



Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

Segment 24

St. Augustine

Emergency contact info:

911

St. Johns County Sheriff's Office: 800-346-7596

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

FPTA Region: L

Begin: Silver Lake Spoil Island

End: St Augustine

Distance: 30.3 miles

Duration: 2 days

Special Considerations: Boat traffic can be heavy along the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW), especially on weekends and holidays. Paddling along the high-energy East Coast shoreline is not recommended due to safety considerations. While some calm periods may make it suitable for paddling the coastal shoreline, conditions can change abruptly and few inlets allow paddlers to move to more sheltered waters. Even in the ICW, there is often a strong easterly shore breeze.

Introduction

St. Augustine is the oldest European-founded city in the United States. For centuries, Spain, France, England, a young United States, and various Native American tribes wrested control of Florida through the historic town. Paddlers on the circumnavigational

trail can touch the past by visiting the historic section of St. Augustine and other historical sites in the area.

The St. Augustine segment is also blessed with scenic beauty. The trail skirts county parks and large tracts of public land. These include the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve (GTM). The reserve encompasses more than 60,000 acres of wetlands, upland habitats, and offshore areas.

The Matanzas State Forest, along the western shore of the Matanzas River at the beginning of this segment, is part of a 16,000-acre conservation corridor linking protected lands along Pellicer Creek to the Moses Creek Conservation Area. A significant wood stork rookery is located in the forest. Moses Creek Conservation Area is managed by the St. Johns River Water Management District and features scenic primitive camping along the sandy bluffs of Moses Creek, along with miles of hiking trails.

Anastasia State Park and its white sand beaches and campground are accessible near the end of the Salt Run east of St. Augustine, just past the St. Augustine Lighthouse and Museum (also accessible by kayak). Much of the coquina rock used to build Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine was quarried here by the Spanish. Two historic Spanish-built forts can be accessed from the trail, Fort Matanzas and Castillo de San Marcos. Both are national monuments.

Guana River Wildlife Management Area covers nearly 10,000 acres along the eastern shore of the Tolomato River in the northern part of this segment. An estimated 3000 to 4000 migratory waterfowl winter at Guana Lake, a site on the Great Florida Birding Trail. The area is known for being an ideal place to spot peregrine falcons during April and October.

1. Silver Lake Spoil Island to Mellon Island, 14.6 miles

As the river widens in the Pellicer Flats, numerous spoil and natural islands appear. Most are suitable for camping. You will likely want to paddle on the western side of the islands through the flats, where numerous oyster reefs keep out most motorized crafts. You can also paddle up the unspoiled Pellicer Creek, a state-designated paddling trail, to Princess Place Preserve and visit Faver-Dykes State Park.

Princess Place Preserve is named after previous owner Angela Sherbatoff, who was married to an exiled Russian prince. This spacious property of more than 1500 acres features numerous hiking trails and historic buildings and is worth a visit.

Faver-Dykes State Park is accessible about 2.5 miles up Pellicer Creek and is known for its pristine-looking pine and hardwood forests. It was once part of the Buena Suerte

(Good Luck) Plantation in the early 1800s and was occupied by federal troops during the Second Seminole War. Restrooms and water are available at the park ramp.

Two scenic natural islands are also available for primitive camping along the river, Jordan and Mellon Islands, managed by Faver-Dykes State Park. You'll notice that the predominant mangrove shorelines just to the south have given way to mature forests of cedar, sabal palm, and live oak. A half-mile nature trail runs the length of Mellon Island. There are three primitive campsites on each island and they are available free of charge on a first-come, first-serve basis.

A must-stop in this section is the Washington Oaks State Gardens, once owned by a relative of George Washington. You can land near the picnic area and access a nature trail. The picnic area is a short distance to the south and the picturesque gardens and historic interpretive center begin about a half-mile to the north. The creator of the gardens envisioned a manicured exotic landscape "in the jungle" with numerous fountains and reflective pools. Arching live oak limbs festooned with Spanish moss and resurrection ferns provide a natural garden dome.

