HAPPY trails

Cycling connects scenery, history, and culture on Florida's Withlacoochee State Trail.

STORY: NANCY MORELAND

PHOTOS: MATT MARRIOTT & MILES SAUNDERS

Despite the sunny warmth, it's pleasantly cool under the oak canopy of the Withlacoochee State Trail. Cycling to the soundtrack of breezes and birdsong, I can't think of a better way to spend the morning. Passing tots on trikes, spandex-clad athletes on costly Cannondales, and seniors on recumbents, I realize: all are welcome here – whether biking, walking or, in some sections, riding on horseback.

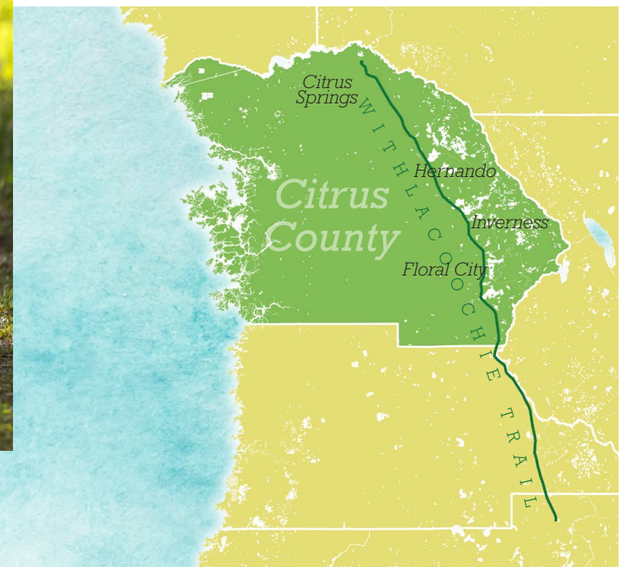
One of the longest cycling trails in Florida, this multi-use marvel

spans 46 miles and three counties. "It's the only trail I know of with historic railroad mileage and whistle markers," says Dennis Reiland of Rails to Trails of the Withlacoochee. "And every six or so miles, there's a town with cafés, taverns, and shops inviting you to stop, rest, and enjoy."

Inverness on the Lakes

Following the trail to Inverness, I find an historic 1912 courthouse anchoring an eclectic downtown. It's a lively mixture of bike shops, brew pubs and sidewalk cafés. "One customer rides 45 miles one way to come here," says James Cook, owner of Cattle Dog Coffee Roasters—a perfect place for a mid-morning break.

Inverness has fully embraced its destiny as hub of the Withlacoochee State Trail. "Our new Depot District is part of a vision to unite the historic business district with our waterfront and the trail" says Liz Fernley, of the city's Events and Visitors Bureau. This incredible fusion of a trailside Farmer's Market Pavilion and historic depot with freshly refashioned waterfront parks, boardwalks, and amenities for cyclists is a wonder to behold. "It takes our 'Small Town Done Right' to the next level," says Liz.



Timeless Floral City

Seven miles south, there's another small town big on charm. Floral City's historic district beckons bikers with a quirky café, bike shop, gallery, heritage museum and majestic moss draped tree-lined streets. "We've preserved our old Florida flavor and Avenue of the Oaks, the iconic signature of our community," says local historian Frank Peters. Cycle to Ferris Groves classic Florida fruit stand from November through mid-April and you can sample milkshakes made from either freshly-picked oranges or strawberries just in from the farm.

Surprises like these will bring me back again.

Discover the scenic lakeside communities of Inverness and Floral City at discovercrystalriverfl.com