

Three miles north of  
marianna



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BUSTER**

Three miles north of Marina, Florida Caverns State park offers more outdoor recreational opportunities than any other place I know of in Florida. What other spot do you know that has hiking, biking, camping, picnicking, horseback riding, cannoning, kayaking on rapids, boating, fishing, birdwatchers, golfing, spring hunting, and, of course, spelunking? It is the caverns that give the state park its name. Created during the Depression as a ICC project, the 1,300-acre park is honeycombed with caves large and small. This urn-Florida-like geological feature is the result of Florida's limestone base bumping the tail end of the uplift that becomes the Appalachians. And while the caves here do not match Mammoth Cave or Carlsbad Caverns, they nonetheless have an impressive array of stalagmites, stalactites, columns, flowstone, and other formations created over thousands of years by the steady drip of water. One large cave may be visited on guided tours. The tour takes about 25 minutes, and the cavern is a constant temperature of 59 degrees.

Native Americans once used the caves for shelter and storage, and their history is told in the park's informative museum. The rest of the caves are off limits or even gated to protect fragile formations and colonies of endangered gray bats. These shy insect-eating creatures are easily disturbed, but warmly welcomed by campers for the tons of mosquitoes they eat. Bats and insects are not the only residents in the park, which is a safe haven for alligators, deer, and beaver as well as home for a rich variety of birds, fish, and other wildlife.

Some have claimed sightings of the ivory-billed woodpecker in the area, although such are not confirmed and most believe this largest of all woodpeckers is now extinct. But if the ivory-billed survived anywhere, it might be in these rich floodplains. Gigantic beech, magnolia, sweet gum, and oak trees shade the lowland areas, and the understory flowers all year long with everything from columbine, native azalea, and sage to leafless, bottlebrush, and the lovely January-blooming topmasts lily.

The river floodplain trail is the best way to see the many faces of the area. In 30 minutes, you will go through natural tunnels, climb boulders, see virgin forest and some of the largest trees in the state, and be able to peek into several caves. The horse trails may also be hiked and loop along spring runs and through deep forest. Riders must provide their own horses. The Chipolata River bisects the park from north to south and is joined within it by two spring runs.

In the middle of the park, the river dips below ground for more than 1,000 yards before reappearing. A century ago, a channel was cut across the natural bridge so logs could be floated downstream. The ditch is narrow, fast, obstructed, and not recommended for the inexperienced paddler. Fed by rainwater and springs, the Chipolata can be very clear and is an easy paddle stream or down. Alligators bask in the few sunny spots, discouraging riverswimming. Even so, there is a great spring group about a mile upstream of the boat ramp.

Called Bezel, the main spring has a clear shallow run from the east and leads to a lovely spring pool that strongly invites a dip, even a skinny dip when no

one is around. Three more springs line the banks just below and above Bezel, and the park is a popular pull-out for overnight and weekend campers. The official swimming area is yet another spring called Blue Hole. The spring forms three pools, one of which has a nice beach and dive littoral. The water in the main spring is a deep, milky blue and its 68 degrees are very refreshing on a hot summer day.

The Florida Caverns Golf Course is adjacent to the park and is a separate concession. Park fees are \$3.25 per car, and there are additional, if reasonable, charges for cavern tours, canoe rentals, camping, horseback riding, and golfing. The cavern tours are very popular, so call ahead if you plan a weekend visit. Development is increasing around the park, but once inside you can explore the glories of natural Florida in greater variety than just about anywhere.