

Down Time

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer; Photos by Silvia Ros
May 2016

Oleta River State Park is the biggest urban park in Florida. Big enough to include cozy cabins for rent. Cheap.



urn east off Biscayne Boulevard and drive along NE 163rd Street toward Sunny Isles Beach. Look to your right. See all those mangrove trees? That's Oleta River State Park, a 1000-acre behemoth of recreation.

Here on this former garbage dump, you'll find bike trails and lagoons, kayaks and canoes, campgrounds and a sandy beach. Not to mention biting insects and rapacious raccoons, chirping birds and screeching squirrels. You may spot gray foxes or marsh rabbits in the brush, perhaps a gopher tortoise, osprey, bald eagle, and warblers -- even large iguanas. And within a network of mangrove waterways, you're likely to encounter manatees, dolphins, boaters, and other aquatic creatures.

"It's the largest urban park in Florida," says Jacob Bennett, a park services specialist for Oleta River State Park. "And it's a great location for a lot of people to come here and use our resources."

The park encompasses about 1.6 square miles, has 17 miles of bike trails, an armada of canoes and kayaks, a 1200-foot-long sandy beach, nine open-air pavilions, and scores of tables and barbecue grills. There's a tent area reserved for youth groups like the Boy Scouts and Girl

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Scouts.

And there are cabins, 14 of them, each with its own covered porch and swing. You don't have to be a Boy Scout or Girl Scout to snag one. You just need the financial wherewithal to pay a modest \$55 per night.



Because the park is so large, it's impossible to experience it all in a day trip. So my girlfriend and I are about to head over for a couple of nights and live among the organisms (human and otherwise) that dwell there. During the trip, we'll kayak choppy north Biscayne Bay, chat with boaters living off the grid, be devoured by no-see-ums, contemplate lizards, consider riding bikes over tree roots; and watch teens and tweens hurl themselves off a fishing pier.

Every journey comes with a first step, and ours begins online. You book cabins via the Oleta River State Park/Florida State Park web link to ReserveAmerica.com, an online service for reserving camping spots at state and national parks in this country and Canada.

"Cabins fill up pretty quickly on weekends," Bennett tells me. (There's also a two-night minimum on weekends and holidays, with few exceptions.) "On weekdays, there are usually a couple available," he adds.

Robin and I find a cabin available for a Sunday afternoon in mid-April. Checkout will be Tuesday morning. The total bill, including tax, comes to \$131. For good measure, I buy a fishing license from license.gooutdoorsflorida.com, a state-affiliated website, in case we decide to fish.

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In spite of Robin's pleas and Yelp warnings to arrive at the park on Sunday mornings before 11:00, I'm moving slowly. (Up late watching Japanese anime, okay?) We don't even hit the road from Miami Beach until after 1:00, and even so, I've got to make a side trip for more supplies.

An hour later we're driving east in the far-right lane of SR 826 (a.k.a. 163rd Street) and closing in on the park's only vehicle entrance, at 3400 NE 163rd. We pass the Blue Marlin Fish House at 2500 NE 163rd St. Although Blue Marlin is a mile from the park entrance, and separated from the main park by the Oleta River and mangroves, the restaurant is a park concession.

I barely pass the Blue Marlin when I must hit the brakes. The cars up ahead have stopped. The immediate thought: There's been an accident. Then it becomes clear: those vehicles are loaded with kayaks and bicycles.

I maneuver out of the right lane and drive forward. Sure enough, it's a very long line of cars trying to get into the park. Turning in to the Intracoastal Mall, I park the car and tell Robin to wait here for my next call. ("I *told* you to leave early," she replies.)

Best to investigate the situation by setting out on foot for the park's main entrance, where hundreds of cars are being funneled into a single lane by police officers and state park rangers.

A young man with a black beard is sitting in one of the cars; he turns toward me and asks, "Is this the way it is all the time?"

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Apparently it is -- at least on Sundays. Oleta accommodates a *lot* of people -- 655,484 last year, says park services specialist Bennett. On any given Sunday, more than 1500 people can show up.



A uniformed park ranger, stuck with the task of directing traffic, tells me it's always gridlocked on Sundays, especially in good weather. And vehicles will keep on coming until sundown, when the park closes. My day is blown, I think, but then I hear a man driving a Kia yelling at a car that has cut him off.

