

Up close with Florida manatees at Blue Spring



Hundreds of manatees gather at central Florida's Blue Spring State Park in the winter months. Photos by Susan Glaser, sglaser@cleveland.com

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ORANGE CITY, FLORIDA — I pulled my paddle out of the water and looked down, into the crystal clear water of Blue Spring, and watched as the gentle giant glided below.

Later, after the manatee had moved on, I slipped into the spring myself, swimming through the same pristine water.

Blue Spring State Park, about an hour northeast of Orlando, is the perfect antidote to what attracts most travelers to Central Florida. The draw here is all natural, from hundreds of manatees seeking warm-water refuge to underwater cave exploration to lush riverfront trails.

It's worth a detour from the crowded chaos of Disney World et al., although it can get busy here, too. So my husband and I arrived early, just after 8 a.m., and spent most of a day exploring the park's more than 2,500 acres.

FIRST UP: KAYAKING

Blue Spring, one of 175 state parks in Florida, offers vastly different experiences depending on when you visit.

In the summer, the spring acts as a scenic swimming hole, a lovely place to soak, float, snorkel, even scuba dive, with a year-round water temperature of 72 degrees.

In the winter, that constant 72 degrees attracts hundreds of manatees, seeking refuge from dropping temperatures in nearby rivers and bays.

Swimmers and kayakers are prohibited from entering the spring water from mid-November through the end of March, so as not to disturb the gathering mammals.

Visitors still come, however, attracted to the park to view the amassing crowd of sea cows, easily seen maneuvering through the water from a scenic half-mile boardwalk that lines the spring.

I got the best of both worlds during my visit in mid-November. I was there the day before the spring was closed to swimmers and paddlers, so I was able to get onto and into the water.

I also got the thrill of seeing a few early-arriving manatees up close, from my rented kayak.

I've seen perhaps thousands of manatees in the many years I've been a regular visitor to Florida. But honestly, these animals continue to enchant, every single time.

HUNDREDS OF SPRINGS

Blue Spring is one of more than 600 freshwater springs dotting the state, mostly in the central and northern regions. They are a product of the Florida aquifer, a thick layer of limestone underlining the peninsula that collects water, creating tunnels and cavities and sometimes bubbling to the surface.

Some of these springs are barely noticeable; others have drawn tourists for more than a century. Fifteen have been made into state parks. Among the best known: Weeki Wachee Springs, Homosassa Springs and Crystal Springs.

Blue Spring, a half-mile freshwater run, connects to central Florida's St. Johns River, which, at 310 miles, is the state's longest. The scenic spring caught the attention of legendary underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau in the early 1970s, who filmed here "The Forgotten Mermaids," an episode of "The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau." The show brought attention to the area as a winter refuge for manatees, and influenced the state's decision to create the park in 1972.

Much earlier, in the late 1700s, the spring garnered the interest of early American botanist John Bartram, the first to leave a written account of the spring, which he called a "surprising fountain." In the late 1800s, the area was a hotbed of steamboat activity, drawing tourists and transporting goods to Jacksonville and beyond.

Today, it's a relatively quiet refuge not far from the bustle of nearby Orlando.

ARRIVING EARLY

I had been advised to arrive early to the park, which closes access to visitors once the parking lots fill. During the health pandemic, visitation is limited to about 1,200 guests, according to a spokesman. Oftentimes, the park fills up just after opening, at 8 a.m.

My husband and I, who had just spent a couple of days at Disney World, relocated to a Hampton Inn near Orange City and arrived early on a Friday morning in mid-November. The park was surprisingly empty.

Admittedly, it wasn't a very nice day — cool and overcast, but with no chance of rain.

SEE BLUE SPRING, K2



Kayaking at Blue Spring State Park near Orlando, Florida.



