

GET OUT OF TOWN

Clearly a unique way to paddle through Old Florida

BY PATRICIA HORWELL

Florida Weekly Correspondent

If you are looking to get away and experience Old Florida, a kayak outing at Silver Springs State Park, near Ocala, fits the bill. This works just fine as a day trip — or you can take advantage of the park's rental cabins or a campground accommodating tents and RVs. There are also lodgings nearby for those who prefer to stay longer.

View the wildlife both above and below the water by exploring the clear blue canals from a clear kayak. It's an easy paddle and Get Up and Go Kayaking provides you with a knowledgeable guide who will point out local wildlife (which might even include wild monkeys).

We were equipped with a kayak (for one or two people), life vests and a dry bag for personal items. But don't bring too much with you as there isn't too much storage space. There were about eight kayakers in our group tour.

Our guide, Josh, an Ocala native, steered us through the waterways where we saw fish, birds, turtles — even an alligator or two from afar. But, not to worry, the guides know all the gator hangouts and avoid those areas. We spent more time looking down than up, and let Josh lead the way. Besides the wildlife, remnants of sunken boats lie below the surface.

The adventure includes a relaxed paddle, stopping occasionally to take photos, learn more about the springs or just take a break. The journey eventually takes kayak-



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Tour guide Josh on the paddleboard, leading the tour group to one of the many springs in the park.

ers right into the headspring, which pumps more than 500 million gallons of water a day into the Silver River.

The region is rife with history. It was inhabited at first by Neolithic people in Florida, in a time when mastodons and giant ground sloths still roamed the peninsula! Later came the Timucua, followed by Spanish explorers and missionaries as well as the Seminoles.

During the 1850s, the Silver River saw steamboat traffic transporting crops and supplies. Farms were established along the river. Right after the Civil War, steamboats brought tourists to the area. A visit to the springs was considered a must.

During our journey, we learned of the springs' Hollywood past. In the 1930s, at

least 20 movies filmed scenes there, including "Rebel Without a Cause" starring James Dean, "Distant Drums" starring Gary Cooper, the James Bond movie "Moonraker," "Creature from the Black Lagoon" and six Tarzan films. The television show "Sea Hunt" starring Lloyd Bridges was filmed in part at Silver Springs. It is believed that Mr. Bridges learned to scuba dive there. Paramount bought the park in the '60s and eventually the state gained control of the property.

Besides the clear kayak tours, the park features individual kayak, canoe and paddleboard rentals — and the famous Glass Bottom Boat tours, which have operated since 1924.

In the **KNOW**

Get Up and Go Kayaking

» **Information and tickets:** www.getupandgokayaking.com/locations/silver-springs

» **Contact:** contact@getupandgokayaking.com, 352-541-0115

Silver Springs State Park

5656 E. Silver Springs Blvd., Silver Springs

» **Information and tickets:** www.silversprings.com

» **Contact:** SilverSpringsInfo@capeleisurecorp.com, 352-261-5840

Glass Bottom Boats run every 20 minutes until 4 p.m. Tickets for the 30-minute tour are available onsite or online, and the cost is \$12 for seniors and children 6-12, and \$13 for adults. Extended tours are \$20 for seniors and children 6-12, and \$25 for adults. Children 5 and under are free.

Kayak tours run an hour and a half, with three tours daily at 8:30 a.m., 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Tickets are \$45 for children 11 and under, and \$62 for adults. Reservations must be made in advance.

The park, which also features a museum, a Florida Cracker historic village, a restaurant, snack bar and souvenir shop, is open from 8 a.m. to sundown seven days a week. ■