"Why don't the police arrest him?" he bellows.

But wait...the car that cut him off didn't come from the west. It came from the east. I make a quick call to Robin, run back to the car at the Intracoastal Mall, and drive to our new secret path.

Well, it's not a secret anymore. Late-risers take note: Shave off an hour of wait by heading from the *east* and making a left at NE 34th Avenue. Beware: It's a short left-turn lane, and 163rd Street is a busy highway patrolled by cops.

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Everyone who enters Oleta pays admission. Vehicles pay six dollars (maximum, eight people); if you're on a motorcycle or moped, the rate is four dollars. Pedestrians and bicyclists pay two dollars. These entry fees are the heart of the park's \$1.5 million annual revenue stream. We don't have to pay since we've booked a cabin; we also receive special codes enabling us to leave and return to the park after dark.

To get to our cabin we drive uphill along a gravel road, though "rock road" is a more accurate description. My car struggles until I remember there's such a thing as second gear. Atop the hill sit the 14 cabins, along with a large restroom and four showers -- two for men, two for women. Adjacent to the restroom sit a couple of mobile home trailers. East of our cabin a trail runs past a brush of trees and down a steep grassy slope. A rocky shore lies west of the restrooms.



We take in the blue water, mangroves, and anchored vessels as fish leap. This isn't the Oleta River, which is north of us, and connects Biscayne Bay to Maule Lake and Snake Creek Canal in North Miami Beach. What we're gazing upon is a lagoon created by engineers in the 1960s, part of an ill-fated project called Interama. (More on that later.)

"Hey! We made it!"

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Turning toward the voice, we see that it's Blackbeard from the traffic jam, paddling by in a kayak. He'd been stuck on the entrance road for close to two hours, he says. "But it was worth it, man!" he beams. "This place is awesome!"

Robin, meanwhile, has fallen in love with our temporary home, Cabin 008. "It has a porch swing!" she cries. Besides the swing, the cabin has two electrical sockets, a couple of lights, and a surprisingly quiet air conditioner.

The biggest objects in the room are the beds, a double and a bunk bed. The beds have mattresses, but no linens. We're using a sleeping bag.

We also brought a change clothes, swimsuits, goggles, sunscreen, a fishing rod we end up not using, battery-powered lanterns, sandals, towels, graham crackers, cheese, rice cakes, chicken sausages, portobello mushrooms, marshmallows, a chocolate bar, skewers, a bag of wood chips, paper plates and cups, lighter fluid, water, wine, beer, a four-pack of Red Bull, nuts, and a cooler filled with ice.



Eager to experience Oleta, we head to the main part of the park, where our first stop is the large wooden building on stilts that houses the park's rental kayaks, canoes, and bikes at ground level, and a general store upstairs. For nearly ten years, Oleta's concessions were run by Blue

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Moon Outdoor. That changed in November 2015, when a subsidiary of Canadian entrepreneur Bobby Genovese's BG Capital Group (BG Florida Parks) took over the concessions for Oleta and Blue Marlin. On this afternoon, dozens of people wait to rent equipment, and we're told it'll be 45 minutes for either a bike or a kayak.

So we skip that for now and head for Oleta's sandy beach, where hundreds of people of all ages are cooking on portable grills, tanning, playing catch, flying kites, and swimming. Laughter is in the air. So is the smell of hot dogs, ribs, and marijuana. Music blasts from dozens of radios, mainly salsa and reggaeton. Beyond a tether line that marks the swim zone, boats lie at anchor. Aside from the occasional crying child, everyone seems to be very happy.

A fishing pier lies at one end of the crescent beach. Actually, today it's more of a diving pier. Kids leap off it into the water below. Despite all the splashing, Guillermo Vega and Alex Vivas are casting lines into the water at spots not occupied by swimmers.

"We usually come to swim," Vega says. "This weekend we're trying to fish."

Vega installs tiles for a living, while Vivas does waterproofing. Both men hail from Nicaragua but now live in Hialeah, and bring their families to Oleta nearly every weekend. There's just more to do here, they say, than across Collins Avenue at Haulover Beach -- or elsewhere.

"You can sit here, have a beer while watching the kids -- bike, canoe, rent kayaks," says Vega. "You can do a lot of things."

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