PATH OF THE SUN

Airboat rides provide a breathtaking voyage into hidden shallow-water wonder worlds.

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Main photo: Captain Gary Bartell Jr.; bottom left and right inset photos: Miles Saunders; bottom center inset photo: Jeremiah Johnson

The Ozello Keys

Withlacoochee River

Tsala Apopka Lakes

Homosassa River

Gliding over Lake Tsala Apopka in an airboat, the first thing you notice is the sky. Cumulus clouds billow against the brilliant blue backdrop. Come nightfall, they disappear, unveiling a starry dome. At daybreak on the Gulf of Mexico, sunshine blends with rain, rewarding you with a rainbow.

And that's just skimming the surface of Citrus County's incredible aquatic adventures.

With three lakes, seven rivers, dozens of springs and the Gulf, it's a glistening water world that, even by Florida standards, is like few others.

The Lakes

Take the majestic Tsala Apopka—it's a 23-mile labyrinth of lakes on Citrus County's eastern edge. On one side, it is fed by the Withlacoochee River. On the other, its shoreline is hugged by the cities of Inverness, Floral City, and Hernando.

During the day, pontoon pleasure seekers drift by estates tucked jewel-like into the green velvet of its tree-lined banks. At night, the lake's wild side emerges. Owl cries and gator bellows dominate the darkness. "The only light comes from stars and fireflies," says Captain George Kapiton. "It's like a scene from Avatar."

The River

Weaving a serpentine path through the Withlacoochee River's tea-stained waters, another realm appears. "There are no houses for 24 miles along one stretch," says Captain Doug Riggs of his daily route. At the water's edge, cypresses stand like ancient sentries, their gray moss beards reflected in the river.

"If there's water, an airboat can get through it."

—CAPTAIN GARY BARTELL, JR.

The Gulf

In the Ozello Keys, modern Florida fades from memory. Aboriginal shell mounds and weathered shanties dot the scenery as you cruise the coastal Rivers. "If there's water, an airboat can get through it," says Captain Gary Bartell, Jr. "They draw next to nothing, which protects everything under the boat."

I soon understand what he means. Snaking through mangroves, we arrive at St. Martins Reef and hover over coral and sea sponges in knee-deep water. It's wild Florida wide open and in all its breathtaking splendor.

"Getting out on an airboat puts things in perspective," says George Kapiton. "You forget about your phone and everything you have to do."

Call it a recipe for instant relaxation. Just add water.

Discover more Air Boat adventures online at discovercrystalriverfl.com.