Tours Galore: Pythons and Gators and Swamp Buggies, Oh My!

By Angie Reid

2014 Orlando Planning Committee Co-Chair

If you are thinking to yourself “I think I’ll save my money and skip the tours so I can afford to take my kids to Disney on the weekend,” I’m here to change your mind! Our technical tours are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Where else can you ride a swamp buggy, meet up with the Python Patrol, and get an all access tour of largest cow-calf operation in the United States? This year’s technical tours will take you to The Nature Conservancy’s Disney Wilderness Preserve, Tenoroc Fish Management Area, and the famed Deseret Ranch. Our social tours will offer you the opportunity to get up close and personal with some Florida gators, sample some Fresh from Florida locally brewed beer, and explore outer space! Join us as we visit Wild Florida Airboat Tours and Wildlife Park, Orlando Brewing and Shipyard Brewing Companies (21+ only), and the Kennedy Space Center. Better yet, this year we are offering special kids pricing options for the family friendly social tours!

Disney Wilderness Preserve

Amongst the backdrop of theme parks, The Nature Conservancy’s Disney Wilderness Preserve (DWP) revolutionized the way agencies, business and conservationists think about environmental mitigation and the benefits of nature. Twenty years ago, decades of ditching and draining land across central and south Florida had taken a lot of water out of the natural system, depleting wetlands that provide water for wildlife and replenish our ground water. As businesses and agencies were struggling to meet new wetland protection requirements, The Nature Conservancy and The Walt Disney Company joined forces to implement an innovative idea.

Disney purchased an entire 8,500-acre ranch that was being eyed for homes and golf course development and protected it permanently by giving it to The Nature Conservancy to restore the wetlands and forests into a healthy state. Today, the ranch’s successful restoration serves as a model around the world. Wildlife is thriving, water is flowing naturally to the benefit of people and ground-breaking research is under way that will inform markets critical to our future.

We will be spending the day learning from DWP staff on our fun-filled day during two different tours. The first, the Big Swamp Buggy Tour (yes, it is as fun as it looks), will take us to federally threatened Florida scrub-jay territories, federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (endangered) reintroduction sites, carbon towers and pine flatwoods restoration areas. After enjoying lunch with beautiful scenery, the second tour will give you a chance to get out and stretch your legs. The walking tour will take us to Lake Russell where we will learn about some of the aquatic management done on the property as well as learn a bit about some of the GIS surveying they do to monitor and treat invasives.
Invasive Species Ecology and Management in Florida

Florida is home to a diverse and intriguing collection of ecological systems that provide wildlife habitat and support rangeland livestock production. The state’s geography, climate and human population have also made it susceptible to repeated introductions of, and subsequent invasion by, multiple non-natives ranging from highly competitive plants to reptiles to insects and other problematic species. Because of these characteristics Florida land managers have extensive experience with attempting to eradicate or control invasive species. This half-day tour will visit Tenoroc Fish Management Area to discuss ongoing research and management programs for some of Florida’s worst invasive species: old world climbing fern, cogongrass, pythons and feral hogs.

From the 1940s through the 1970s, Tenoroc was extensively mined for phosphate resources. The mining activities resulted in a highly-disturbed landscape – and such disturbance is often associated with an influx in invasive, weedy plants. The property, now owned by the State of Florida and managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, has largely been reclaimed from its previously disturbed state and is frequented by birders and outdoor recreationalists. However, invasive species persist and the site is home to ongoing research into the management of invasive plants like cogongrass.

This tour focuses not so much on a specific place, but more on an opportunity to gain insight into the suite of invasive species issues facing Florida. Participants will move through a series of stations, each providing insight into a particular invasive species challenge. The Python Patrol, a cooperative effort to catch and report invasive pythons, will give a hands-on demonstration and training on the giant non-native snakes expanding their range in Florida. Feral hog management will be discussed and participants will have an opportunity to see the type of damage caused by hogs along with techniques for managing them. Participants will also learn about ongoing research for management of invasive plants, such as cogongrass and old world climbing fern, which reduce habitat quality for wildlife and livestock alike.

