In Search of Succulent Treasure

Set on the edge of one of North America's most important ecological wonders, Crystal River and Homosassa are the epicenter of summer scalloping on Florida's Big Bend.

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PHOTOS: ???

It's 7:30am and quiet on the Kings Bay docks as I board a boat bound for the Gulf of Mexico. With the July sun inching skyward, there's no time to waste. I join a multigenerational group eager to partake in Crystal River and Homosassa's favorite summertime ritual.

It's the first day of scalloping season. There's a sense of festive anticipation. As Captain Anthony Altman motors us upriver, a stream of vessels follow behind. Relishing a brisk breeze, I wonder what lies ahead. I've heard scalloping compared to an underwater Easter egg hunt. For a few hours, I'll focus on foraging for wild food in some of Florida's cleanest waters.

Connecting the Dots

Florida's Big Bend regions is uniquely blessed with 400,000 acres of seagrass meadows—among the largest in North America. "Seagrass is incredibly important to a healthy marine environment," says Holly Binns, director of The Pew Charitable Trusts' seagrass and marine

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life conservation work in the Southeastern United States.

In fact, seagrass beds are among the most important and productive ecosystems in the world. That's what led Pew to launch a five-year initiative supporting education about and conservation of the sea grass beds of the Big Bend.

"Seagrass connects the economic and ecologic dots," says the Pews' Tom Wheatley. He points out that scalloping, recreational and commercial fishing and even manatees all depend on seagrass. Take scallops for instance: they once appeared off both Florida coasts. Today, they're limited to a handful of Gulf Coast counties where scallop populations have rebounded.

Snorkeling for Dinner

"Okay, folks, we'll drop anchor here," Captain Anthony shouts. "Stay within 100 yards of the boat. A prize for whoever finds the first scallop!" We spring into action, grabbing our gear before entering the glistening shallows. Squeals from the pint-size explorers reverberate over and under the waves.

Gradually, everyone eases into hunter-gatherer mode. My eyes adjust quickly in the clear waters. Regulating my breath, I tread earnestly against the current, scanning the khaki-colored seagrass.

"I found one!" "I found three!" Voices trill over the waves as we bag our first bivalves. Finally, I, too, spot a dun-colored scallop in the undulating grasses. It's not flashy, compared to flamboyant seashell souvenirs. The true treasure emerges later, when the pearly flesh is sautéed to perfection.

After a few hours in the Gulf, it's time to leave. Cruising back to the docks, we settle into a calming rhythm: wind, waves, motor humming at the stern. Children gaze contently at the horizon. Sensing our now drowsy state, Captain Anthony issues a wake-up call. "Who wants to wash off the salt water in Hunter Springs?"

A turquoise oasis shimmers into view. Diving into the effervescent 72 degree springs, we frolic for a few minutes. As we climb back on the boat, a manatee approaches, as if beckoning us back in. Tempting as it is, it's time for lunch. After all, nothing whets your appetite like a day on the water, especially when the crown jewels of Crystal River await your plate.

Tips for Scalloping

GO WITH A PRO: Guided scallop charters are easy and fun. Your Coast Guard certified captain provides everything you, your family and friends need including the boat, gear and fishing license. Find a guide at discovercrystalriverfl.com

SKIP THE WORK: Not up for the after-work of cleaning scallops? Experienced "Shuckers" are stationed at local docks to shuck the shells and clean your catch. Remember to have a cooler handy to put cleaned scallops on ice.

SIT BACK AND ENJOY: It's a long standing tradition in Citrus County: More than fifteen restaurants in Homosassa and Crystal River offer Cook Your Catch. Bring your cleaned scallops and the let the pros make it a meal for you. Find a complete list at discovercrystalriverfl.com