



Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

Segment 8

Pinellas

Emergency Contact Information:

911

Pinellas County Sheriff's Office: 727-582-6200

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

FPTA Region: D

Begin: Hudson Beach Park

End: Fort De Soto Park or Shell Key

Distance: 61 miles

Duration: 4 days

Special Considerations: Open water stretches around Anclote Key may pose a hazard in windy or stormy weather. Currents and tidal influences in passes, especially Hurricane Pass, can pose a threat, too. As always, proceed with caution. Rats are known to inhabit some of the spoil islands and raccoons can always be problematic, especially at Fort De Soto Park, so do not leave food or fresh water unattended.

As with most South Florida segments, boat traffic can be heavy, especially on weekends. Advance reservations are recommended for motels and campgrounds, especially during holidays and the spring season. The situation regarding motels may change as motels in some locations are being converted to condominiums and resorts that require multi-day rentals.

Introduction

The rich history of Pinellas County began thousands of years ago when Tocobaga Indians and their predecessors hunted, fished, and later farmed the area. About 1,800 years ago, the area's native people created a more sophisticated social and ceremonial structure that was reflected in their art forms. This "Weedon Island culture," (sometimes spelled "Weeden") lasted about 800

years and was marked by exquisitely decorated pottery. The 3,164-acre Weedon Island Preserve on the west side of Tampa Bay protects a large shell midden and burial mound complex associated with this period and is open to the public.

Panfilo de Narvaez landed along Tampa Bay with about 300 soldiers in 1528. The Spaniards treated the Indians cruelly in a futile search for gold and silver. Most of the Indians eventually died from European introduced diseases and Seminole Indians inhabited the area for a brief period before and during the Second Seminole War, before being driven south or removed to Oklahoma.

Odet Phillipe is credited with being the first white settler of the area, establishing a plantation and citrus grove in the 1830s. Philippe is believed to have spawned Florida's citrus industry. The area began to boom in the 1880s with the completion of the Orange Belt Railroad to St. Petersburg. Large motels, such as the famous Belleview-Biltmore, were built to accommodate tourists. Many visitors who came for health reasons and balmy weather decided to stay. From a population of 13,000 during the county's inception in 1912, the residential population now stands at almost a million. In addition, more than four million tourists visit Pinellas County each year. The word "Pinellas" reflects the area's rich history, having been derived from the Spanish words *Punta Pinal*, and meaning "point of pines."

Although this segment marks the beginning of a long stretch of urbanized coastline as you head south, you'll be able to enjoy several scenic state and county parks reminiscent of original Florida. Three premier Florida state parks are situated along the route: Anclote Key, Honeymoon Island, and Caladesi Island.

The Pinellas County park system, totaling more than 4,000 acres, is unrivaled. Several "green spaces" and beach parks are spaced out along the route. Some of the larger parks have viewing towers, hiking trails, paddling trails, kayak launches, and unspoiled tracts of land. Birdwatching possibilities abound.

The paddling trail in this segment traverses the Pinellas County Aquatic Preserves. Established in 1972, the preserve's 336,265 acres of seagrass beds, hard and soft bottoms, oyster reefs, spoil islands and mangrove areas help to protect wildlife species such as manatees, roseate spoonbills, bald eagles, sea turtles, indigo snakes and a host of fish and marine creatures.

Leave No Trace principles should be followed when camping on Anclote Key, or any spoil island. Bear in mind that some spoil islands are bird colonies and should be avoided. These many spoil islands and their designations are described in the Boater's Guide to Clearwater Harbor and St. Joseph Sound. To obtain your free copy, call 727-893-2765 or 813-623-6826.

1. Hudson Beach Park to Anclote Key, 15.4 miles

An overnight option is a primitive campsite at Werner Boyce Salt Springs State Park, less than a half-mile up Hope Bayou. This scenic park primarily consists of open marsh and tidal creeks, protecting four miles of coastline. Be wary of airboats as they also use the park. Call the park manager at 727-644-2085 or the park at 727-816-1890 if you plan to use this campsite. There is no charge.