Deseret Ranch

The name “Deseret Ranch” is one familiar to almost everyone in the range community and for good reason; the Desert is the largest cow-calf operation in the United States encompassing 300,000 ac and spanning three counties in Central Florida. Join us on this day long tour of the famous ranch and learn all about the diverse landscape and diverse business ventures going on at the ranch. We will learn about the herd management and breeding program in use at the ranch to manage their 44,000 cows and 1,300 bulls. We will see both native range and improved pasture on this tour including one stop where they are currently clearing native range to plant improved pasture. We will have an in-depth discussion about native range versus improved pasture use for cattle management as well as the ecological implications of this conversion.
Next we will learn all about the Desert’s wildlife management program including hunting leases and specific management they use to manage deer, turkey and other non-game wildlife present on the ranch. Another stop will focus on the wetlands on the ranch where we will learn about and discuss the water use and permitting issues the ranch deals with regarding water rights, an issue just as important in the southeast as it is out west. There will be additional opportunity to learn about the diversity of the Desert’s business ventures including citrus, sod, forestry, and seashell excavation for road bed materials. Touring the Desert Ranch here in Central Florida will likely be a once in a lifetime opportunity for most of you so make sure you get a spot on the tour and sign up early! This tour will be led by David Genho, the ranch’s Cattle Manager, and will include a BBQ lunch on the ranch.

**Wild Florida Airboat Tour**

During this tour we will be visiting Wild Florida, Orlando’s Only Everglades Airboat Tour and Wildlife Park Experience. Wild Florida is just a short drive from the Orlando and Disney area and once we arrive we will begin our adventure with a 1 hour airboat ride - parents hold on to your children as there are plenty of gators lurking in the Everglades and you are sure to see several on your ride (just kidding – but seriously, don’t lose sight of your children or grandchildren). On the airboat tour, travel deep into the protected swamps, marshes and rivers that make up Florida’s wetlands. Get an in depth look at the gators, birds, eagles, trees and plants that can be found in our beautiful wetlands. This is Natural and Authentic Florida at its best! Next we will enjoy the excitement of a live alligator demonstration and have the opportunity to handle one! After a BBQ lunch at the park we will depart on our guided stroll through the wildlife park where we will see zebras, watusi, deer, water buffalo, emu, wild boar and monster alligators (again, keep an eye on your kids).

**Orlando Brewing and Sea Dog Brewing Company Beer Tasting**

Join us on this tour of local brewing companies in the Orlando area. We will be making two stops, the Orlando Brewing Company and Sea Dog Brewing Company. We will be touring the facility of Orlando Brewing, Florida’s original organic brewery and the only beer to be declared Fresh from Florida by the state Department of Agriculture, and enjoying a private beer tasting (equivalent to one full beer) before the tasting room is open to the public. We will learn about how the company came about as well as how they maintain an environmentally sustainable business including the fact that they donate their used grains to local organic farmers to use as feed! The second stop on our tasting tour will be at Sea Dog Brewing Company’s brew pub. A company that started in Maine, Sea Dog decided to try their hand in the Florida market and has opened multiple brew pubs. We will be hosted by the brewer to get some insight on the beers we will be tasting (this tasting is equivalent to two full beers). So come join your 50 closest friends, pull up a seat, and enjoy a cold one!
Kennedy Space Center

3...2...1...Blastoff! A visit to Florida isn’t complete without a trip to the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex located approximately 1 hour away from the Caribe Royal. This historic and nationally significant destination is a once in a lifetime opportunity to see the massive rockets that first sent NASA astronauts into space and explore the space shuttle launch pads. This tour will give you approximately 5 hours to explore the center and have lunch at your leisure. Among the activities included in this tour is a bus tour of the grounds that guests can get on and off the bus, spending as much time as desired at each of the locations. Stops include the LC-39 Observation Gantry where you can enjoy a panoramic view of the space shuttle launch pads and the Apollo/Saturn V Center where you can marvel at a massive moon rocket. Also while at the center be sure to stop at the Shuttle Launch Experience, a simulation that immerses visitors in the sights, sounds, and feelings of a real space shuttle launch and check out the many other exhibits and experiences: 3D Imax films, Rocket Garden, Exploration Space, Space Shop, U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame, Astronaut Memorial, Children’s Play Dome, Early Space Exploration, Eye on the Universe: The Hubble Space Telescope, and Robot Scouts. After an action packed day of space adventure you’ll be ready to come back to the Caribe and tell everyone about your “out of this world” experience.