

The Everglades

By Suxanne LaBerge

Flung like a silk scarf across the western sky, the purple and orange sunset reflected off the pecky cypress walls of the dining room at the Rod and Gun Club in Everglades City. The year could have been 1922. That's when entrepreneur Barron Collier discovered this little town on Chokoloskee Bay in remote southwest Florida. Teddy Roosevelt and a few other wealthy sportsmen knew about it too. But Collier, soon to own more land than anyone else in the state, wanted to entertain his friends in his own place, so he created the Rod and Gun Club here on the banks of the Barron River.

The dining room still serves some of the finest food in the Everglades, and the club's location adjacent to the green and mysterious Fakahatchee Strand Preserve and Everglades National Park makes it the ideal base for visitors to Florida's subtropical wilderness.

This is the land of the fabled Everglades fishing guide. The experienced guides, many descended from pioneer Everglades' families, are famous for their ability to "read the water" for tarpon, snook and redfish. Guide Brian Richardson's been fishing here since he was 7 years old. "There's no place on earth like Everglades City," he says. "There's no congestion—this is a place where time stands still."

Just 4 miles from town, Jane's Scenic Drive takes you into the wonders of the Fakahatchee Strand where you can hike or bike along the old logging roads. Overhead, hawks, kites and ospreys soar on the thermals, and exotic orchids and bromeliads cling to the cypress trees. Get out early enough, and that rustling sound in the undergrowth may be deer, or even a bobcat. Alligators are the undisputed kings of the swamp, cruising through the quiet waters, barely showing their eyes and snouts, or sunning themselves on banks and logs. And on a lucky day you may catch a glimpse of a Florida panther, a red-brown streak flashing through the green jungle.

Water sports more to your liking? Try the meditative experience of paddling a canoe through mangrove tunnels where bright sky, dark tangled mangrove roots and mirror-like water combine to form a reflection under your craft that temporarily suspends gravity. For the adventurous, tours around the Ten Thousand Islands of the vast Everglades National Park can be arranged in speedy airboats.

Unlike most other places in coastal Florida, Everglades City has retained its Old Florida ambiance and natural beauty. Barron Collier's bank building and the historic city hall still stand proud under the royal palms. Across the street, the 1927 "Old Laundry" houses the Museum of the Everglades. The museum showcases 2000 years of Glades history with exhibits ranging from the pre-Columbian era to the building of the Tamiami Trail.

Back at the Rod and Gun Club, the pecky cypress glows warmly in the fading sunset. We settle down with cocktails, enjoying the view. On the dinner menu, the perfect red snapper we caught today. It's just another beautiful night in paradise!

- Rod and Gun Club 239/695-2101
- Captain Brian Richardson 239/695-2535
- Everglades Island Airboat Tours 239/695-2333 or 866/626-2833
- Canoe Rentals/ Everglades National Park Gulf Coast Visitor Center 239/695-3311