sky was cloudy and it looked as though it would rain. I talked to JG about leaving the trip, feeling that I was just not strong enough to stay and help Larry paddle the tandem. JG thought it was a bad idea and reassured me I would be fine. After a delicious pancake breakfast, we packed up the boats and headed to our next campsite on Jewel Key, 6.5 miles away. JG said there were rats living in the bushes. Great, I thought. We paddled on the Gulf side through 20 mph winds and 2 foot swells. The boat was more stable fully loaded. There wasn't much bird viewing on this leg of the trip, just toughing it out on the open water to get to the next campsite. This beach was much smaller but had spectacular views of the Gulf on the windward side and a peaceful bay with plentiful bird life on the lee side. Things were looking up. Larry and I relaxed with a glass of wine and we had another excellent meal. The temperature that night dropped to the high 40s and the stars were incredible.



The other two women and I voted for a calm paddle through the mangroves for the following day. We were tired of fighting the winds. Karen was a serious amateur photographer who wanted more wildlife pictures. The original plan was to do another open water paddle on the Gulf side to Rabbit Key. We thought we had changed the guide's mind, but once we were out on the water the men decided to go for the open water. Coming back, there was more wind and whitecaps to fight but I did much better, understanding how we could use the wind and currents to our advantage to stay on course. We couldn't always stay with the group but this time Larry had explained our tactics to the group leader who said, "Go for it, man, do what you need to do". Since our guide knew our plan and approved, I felt better about being farther away from the group. We had been chastised for not staying with the group earlier; "I can't help you out if you get into trouble so stay near the group," JB had said. Wise words for all kayakers to remember, it's too easy to strike out on your own and forget about the overall safety of the group.

Kayaking back on the final day was a short six miles. We had planned to do a hike on Sand Fly Key but the landing area had no room for all of our boats so we opted to do an extra jaunt through some mangroves before the final push.

I ended the trip feeling less a reluctant kayaker, but I still prefer a calm shoreline with birds to view in the cool early morning air to an open water, adrenaline-pumping fight with the wind and current. I learned some new skills and built confidence. Shortly after returning home I found myself in front of my computer searching for guided kayaking trips in the Pacific Northwest for the future. Next time however, I would consider a tour with a mother ship just in case.

Until then, you'll find me happily on terra firma with lots of snow gliding around on my cross country skis in the winter and running or biking in the summer, with the occasional calm weather early morning paddle to check out the birds.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE GOING: Make sure you have taken the class offered by the Club's excellent instructors and build up some upper body strength and you will enjoy your trip much more. I had taken the class and worked on upper body strength but I could have done more. Understand that this is a wilderness trip with no showers, toilets or cell phone connections, but you will get restful nights, away from noise and technology with fabulous star gazing. JB says that the best month to do this trip is February.