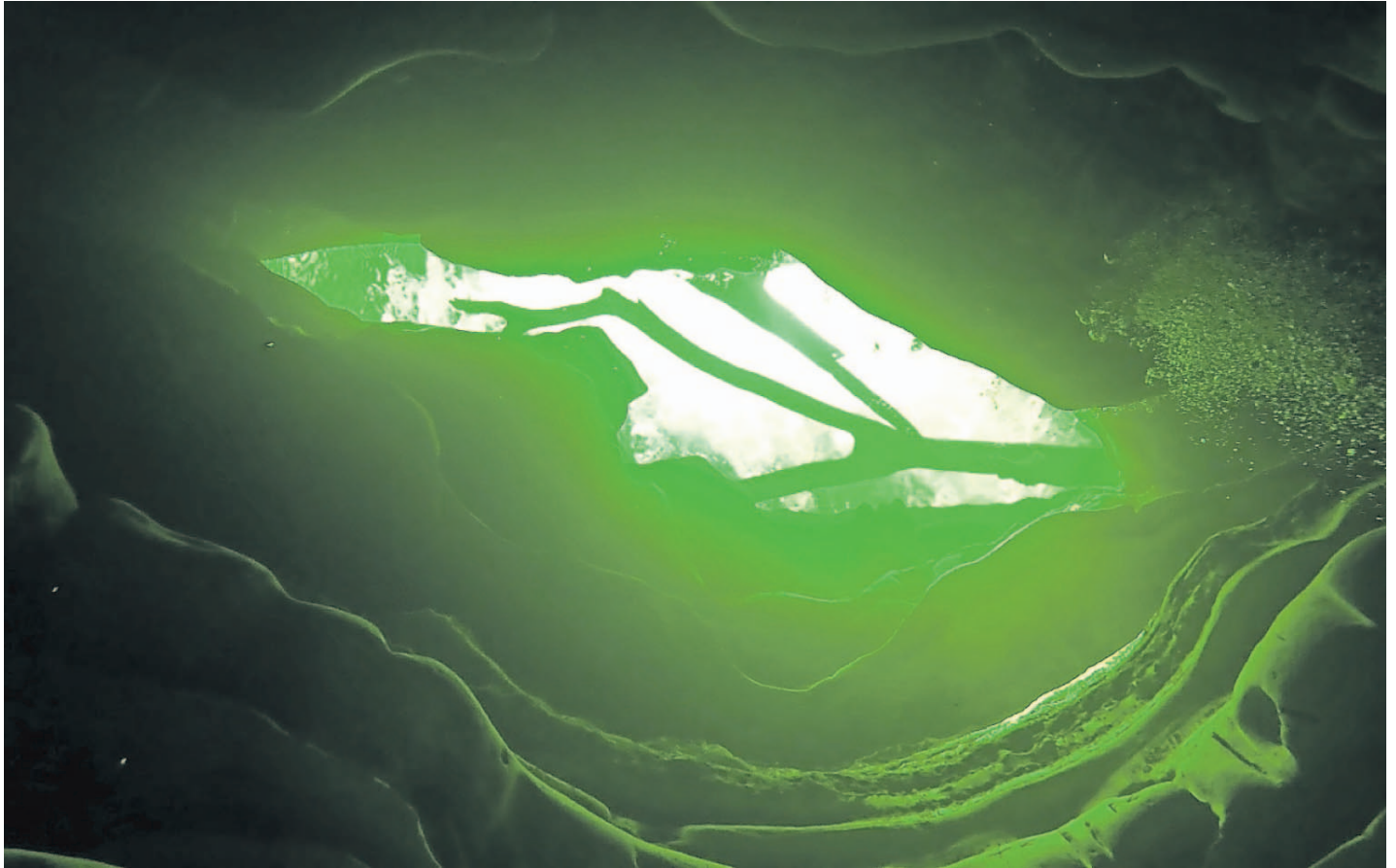
A manatee swims close to Susan Glaser's kayak at Blue Spring State Park in Florida.



Advance Local graphic

BLUE SPRING

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Looking up through the underwater cave at Blue Spring State Park. Susan Glaser, sglaser@cleveland.com

Continues from K1

We started our day on a double kayak, available for rent, along with canoes and paddleboards, through park concessionaire, Blue Spring Adventures (bluespringadventures.com, 386-775-0046).

Starting in mid-November, kayaks, canoes and paddleboards are prohibited from moving up the run to the spring boil, the name for the bubbling area where the spring originates. Rest assured, the water temperature at the boil, still 72 degrees F, is not close to boiling.

The water was crystal clear the entire way, so we could easily see to the bottom of the run, between 3 and 5 feet deep in most spots, although considerably deeper the closer you got to the source.

Water comes out of the boil with little oxygen and no food material, so few plants and animals inhabit the surrounding pool. The farther you get from the source, however, the more likely you are to see signs of life.

Peering over the side of our boat, in addition to a couple of early-season manatees, we could easily see what we later identified as catfish, bowfin, longnose gar

and at least one variety of turtle.

I was eager to get even closer to the underwater world, so after kayaking I swapped my shorts and T-shirt for a bathing suit, then purchased a mask at the gift shop for \$15. (Snorkeling equipment rentals have been suspended during COVID). I opted against buying a snorkel, figuring I could just come up for air when needed, although once I was in the water, I wished I had one.

This isn't like snorkeling in the Keys, for example, where colorful coral and tropical saltwater fish provide plenty of underwater eye candy. Here the high-lights are some cool rock formations and those prehistoric-looking gar, with weirdly long snouts and a mouthful of intimidating teeth. I kept my distance.

The water was chilly, but definitely not too cold for this Northeast Ohio swimmer who is hearty enough for Lake Erie in early summer.

Once acclimated to the water, I slowly made my way to the boil, where a few scuba divers had gathered, preparing to descend into the cavern. I stayed near the surface,

inspecting the upper reaches of the cavity through my mask. It looked like a hole to the center of the earth, though in reality it goes down approximately 120 feet.

Curiosity sated, I made my way back to the swimming dock, keeping an eye out for more early-season manatees. I saw none.

In the month and a half since my visit, however, the park has become a mecca for the gentle giants, with more than 466 manatees reported in the run on the day after Christmas.

Although kayakers and swimmers are not allowed in the water with the animals now, paddlers can often get very close to the manatees as they enter and exit the spring.

The animals also can be easily seen from numerous viewing points along the Blue Spring boardwalk.

A designated warm-water refuge for the manatees, the park also could be described as a much-needed retreat for overstimulated humans like me, who never stop being fascinated by these mesmerizing creatures.

If you go: Blue Spring State Park

Where: 2100 W. French Ave., Orange City, Florida, about 35 miles north of Orlando, mostly via Interstate 4

Hours: 8 a.m.-sunset daily

Staying overnight: The park offers six cabins and 51 campsites. There are plenty of hotels nearby, just off I-4 and in the nearby town of Deland.

Admission: \$6 per car

Information: 386-775-3663, floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/blue-spring-state-park