Continuing along the coast, you can take a rest break at Brasher Park, which has restrooms and water. Here, you have a choice of hugging the coast and accessing other public parks such as Robert K. Rees Park and Anclote Gulf Park before paddling to Anclote Key Preserve State Park or making a straight beeline across open water to the island. Weather will certainly be a determining factor. The closest point to the northern end of Anclote Key from the mainland is 4 miles, near the town of Tarpon Springs. Crossing at this point could add a couple of miles to your day's total. The famous sponge fishing town of Tarpon Springs is not very accessible by kayak, but you can paddle up the Anclote River to view it from the water or hike about 3 miles by road from the Anclote River Park. The town features a free museum, numerous restaurants, and gift shops.

At Anclote Key, camping is allowed on the north end of the island. A series of hiking trails and a sandy beach offers great opportunities to explore this 3-mile-long undeveloped island. Kayaking along the mangrove-lined bay side is inviting as well. The south end has picnic shelters, a grill, and a composting toilet for day users, while the north end has no facilities. At the south end, a 19th century lighthouse is still operational. Due to birds nesting, dogs are not allowed on the island. Camping is free on Anclote Key, but you must first check in by calling 727-638-4447. Be wary of crossing open water stretches to and from the island as winds can cause dangerous paddling conditions.

Another more sheltered option along the coastline is to visit Eagle Point Park where local Eagle Scouts built a platform for an overnight stop. The platform has corner posts to hang tarps, tents, etc., along with a fire ring and picnic table. There is a restroom on-site, but visitors need to walk about 100 yards. Call and get confirmation to stay overnight and ask for the restrooms to be left unlocked/open. The phone number is 727-834-3278.

2. Anclote Key (north end) to Spoil Island #13, 12 miles

Be wary of crossing open water stretches to and from the island as winds can cause dangerous paddling conditions.

Fred Howard Park is directly east of the south end of Anclote Key and a good stopping point for water, restrooms, and a picnic. The park also offers a paddling trail through sheltered mangrove areas, and the mainland section of the park covers an impressive live oak forest grove.

On your way south, be sure to stop at Honeymoon Island State Park and hike through the 80-acre old-growth slash pine forest. Viewing these majestic trees is worthy of a visit, but the forest also supports an unusually high density of active osprey nests.

After Honeymoon Island, you'll cross Hurricane Pass. Due to currents, tidal influence, boat traffic, and breakers on the Gulf side, crossing Hurricane Pass should only be attempted by experienced paddlers in favorable weather conditions along the bay side. If you cross under the Dunedin Causeway along the Intracoastal Waterway, you should be safe.

For camping, there are several spoil islands to choose from along the route, but the one near channel marker #13 (Spoil Island #13) is of good size and it features a marked interpretive trail, fire ring, and picnic tables. The island has been impressively landscaped with native plants.

3. Spoil Island #13 to Island #BC 21, 17 miles

A cultural stop along the route is historic downtown Dunedin, which features a museum, shops, galleries, and several restaurants. You can access this area by entering a sheltered marina of boat slips and hanging a right until you come to the Dunedin boat ramp (see map). Here, you can carry your kayak across the road and leave it at Edgewater Park.

Roughly a mile across from Dunedin is Caladesi Island State Park, accessible only by boat. Here, you can enjoy three miles of unspoiled beaches on the Gulf side and a three-mile round trip paddling trail on the bay side through mangroves. You can obtain maps for the trail at the marina near the boat docks, where you can land on a low kayak dock adjacent to the ferry dock. The park also has a snack bar and gift shop near the docks. Channel markers will lead you to the marina. Kayakers must pay a \$1 admission fee.

Many paddlers access the park's marina from the Dunedin Causeway, where there are numerous launch points and a kayak concessionaire. From channel marker #14, just west of the Dunedin Causeway Bridge, take an approximate 212 degree heading on your compass for approximately one mile to the marked channel to the marina.

As you proceed south, you have the option of remaining on the bay side en-route to Island BC 21, or, if the weather is favorable, paddling on the Gulf side by traversing Clearwater Pass and arranging for a hotel stay at a beachside motel along Indian Rocks Beach or other coastal communities to the south. Advance reservations are recommended, especially in springtime beginning around February 1st.