Another interesting stop is Marineland, a short distance before Mellon Island along the eastern shore. You can land at the River to Sea Preserve kayak launch and walk a short distance south along A1A to the world's first "oceanarium." Opened in 1938 by an eclectic group that included members of the Vanderbilt and Tolstoy families, the park fell on hard times with the advent of central Florida's theme parks. The facility has since been revived, with a special emphasis on dolphin interactions.

2. Mellon Island to St. Augustine Edgewater Inn, 15.7 miles

Take your time paddling this section for there is much to see and explore. By taking the old channel of the Matanzas River just past Mellon Island, you'll not only avoid busy boat traffic, but you can also access the Fort Matanzas National Monument. Land near the dock along the east side of the river to tour the visitor's center and hike the nature trail. Do not land at the fort itself. To reach the fort, you must take a free ferry ride across the river, where you might be treated to a guided tour by a person in character as a Spanish infantryman. The panoramic view of a relatively unspoiled terrain from atop the fort is worth the trip alone. If you are taller than 5'7", duck your head through the doorways.

The ferry boat leaves every hour from 9:30 am to 4:30 pm, seven days a week every day except Christmas. Ground-shaking cannon firing demonstrations occur Saturday through Monday. The fort, built from 1740 to 1742, was needed by the Spanish to guard the Matanzas Inlet to St. Augustine. The Spanish had good reason to fear a raid since the

English repeatedly harassed St. Augustine, beginning in 1586 when Sir Francis Drake burned the city. The fort proved to be an adequate deterrent. Gunners fired upon British vessels soon after completion and never saw military action thereafter.

The Matanzas Inlet was named for a Spanish slaughter of about 250 Frenchmen who had surrendered to Pedro Menendez de Aviles in 1564. Matanzas is the Spanish word for “slaughters.”

Although only about 7 miles from Mellon Island, a mile past the Highway 206 Bridge along the western shore is the Moses Creek Conservation Area. Two primitive campsites atop sandy bluffs overlooking Moses Creek are hard to beat anywhere. The first shaded site beneath arching live oak and cedar trees is only a quarter-mile in from the Matanzas River near Murat Point. This campsite has picnic tables, a fire ring, and a hand pump for washing dishes (not potable). Each site can accommodate up to four tents; they are available free of charge on a first-come, first-served basis. From this first campsite, you can access several miles of marked hiking trails, or you can paddle up Moses Creek.

To access the historic section of St. Augustine, land your kayak at the low dock at the St. Augustine Municipal Marina alongside numerous small dinghies, just south of the Bridge of Lions. Make sure you have a bowline to tie up. You’ll need to register at the marina office at the end of the dock and pay a small fee. The marina has restrooms, showers, a laundromat, a small store, and there is a motel across the street. Various other motels and bed and breakfasts are within easy walking distance, including an inexpensive hostel with an all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast, The Pirate Haus Inn—954-567-7275. You can also walk to shops, museums, restaurants, and the historic Castillo de San Marcos, or you can paddle to the fort and land on the north side at a small beach. Learn how Seminole Indians achieved their great escape from the fort’s jail during the Second Seminole War. Downtown ghost tours are available after dark. If you don’t want to walk, you can take a sightseeing train or a horse-drawn carriage.

A convenient place to stay in St Augustine is at the Edgewater Inn on the northeast side of the bridge. There is a nice beach area out front to land on, and plenty of places to eat within walking distance. If not staying in St. Augustine, about four miles north on the east side of the Tolomato River is the North Beach Camp Resort. You can land at the boat ramp near a bait and tackle shop (see map) and walk to the office to register for a tent site. The campground has restrooms, showers, and a laundromat. Advanced reservations are recommended. Call 800-542-8316.

Though a bit off the route, you can also camp at Anastasia State Park by paddling up the Salt Run to the park’s launch area. The campground is a short walk across the road. Make reservations online well in advance or call 1-800-326-3521.