



Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

Segment 11

Charlotte Harbor

Emergency Contact Numbers:

911

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

FPTA Region: E

Begin: Manasota Key Resort near Stump Pass Beach State Park

End: Cayo Costa State Park or Cabbage Key

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. The situation regarding motels may change as motels are rapidly being converted to condominiums and resorts that require multi-day rentals.

Overnight stays at Cayo Costa State Park remain closed as of August 2024 due to Hurricane Ian damage. The park is open for day use only. The cabins will not be rebuilt, but please contact the park to see if camping has been re-opened. An alternative is Cabbage Key, which has cabins and

rooms. Cabbage Key is approximately 2.5 miles to the southeast of the Cayo Costa State Park ramp. For reservations, call (239) 283-2278.

Introduction

Developed and pristine barrier islands contrast each other in this segment, which spans Charlotte Harbor. Paddlers have the option of cruising the Intracoastal Waterway side or the Gulf side, depending on the weather. This guide will focus on the Intracoastal Waterway side since most of the camping and lodging opportunities are inside the barrier islands, and it is considered safer. 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 Charlotte Harbor 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 ground 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.

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.

Only one state park, Cayo Costa, normally offers camping. However, camping is closed as of August 2024 due to damage from Hurricane Ian. To check on camping updates, contact Reserve Florida State Parks or call (800) 326-3521.

For day paddling opportunities in and along the bay's many tributaries, download the Charlotte County Blueways Guide.

1. Manasota Key Resort to Dog Island, (9 miles) or Hoagen Key (12 miles)

Proceeding from Manasota Key Resort along the paddling trail, paddle along the state park on the Intracoastal 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 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 so be sure to keep a distance to avoid disturbance.

A permit is not required to camp on Dog Island although it was in the past. There are no facilities on the island which is maintained by FPTA volunteers who visit it frequently to keep the island pristine. Leave No Trace principles should be followed on the island, meaning that all trash and human waste should be packed out.

Near Dog Island, you can enjoy the winding Woolverton Kayak Trail through a scenic mangrove forest.

Hoagen Key is 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 or Cabbage Key, 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 impressive three feet long and look like mini Komodo dragons. You have the option of extending your trip by staying at The Innlet, a motel accessible by kayak from the Intracoastal Waterway side. 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, which was 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 Intracoastal side to Cayo Costa Island. This island is only accessible by boat. After roughly two miles, you'll see the Cayo Costa State Park boat dock.

Paddle past the dock to a kayak landing spot on a tiny beach in the mangroves. Pull up your boat away from the landing and keep it separate from the rental boats.

Once Cayo Costa re-opens for camping, advanced reservations are highly recommended, especially on weekends and holidays and during the spring. For camping reservations, visit [Reserve Florida State Parks](#) or call (800) 326-3521. Restrooms, water, and cold showers are available at the park.

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 about a mile away on the Gulf side.

If you happen to land on the Gulf side near the campground, you must register at the park office (on the ICW side) before setting up. You can carry your boat to your campsite. Periodic shuttles can give you a lift to the office, or you can hike (1 mile).

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.

If you stop at [Cabbage Key](#), you can access a restaurant, lodge, and picturesque cottages.