It is about 13 miles from Island #13 to Indian Rocks Beach, and another 19 or so miles from there to Fort De Soto Park Campground along the Gulf, so plan accordingly. There are numerous public beaches along the route that make for ideal rest stops, most of which are listed on the maps. At the Belleair and Park Boulevard Causeways, you can find public boat ramps, restrooms, and potable water.

In the bottom half of the bay route, you will proceed through “The Narrows,” where the width between the mainland and barrier islands is very narrow, thus the name. Be wary of boat traffic as there is not as much room for maneuvering. There are at least two marinas along this stretch as well. Numerous small spoil islands are available for rest stops all along the route.

As you leave the narrows and enter the first stretch of Boca Ciega Bay, Island #BC 21 will come into view. Campsites are on the southwest side of the island. For a break, you can land at Boca Ciega County Park near the viewing tower just to the east of the island. Stretch your legs on scenic boardwalks through mangrove forests. Restrooms are about 200 yards from the kayak launch area. The area is very shallow at low tide.

Another excellent island for camping is CB #9 (AKA Archie’s Island), about 3.5 miles farther south (see map). Camping is on the east side. Just northwest of the island campsite is another scenic county park--War Veterans’ Memorial Park on Turtlecrawl Point. Restrooms and fresh water are near the kayak launch site.

4. Island #BC 21 to Fort De Soto Park Campground or Shell Key, 16.5 miles

As you head south, you may want to skirt around the end of Long Key to Pass-A-Grille Beach. Pass-A-Grille is a historic coastal village with a lot of charm. There are several post offices in the area.

The Spanish Explorer Panfilo de Narvaez was believed to be the first European in the area when he anchored off Pass-A-Grille Pass in 1528. Since then, the island was long used by fishermen to obtain fresh water and to grill their catch, thus the reason for the name (likely from the French *Passe aux Grilleurs*). Beginning in 1857, John Gomez, a self-proclaimed pirate, opened the way for tourism by bringing in excursionists from Tampa. A section of Pass-A-Grille was declared a National Historic District in 1989.

Fort De Soto Park, your destination for the day and the end of this segment, also has a rich history. You can tour Fort De Soto, built to protect Tampa Bay during the Spanish-American War. The fort was named after the Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto, who began his tumultuous three-year march from Tampa Bay in 1539 to find gold and subjugate the native population.

Fort De Soto Park is known for its birdwatching, one reason it is a featured stop on the Great Florida Birding Trail. Flocks of shore and migratory birds seem to pose for visitors as they feed or rest. Two hundred and ninety-six avian species have been sighted in the 1,136-acre park.

Exploring the park is easy. You can kayak through mangrove-lined lagoons in its interior to a kayak livery facility that also rents bicycles (see map). By bicycling or hiking, you can tour the park’s off-road trails that lead to beaches, coastal hammock forests, a small museum, and the historic Fort De Soto, built to protect Tampa Bay during the Spanish-American War. The fort

was named after the Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto, who began his tumultuous three-year march from Tampa Bay in 1539 to find gold and subjugate the native population.

From the park, you can paddle about two miles or take a ferry to Egmont Key State Park, managed in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Coast Guard. On the island, you can tour Fort Dade, built during the Spanish-American War, stroll along century-old brick roads, and tour an operating lighthouse that was built in 1848. Look for the mounds of soft sand that mark the burrows of gopher tortoises, a protected species abundant on the island's interior.

Numerous campsites at Fort De Soto Park are easily accessible by kayak, especially tent sites. A small seawall surrounds most of the RV campsites, which may prove difficult for kayaks, so make sure you reserve one of the tent sites (sites 1 through 85). Advanced reservations are highly recommended, so call (727) 582-2100 up to six months in advance of your trip or reserve online: <https://public.co.pinellas.fl.us/parks/ParksMain.jsp>.

Primitive camping is available at no charge on Shell Key, which is just offshore from North Beach in Fort De Soto Park (see map). This island is also managed by Pinellas County. Leave No Trace principles should be followed on the island. Campers must first obtain a Shell Key Preserve Camping Permit, which is limited to 25 total individuals.

Alternate Route: There is an alternate outside route from Hurricane Pass to Pass-A-Grill in the data book. Since this route requires traversing passes with strong currents, this is only recommended for experienced paddlers.